

THE WHO, WHAT, HOW AND WHY OF AVA EMPLOYER OF CHOICE

On 8 November 2022, Pets and their People (PATP) in Adelaide joined 15 other veterinary practices to become an AVA Accredited Employer of Choice (EOC). All three PATP practices, including Wayville Animal Hospital, Fulham Gardens Animal Hospital and Unley Veterinary Surgery, achieved their EOC Accreditation. Their accomplishment closely follows the ASAV Hospital of Excellence accreditation for Fulham Gardens Animal Hospital and Wayville Animal Hospital we announced in our last edition of *Companion*, Q4, 2022.

AVA Employer of Choice (EOC) consists of the EOC Program and EOC Accreditation. These initiatives were developed as a result of the Australian Veterinary Workforce Survey 2018/2019, which confirmed the significant issues practices across the country are facing in terms of staff recruitment, engagement and retention. EOC offers veterinary professionals the peace of mind that their workplace is aligned to quality standards, and it provides practices owners with the opportunity to maximise the full potential of their workforce.

The **AVA EOC Program** is the educational phase of EOC and is available to AVA members as a member benefit. It is a flexible, self-paced program that consists of a manager survey and employee survey, an online module featuring 30 best practice employee recruitment, engagement and retention strategies, as well as case studies, exercises, activities, 'to do' lists and optional reflective questions. Registration in the EOC Program can be initiated by AVA members via the AVA Education and Events Calendar at: <https://www.ava.com.au/education-events/education-and-events-search>.

The **AVA EOC Accreditation** phase was launched by the AVA in November 2021. It offers veterinary teams the opportunity to undergo a recognised and independent external audit, designed to assess and improve the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of staffing strategies in veterinary practice. The audit also evaluates compliance with relevant legislation and best practice HR standards specific to the veterinary profession. It complements the EOC Program and is an optional next step for AVA members who have already engaged in the EOC Program.

A practice will retain its AVA EOC Accreditation status for four years from the date the accreditation is approved. To maintain its accreditation for the full four-year period, the veterinary practice must comply with all requirements, including the EOC Accreditation Annual Compliance Review. This is a checklist comprised of HR procedures and actions to be completed by EOC Accredited practices annually to ensure the practice continues to uphold all relevant EOC Accreditation standards.



Some of the team at Fulham Gardens Animal Hospital



Some of the team at Wayville Animal Hospital



Some of the team at Unley Veterinary Surgery

PATP's practice owners saw the EOC Program as their logical next step in developing their teams and their business.

"Having a healthy workplace gives our team more mental energy to focus on their clients," said co-owner Dr Alan Dalgarno.

Part of their HR strategy is to focus heavily on their team's personal development and leadership skills.

"Management tries to minimise the barriers, reduce the challenges and upskill the team to help them have veterinary careers that are "as meaningful and fulfilling as possible," he explained, "so creating a



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positive working environment is a priority, with staff given the freedom to ask questions, learn, seek guidance, feel safe and enjoy coming to work.”

While PATP already had a strong foundation and great employee workplace satisfaction before embarking on their EOC Accreditation journey, building a positive and supportive workplace is a continuous focus for the PATP management team.

“We felt that it was important to have an independent authority review what we were doing to ensure we were doing ... as well as we could,” Dr Dalgarno said. “Additionally, we view the AVA EOC process as a way to lift workplace standards across the industry, which is “important in making the whole veterinary profession more sustainable by improving the quality and length of careers.”

When the news of their AVA EOC Accreditation was announced to the PATP team, it was a really uplifting moment: “To have an independent organisation tell us that we are an Employer of Choice was similar to the feeling of satisfaction we all had when we achieved our ASAV Hospital of Excellence accreditation” he recalls.

Already there have been tangible benefits to the PATP team from earning their AVA EOC Accreditation.

“The staff feel a huge sense of pride and satisfaction, and we are all pleased to be part of an Employer of Choice team and business that we can all be very proud of,” Dr Dalgarno said.

Additionally, it has already made a difference in terms of PATP’s success in recruiting new staff.

To ensure PATP continues to meet AVA EOC standards throughout the four-year accreditation period, they have already implemented a calendar of monthly tasks scheduled to review and improve various areas. “We are not ‘done’; our goal is to be ‘even better yet,’ said Dr Dalgarno happily.

Ballarat Veterinary Practice (BVP) group, the first in Australia to achieve EOC Accreditation, also shared a recruitment benefit of



BVP’s Eureka Veterinary Hospital, Ballarat VIC, AVA EOC Accredited 1 April 2022

being EOC Accredited. Shortly after earning their accreditation, they were “approached by a young veterinarian who was motivated to seek employment in our clinics because of our EOC status ... This was the best endorsement we could have hoped for, and [it] validated the value and benefit of the process,” said Claire McAteer, BVP’s Human Resources Manager. As part of BVP’s accreditation, they implemented a new website detailing their journey through the EOC accreditation process and exemplifying what makes them an AVA Employer of Choice.

Swans Veterinary Services, a mixed practice located in Esperance WA, also developed a management calendar of HR, WHS and staff reviews as part of their AVA EOC Accreditation success in June 2022. “We have regular management team meetings, and we are ensuring that the required documentation is kept up to date,” said Dr Nicole Swan.

For practices wanting to earn EOC Accreditation, AVA and ASAV members are encouraged to engage with all stages in the EOC Program. Using the employee and manager surveys, practices can identify areas of development across each of the 30 strategies identified in the learning resources. The surveys allow each practice to focus on the HR areas that require the greatest level of attention based on the priority ranking of each strategy. Using this ranking, a practice may utilise the appropriate strategies and implementation resources to develop these into strengths.

In terms of the accreditation journey itself, Dr Dalgarno has this to say: “Get started. Do the EOC training course. It doesn’t matter how long it takes. By starting the process of developing better employment systems, you can build a better [workplace] for your staff.” The accreditation process is an opportunity to identify areas to “improve, grow and learn from ... or to confirm you are on the right track.” 🐾



Swans Veterinary Services (Esperance, WA) and their families had a taco night in their horse barn to celebrate their 1 June 2022 AVA EOC Accreditation