TALENT TERRITORY

A Recession-Resilient Force

As consumer spending tightens elsewhere, veterinary practices are still competing — and paying — for talent.

BY STACY PURSELL, CPC, CERS

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Over the past couple of years, many sectors of the U.S. economy have struggled. Consumer spending has tightened, housing markets have cooled, and retail foot traffic has weakened. Yet, there's a counterintuitive story unfolding in the world of veterinary medicine: Even as visit volumes decline, the profession has continued to hold its ground. This isn't luck. It's a reflection of something deeper — a cultural shift in how pet owners value their companions and, as a result, how the profession fits into the economic landscape as one of the few areas that has proven remarkably resilient.

For practice owners and hiring managers, this isn't just a balance-sheet story. It's a hiring story. A resilient industry means sustained demand for veterinary talent, and that's reshaping how practices recruit, what candidates expect, and how quickly open positions are filled.

An Essential Profession

When people think of recession-proof industries, they may picture human healthcare or consumer staples like food and utilities. But for most pet owners, veterinary care falls squarely into the "essential" category, even when money is tight. That's because pets aren't just seen as animals; they're family members. And family comes first.

Approximately 71% of U.S. households own a pet. Veterinary care accounts for nearly $43 billion of the $158 billion U.S. pet industry. As pet owners increasingly treat pets as family members, they prioritize their animal's health in ways previous generations may not have. What once may have been occasional sick visits has transformed into regular preventive care, advanced diagnostics, and specialty treatments that promise longevity and an improved quality of life.

This fundamental shift has a direct staffing consequence: Demand for veterinarians, technicians, and support staff hasn't eased along with visit counts. If anything, the gap between the number of qualified candidates and the number of open positions has remained one of the most persistent challenges practices face. And, it's a gap that doesn't close just because the broader economy slows.

A Tight Labor Market

Here's the part that surprises a lot of practice owners. In most industries, hiring slows during economic uncertainty. Companies freeze headcount, candidates stay put, and employers regain some leverage in negotiations.

Veterinary medicine hasn't followed that script. Because revenue has stayed relatively stable — sustained more by rising pricing than by visit volume — many practices have continued investing in staff rather than pulling back. At the same time, the supply of candidates, particularly experienced veterinarians and credentialed technicians, hasn't grown to match demand.

The result is a labor market that has stayed tighter for longer than owners might expect given headlines about the broader economy. Candidates with in-demand skills or specialties often have multiple opportunities to consider, and practices that move slowly on an offer — or don't present a strong offer in terms of compensation and benefits — risk losing candidates to a competitor down the street.

What This Means for Practice Owners and Hiring Managers

Resilience on the revenue side doesn't automatically translate into easier hiring. If anything, it raises the stakes:

- **Compensation needs to keep pace:** Rising service prices have helped offset visit declines, but candidates are comparing offers across practices and regions. A compensation package that looked competitive a few years ago may not anymore.
- **Speed matters:** In a tight market, a slow interview-to-offer timeline is often the difference between landing a candidate and losing one.
- **Retention is cheaper than replacement:** Recruiting costs and onboarding time are significant, and practices that invest in culture, scheduling flexibility, and growth opportunities tend to spend less overall on hiring.
- **Flexible care models open new roles:** Telehealth, wellness plans, and expanded technician responsibilities appeal to candidates looking for variety or better work-life balance.
- **Plan hiring around demand, not headlines:** Because veterinary demand doesn't move in lockstep with the broader economy, owners shouldn't assume a slowdown elsewhere means hiring pressure will ease here.

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BY THE NUMBERS

According to the 2025 AVMA Report on the Economic State of the Veterinary Profession, the unemployment rate for veterinarians was 0.7% in 2024. The overall U.S. unemployment rate was 3.9% as of April 2024, and it climbed to 4.3% as of June 2026.

What This Means for Veterinary Professionals

For associates, technicians, and practice managers, this resilience translates into something concrete: job security and leverage that few other fields can currently offer.

Professionals with strong clinical skills, specialty training, or management experience are likely to continue finding multiple opportunities, even if the broader job market cools. That doesn't mean every move is automatically a good one, but it does mean that candidates have more room to be selective about compensation, schedule, and practice culture than they might in a more typical labor market.

It also means that professionals considering a transition — whether to a new practice or a new role — are operating from a position of relative strength.

A Profession That Reflects Human Priorities

The veterinary profession's performance over the past few years reflects something deeper about human priorities: Pets are family, and their health matters. And that shows up in spending behavior even when budgets are tight elsewhere.

For hiring managers, the takeaway is straightforward. The demand that keeps practices financially stable is the same demand that keeps the talent market tight. Treating recruitment and retention as a strategic priority is what separates practices that thrive from those that simply hold on. TVB