The ultimate goal of this presentation is to share concepts with veterinarians that can help them improve the business management of their practice and improve their own work-life balance. Finding the right practice manager, developing them professionally, and giving them the authority and responsibility to develop the business aspects of the practice can be one of the best investments they will ever make. This report details what a practice manager can and should do for a practice, what to look for in a practice manager, and ways to help the practice manager develop themselves professionally. Author's address: PO Box 1569, Weatherford, TX 76088; e-mail: kirk@equinepractice management.com © 2011 AAEP.

1. Introduction: Relevance
As a veterinarian, you wouldn't settle for anything less than excellent care for your patients. Providing quality medical care is vital for a successful outcome. This same logic applies to managing your veterinary practice. Proper business management is critical to the financial success of your practice. Generally speaking, veterinarians are not taught business management in school. Nonetheless, many veterinarians assume that veterinary medical skills alone are enough to open a practice. Regrettably, for many practice owners, handling the business side of veterinary medicine is a time-consuming and overwhelming task. For some, their own lack of business acumen can lead to a no-value or low-value practice, or worse, a failed business. This presentation will discuss why veterinarians should consider hiring a skilled practice manager to oversee and improve business management in their practices.

2. Covering the Topic
This presentation will cover four major points:

- Why to hiring a practice manger (“Who Should Manage Your Practice”)
- Selecting a practice manager (“Finding the Right Practice Manager”)
- Developing your practice manager (“Don’t Stop There”)
- Ensuring the success of your practice manager (“Don’t Get Run Over But Don’t Stand in the Way”)

3. Who Should Manage Your Practice?
A survey performed by the National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues (NCVEI) found that the more hours a veterinarian spends performing management duties, the less income they actually bring in. These busy do-it-yourselfers spend countless hours coping with employee issues, pricing issues,
tax issues, maintenance issues, marketing and public relations, and trying to make sense of all those numbers (not to mention their regular jobs treating patients and talking to clients), but the end result is that they often make less money. There are better ways to manage your business and bring balance back into your life.

Selecting the right practice manager can be one of the best investments a practice owner can ever make. A good practice manager will handle all the details of running the practice, except for the medical diagnosis and treatment of patients. The same NCVEI survey mentioned above found that veterinary practices that relied on their staffs to handle the management duties were significantly more profitable than those that did not. How significant is this? According to the survey, the average clinic enjoyed an additional $119 of income for every hour staff members, rather than a veterinarian, worked on management issues. That extrapolates out to an additional $247,520 in gross revenue for a full-time practice manager.

4. Finding the Right Practice Manager
When looking for a practice manager, take your time to find the perfect match. It may be tempting to promote someone in your organization (perhaps, a great technician) into the management role, but that could be a mistake. You may have a bright star looking to shine, but, more common than not, this creates a condition known as the “Peter Principal” in which a competent employee is taken from a well-suited role and promoted to a level of incompetence. She may be an awesome technician who understands your company, its services, and its clients, but that doesn’t mean she’s the best person to manage the practice. She may not have any of the “soft skills” needed to manage people and govern the board of directors or the business skills to analyze financial reports and develop budgets. Her attention to detail and technical expertise are no longer the primary strengths she’ll need in her new role. The result is poor performance, frustration, and mediocrity for the practice.

The ideal candidate will already possess administrative and supervisory experience. Formal management training and a veterinary or medical background are definite advantages, as is familiarity with practice management software and organizational systems. When interviewing the candidates, also consider the intangibles and pay attention to your “gut” instincts. Look for someone of ethical character, charisma, and someone you feel you can trust.

5. Don’t Stop There
When you’ve found the right practice manager, it is important that you continue to invest in their professional development. Send them to business continuing education and training on a regular basis. The AAEP Business Education seminars provide training from some of the top practice management consultants and veterinarians in the industry. The Veterinary Hospital Manager Association (VHMA) is the primary organization for practice management professionals and provides a certification program leading to a Certified Veterinary Practice Manager (CVPM). The Veterinary Management Institute is a “mini-MBA” program offered by Purdue University and the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA). Other ways to help develop your practice manager include purchasing practice management books and veterinary business newsletters. Often, your distributor and manufacturing representatives will be able to provide monetary and other help for all these initiatives. As a key employee in your practice, investing in your practice manager demonstrates your commitment to their success and your faith in them to improve the business. The money spent can pay huge dividends down the road in terms of improved processes, better employee management, business growth, and increased profitability.

6. Don’t Get Run Over But Don’t Stand in the Way
Once you have hired the right manager, remember this truism: “Highly successful practices consistently hire competent people and then stay out of their way to let them manage.” One word of caution: This does not mean abdicating your responsibilities. Delegation is the act of empowering the interest of others. Abdication is giving up responsibility to others with no intention of resuming it. Too often, veterinarians/owners prefer to abdicate financial and administrative responsibility to the practice manager and staff. As a rule of thumb, in any business, no employee should become so important that replacing them could derail the practice. As the owner, you still must provide vision, leadership, and strategic planning to move the practice forward. When you understand your role as leader and let your team manage the day-to-day operations, your profits will grow and your headaches shrink.