

Becoming the associate: Finding your niche and keys to personal and professional success

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Abstract

Young veterinary professionals today are often hired by practices right out of school, and unfortunately these practices often lack the skills and training to set them up for long term success. These professionals have been taught what and how to learn for the better part of 2 decades and are now expected to self-motivate, identify, and educate themselves in such a way that they can grow and develop while in practice.

These expectations often come with little to no formal guidance from the practice's management team. Yet, these associates represent the best chance for practices to overcome the existing biases within their system and find new avenues to grow and expand. By understanding and harnessing their underlying psychology, associates can create an environment in which they can practice, identify, and excel in their own niche with, or in the absence of, qualified guidance and oversight. This psychology can then be used to create an environment of growth through pursuit of their purpose while leveraging their unique talents and routines. By educating our budding peers on the discussed self-development system, we can help them achieve their own niche by whatever definition they choose to use.

Key words: self-determination theory, niche, high performance

Introduction

Every veterinarian remembers the day they signed their first employment contract, the first time they were able to leverage their hard-earned veterinary degree for a tangible return. On that day many of us believed we were signing on to provide veterinary services for that practice, services such as rectal ultrasound, D/A surgeries, and sick cow exams. However, many contracts fall short on communicating exactly what will be expected of an associate in the area of developing a niche or specialty that benefits the practice beyond the basic services that they would provide.

What many young veterinary students and associates fail to realize is that their practice is not handing them an average salary of \$70,282 for basic day-to-day work.¹⁴ Employers will expect these young vets to perform these basic tasks at a high level, but the more progressive practices pay this sum for something much more valuable such as the associate's brainpower, their ideas, vision and creations.

While brainpower will not often show up as a financial statistic in the year-end books, it does provide future ideas, growth, and opportunity for aspiring associates and growing clinics. Associates hired for this reason often represent a clinic's best chance at refreshing internal ideas, medicine, and vision. This is because associates manifest something unique in veterinary medicine, something that we as tenured practitioners lose over time. They manifest what authors Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld theorize is the Triple Package.²

The Associate Advantage

Chua and Rubenfeld created the Triple Package thesis when they asked themselves what made American minority groups successful and,

"Why do these and other groups come out on top?"²

This simple question was used to investigate why these minority groups obtained the American Dream more frequently than larger, more mainstream groups who have recently begun to flounder in modern America. What they observed were 3 cultural traits within said groups: a belief in group superiority, a deep-seated feeling of individual inferiority, and deeply rooted impulse control which caused these groups to feel a higher degree of empowerment than their peers. The expression of these 3 traits in turn allowed them to experience success by any definition (money, fame, spirituality, professional success, etc.) at a higher level than their mainstream peers.

The author contends that this thesis can be taken one step further and applied to another unique group, the recent graduate veterinarian. This individual, or associate, has been forged through the fires of veterinary school, the likes of which could only be survived with a healthy belief in oneself.

This mindset begins with the belief that at some level they have superiority over others. It can be as superficial as the classic statement, "I'd rather go to a vet than a doctor", or go as deep as classmate-to-classmate competitions for grades and highly coveted job prospects. Chua and Rubenfeld reflect how this behavior is condemned and often avoided in today's society.² The author also contends that by the time the associate graduates, the concept of achieving and maintaining superiority over circumstance or others has become deeply ingrained in who they are. In fact, this trait will inevitably be brought to the graduate's first job, and as a result will interact with the second trait of insecurity, tending to drive the associate's professional development.

Insecurity, anyone who has spent 10 minutes with a recent graduate can perceive this trait in them. They are unsure of their place, their client's belief in them, and their skill set. This "anxious uncertainty" gives the associate the Triple Package as well as a potency for growth. This uncertainty drives the associate toward continuous self-improvement as they mentally manifest feelings of derision, disrespect, or suspicion secondary to their insecurity. Later, we will discuss how this trait can be harnessed in these individuals to create circumstances required for continuous professional growth. This growth can potentially change an associate and practice forever.

Finally, these individuals through the tempest of veterinary school, have learned how to resist temptation via impulse control. Many times throughout school, they have had the temptation to quit, give up, and walk away from what might be described as an "arduous or daunting" task. Mastering impulse control builds the stamina needed for long, hard tasks that require concentration, perseverance, and resistance of temptation. This means they are primed to take on large, difficult projects such as developing new services for a practice, reinvigorating internal clinic management technique or revolutionizing the type of medicine practiced.

Chua and Rubenfeld describe the melding of these 3 traits as creating, "A goading chip on the shoulder, a need to prove oneself or be recognized." This means the associate enters a practice with an insatiable desire to push to the top, establishing superiority and seeking continuous growth while loving the hard work and process.

Readers may be asking:

"Why do practices need this 'new blood,' to push development?"

As associates progress from new graduates to seasoned vets, and on to become clinic owners, often what happens is the superiority complex continues to exist but the feelings of insecurity about their skill and talents decrease. The work begins to come easier, requiring less impulse control as the work becomes easier, less problems need to be persevered through, and adversity decreases. The compound effect of these changes being the eroding of the practitioner's driving desires to grow and create.

This erosion of the insecurity and impulse control traits of the Triple Package causes seasoned veterinarians to become complacent, which stagnates the generation of new ideas, slows practice growth, and leads to the setting in of significant biases within the practice. But before we get to how associates can leverage their Triple Package skill set, we must first address the group biases that undermine clinic leadership and practice growth and the role the young associates play in challenging them.

Biases in Veterinary Clinics

New associates bring a clean slate to the practice; they lack exposure to the clinic team, and specifically the biases

created by previous interactions within that team. On their first day, their interactions with the clinic team will open them up to all kinds of biases in their decision making, idea generation and task implementation. While defining the origin and effects of these biases could formulate the basis for a great post-doctoral thesis, the author will select 2 biases that are most relatable to the reader and pose the biggest risk to the clinic teams. These are the biases of Groupthink and the Anchoring.

Groupthink is a human psychological phenomenon by which participants in a group strive for consensus within a group to avoid conflict and subsequent ostracization from the group.¹ This is an evolutionary trait linked to the essence of self-preservation in group-dependent species. Therefore:

"Groupthink causes individuals who are opposed to the decisions of the group to remain quiet and keep the peace resulting in a lack of dissenting opinions and an increase in the potential for tunnel vision as well as catastrophic failure of ideas."¹

This Groupthink can lead clinic team members to believe a wide variety of assumptions, such as thinking everyone on the team is on board with an idea, cause the team to ignore moral problems, empower the team to rationalize decisions based upon lack of objections, stifle other teammate's ideas, and even foster a sense of invincibility. All of these can lead team members to be overly optimistic and engage in otherwise unadvisable behavior, medicine or business practices.

While there are many causative factors for this, the author is convinced that an associate can break up this negative behavior. New associates can disturb and reorganize the cohesiveness in the clinic team by challenging the team's interaction dynamics, adding diversity to a clinic's team, requiring a fresh leadership approach and/or fostering the development of a new healthy mentoring process, thereby bringing new ideas to the clinic. By rewarding these new associates with praise and recognition for their new perspective and creativity, clinics can leverage this new perspective to "refresh the tree of Groupthink."

The next common bias seen at a clinic level is referred to as an Anchoring Bias. Anchoring refers to the human brain's bias to make decisions based upon information recently taken in. In essence, the mind uses this recent information as a reference point and adjusts its next decision or estimated outcome based upon this point.

Perhaps the most famous example of this is "The Dice Study", in which judges were given an example case booklet.⁴ At the end of the booklet the prosecutor's sentencing recommendation was listed as a blank, only to be filled in after the judge rolled a pair of dice to determine the recommendation. In this trial, the dice were rigged to land on a low number for one group of judges and a high number for another group of judges, essentially creating a "low" and "high" anchor point for each group.

The researchers found that judges who rolled a low number gave an average sentence of 5 months while judges

who rolled a high number gave an average sentence of 8 months. This difference translated into a 60% longer sentence simply because of a roll of the dice!

We can see similar effects within our practices when it comes to treatment duration, dosage, and even idea generation. If a mentor at a clinic tends to treat on the higher end or longer duration, their mentee is at risk to extend and increase treatment duration and dose as well. Similarly, if an owner is predisposed to place more value on preserving revenue from something like late night milk fevers, their current staff are more likely to overvalue this revenue source as well. This is where new associates can challenge these biases by asking the invaluable question,

“Why do we do it this way?” “Is this really the right assumption or does a bias exist?”

Now that owners and associates clearly understand the power of onboarding new talent and the role it can play in a progressive practice. Let’s dive deeper into how associates can make the maximal impact possible within their practice.

Your Niche is Yours Alone

Finding and determining an associate’s place within their practice is not a task this author can do for every reader. Each practitioner has their own unique set of strengths and talents that makes their clinic team role and niche different. Discovering one’s niche is often best facilitated by a healthy relationship between the new associate and their mentor-owner. However, this relationship may not always be available to an associate and therefore the author will discuss several mental techniques, books, and daily routines that will discuss how the individual can drive his or her own discovery, growth, amplification, and creativity. Ultimately, achieving their full personal and professional potential.

One of the key psychologic factors that can help drive associates to find their role or niche in a practice is the innate human desire to seek continuous growth and achievement; otherwise known as Self-Determination Theory. In 2017 Ryan and Deci showed that Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is an excellent predictor of an individual’s intrinsic motivation level or the likelihood they will:

“Seek out novelty and challenges to extend and exercise one’s capacity to explore and to learn.”³

That study went on to show that the level of an individual’s intrinsic motivation could predict their aptitude for enhanced learning, performance, creativity, optimal development, and psychological wellness. All of these are critical traits for any high-functioning veterinary associate.

Therefore, understanding the core driving principles of SDT and their implementation means that associates can consciously increase their inclination towards finding their own intrinsic motivation at work and therefore expand their capacity to learn, take on challenges and to grow on their own; yielding unheralded results. One of the theory’s authors, Dr.

Ed Deci, described SDT in an interview with The Brainwaves Video Anthology as follows:

“[Not] asking how you can motivate other people... [instead] asking how can you create the conditions within which other people will motivate themselves.”⁵

Self-Determination Theory suggests that humans will be inherently unhappy until we can fulfill 3 basic tenets: Autonomy, Competency, and Relatedness. Consequently, each of these play a role in how an associate can begin to develop their niche within practice.

Autonomy refers to the individual’s ability to feel that they have control over their undertaking of actions, decisions, and outcomes. In expressing Autonomy, the associate is learning, working, and growing of their own accord, not because of external stimulants or rewards.

Given the solo and isolated nature of large animal practice, Autonomy is often met more naturally than in small animal practice, but it remains critical that owners not micromanage their associates or risk suppressing the benefit of this tenet. As early as 1950, Harlow showed that the application of external rewards, seeking to further encourage growth-type behavior in monkeys, actually suppressed the monkey’s intrinsic motivation for the activity and ultimately reduced the expression of the growth-type behavior.⁷ Therefore, associates and owners should be cautious in seeking out or extending external rewards to compensate associate growth.

Over-aggressive management can also cause associates to shun growth opportunities in practices and ultimately reduce their potential in the long term. Micromanagement erodes the associate’s feeling of self-growth by making them feel that their growth is being controlled and directed by the owner or manager. Over time, management such as this will threaten to erode the associate’s feelings of self-determination, and therefore their intrinsic motivation for their job.

For their part, associates also need to recognize that Autonomy is necessary for their growth. This type of self-driven decision-making yields frequent recognition of patterns and curious investigation of new techniques, services, and treatments. This encourages a healthy manifestation of SDT, further fostering the individual’s intrinsic motivation. Not calling for backup, unless necessary, has the potential to empower you, via self-determination theory and intrinsic motivation, more than any other growth technique.

The second tenet of SDT, Competency, refers to the basic need of the individual to feel that he or she has an area of expertise or specialty. This is the essence of finding a niche. Individuals who find, embrace, expand, and share their Competency are much more likely to be happy and achieve at a high level.

Associates who can pursue and grow their areas of Competency are more likely to enjoy their job and be retained in the long term. Therefore, associates seeking to find their niche need to investigate, pursue, review, and grow areas in

which they show interest and skill in order to help themselves achieve happiness through increases in their personal intrinsic motivation.

The final tenet of SDT, Relatedness, is less tied to the associate and instead is tied to the social support and relationships they have. Associates need to seek out individuals who improve their access to information, provide external resources, ally with them, and reduce stress.¹¹ These individuals may come in the form of a manager, owner, mentor, or peer. Who they are matters less than their expression of unconditional friendship, as expressed not by value to each other but by a true unconditional caring for one another.

Relationships such as these can be difficult to find, but will play a central role in the associate's career. Without Relatedness, the associate will always struggle to truly find happiness at work, as well as experience an incomplete or faltering sense of intrinsic motivation, stunting their long-term growth. One can argue that Relatedness is the most important tenet in establishing healthy, growth-oriented, intrinsically motivated associates. Williams in 2009 showed that active exclusion from relatedness-type relationships, even at a virtual level, led to negative effects and psychological distress to the individual's psyche.¹³ Obviously this is not ideal for creating a growth-based mentality for associates.

Each of these SDT tenets can be well served by leveraging the previously discussed Triple Package skill set we know associates possess. Properly fostered, Autonomy, Competency and Relatedness can fulfill the individual's Triple Package needs to prove superiority, provide the tools to address and reduce feelings of inferiority, and force them to employ impulse control along the way as they grow via their own intrinsic motivation.

Associates should now understand the psychological methods that they, as well as clinic owner, can employ to leverage their intrinsic motivation and aid in the discovery of a niche. But theory and psychology are not enough to create successful associates. These extraordinary individuals also need the right tools and routines to continually fuel their growth.

Tools for Finding and Growing Your Niche

Once the associate has begun to embrace Self-determination theory and the intrinsic motivation garnered from engaging it in conjunction with their Triple Package traits, they will begin to experience more volition, motivation, and engagement than before. The harnessing of this psychology is key to creating high performing and persistently creative associates. At this stage of their development, the associate must be made aware of exactly why they are pursuing this higher level of performance and the unique tools or strengths they can engage along the way to facilitate their journey. The knowledge of why their niche appeals to them and how they will achieve competency within that niche will help direct their creativity toward a niche that will never lack a clear purpose, and create a plan for its development.

The most powerful tool an associate can utilize in the actualization of a niche is their "why." In *Intentional Living*, author John Maxwell describes the power of finding an individual's "why" by saying:

"Once you find your why, you will be able to find your way."⁸

In this context, the why provides a reason for the individual to proceed by showing them their true purpose for being there.

When an individual understands their purpose in the context of their "why," they will be able to find the energy to continually seek growth, overcome obstacles, and fuel endless creation. If readers think back to the Triple Package belief system, they will recognize that the associate's "why" can provide them with the fuel to apply toward their Impulse Control to give up when their growth becomes difficult and progress stagnates.

A great "why" also makes the individual attractive to others. When someone has a visible purpose, they will appear larger than life, compelling others to join them in their journey toward competency and significance. Maxwell describes how these individuals have an "air of distinction" that is not driven by ego or arrogance, but instead simply by a clearly delineated sense of purpose.⁸ Individuals reaching this stage of "why" can leverage this presence to cultivate powerful relationships via the SDT tenet of Relatedness, stated simply: this air of distinction attracts like-minded individuals like flies to honey, and results in the expansion of the individual's network and relationships.

An individual's "why" is unique to them, and the knowledge of it often lies dormant and unknown to the individual without their being prompted and guided to think and actively discover it. However, there are many ways for an associate to discover their why. The author will briefly introduce 3 "why" discovery techniques below:

1. In the first technique, John Maxwell describes his "why" discovery process by having the reader ask themselves 3 distinct questions:
 - a. **What do you cry about?** What issues or problems cause you so much discomfort that you feel motivated to act and find the situation?
 - b. **What do you sing about?** What strikes you at a deep level, causes joy to rise up inside of you? What would you consider doing for free, just because you feel it should be done?
 - c. **What do you dream about?** What would you do if you knew you could make a difference on a larger scale?⁸
2. The second technique for discovering your "why" is the author's personal favorite. In 1930 Sakichi Toyoda, founder of the Toyoda Industries, invented a thinking technique known as the 5 Whys. This technique originally was used to understand the true causes of manufacturing errors, but can be applied as well toward finding an individual's why.

- a. First the individual asks, “*Why do I do what I do?*”
 - b. Second, they take the answer to that question and ask again “*Why do I want to [answer to a.]?*”
 - c. This continues until the individual concludes they can go no deeper in the question line, often after approximately 5 iterations of this singular question.⁶
3. Finally, for those seeking greater and more in-depth guidance when finding their “why”, the author recommends buying *Find Your Why*, by Simon Sinek.¹²
 - a. In this book, Sinek will take readers step-by-step through a discovery process for their why.
 - b. At its core, this book will take the reader through a process that gets them to answer their why in the format of this statement: “*[My why is] to do _____ (contribution) so that I can _____ (impact).*”

Assuming an associate does the work of discovering their “why”, they are now left with the troubling task of discovering how they can accomplish it. How will they use this newfound knowledge? Do they have the skills needed to really turn their “why” into something of impact and significance? The best way for individuals to begin this journey is to understand the strengths, talents, and skills they are working with. Business guru Peter Drucker best describes the critical nature of this journey to discover your talents when he says:

“Most people think they know what they are good at. They are usually wrong...And yet, a person can perform only from strength.”

A good way to start this journey is with a simple combination text and test created by author Tom Rath and managed by the Gallop Company, via the *StrengthsFinder 2.0* book.⁹ This small text is the ultimate tool for discovering an individual’s talents, which can then be built into areas of strength using the routines we will discuss later. After reading 31 pages of text, readers will take a 40-minute talent discovery test: the StrengthsFinder 2.0. This test will rank test takers on 34 unique talents (the author highly recommends paying the upcharge to see the full 34) that span from “Achiever” to “Woo.”

Once an associate procures the knowledge of their personal talents, there are many unique ways they can apply and leverage them. For example, if they rank low in Woo, a talent for interacting with other people, they may wish to delegate personnel or client interaction to other peers within the clinic. Whereas individuals ranking high in a trait like Ideation (a trait linked to a propensity for creating connections and powerful brainstorming) might excel in a role of discovering and developing new services for their clinic.

No matter what talents the associate excels in, they can now use these talents to craft the story of how they will pursue their “why.” They will now understand what they need to do, who they will need to engage to help and what roadblocks may occur along the way. This means the only piece remaining is to craft a system or routine that will con-

tinually feed into these talents, driving the pursuit of their “why” and subsequently fostering the development of their niche within their clinic.

A System for Perpetual Niche Growth

To satiate their natural intrinsic need for growth, associates will now need to focus on creating an organized and systematic system for the growth to occur. The author recommends readers concentrate on a system that leverages the activities of Input, Thought, Creation and Reflection. There are many variations on this type of system, but in its simplest form the basic system described below will work well for associates looking to jumpstart the development of their niche.

For an associate to develop and refine their niche, they will need to continually input new information into their system. This means they need to regularly collect, organize and consume content in various forms as it relates to the pursuit of their why. This is critical, because as Ronald Osborne states:

“Unless you do something beyond what you have already mastered, you will never grow.”

Continuous input is generally accomplished through media consumption. This media can be in a variety of forms such as books, magazines, webpages, podcasts, or video. The type is not important; what is more important is the consumption and exposure to new ideas and connections. Below, the author will list several quality media sources that he invites readers to select from as they see fit.

1. **Books** – A link to the author’s continuously updated, personal Trello library of recommended idea and developmental texts can be found at tinyurl.com/grx6ddp.
2. **Magazines and Journals** – *Hoards Dairyman*, *Progressive Dairyman*, *Feedstuffs*, *Journal of Dairy Science* and *Dairy Star* are all credible quality resources for the large animal dairy practitioner to source new topics and ideas.
3. **Websites** – *Medium*, *Harvard Business Review* and *TheLadders* will provide the reader good information on professional development, as well as cutting-edge business research.
4. **Podcasts** – There are many high quality podcasts out there, and readers should select shows in their areas of interest. The author personally enjoys the following podcasts: *Have You Herd*, *The Brendon Show*, *TED*, *The Gary Vee Audio Experience*, *Marketing Secrets*, *The Life Coach School*, *The John Maxwell Leadership Podcast*, and *The Ed Mylett Show* on a regular basis.

However, uncontrolled input is not necessarily going to drive the niche growth associates are seeking. Along the way, they must seek to encourage the application and connection of these different ideas with their day-to-day experiences. As Marie Forleo describes:

“Eventually we [want to] weave innumerable skills, experiences, and ideas into a multilayered, multifaceted, one-of-a-kind career tapestry.”

We can encourage this type of growth via thought. This means an associate needs to actively consume the information by taking notes, creating links between ideas, and brainstorming possibilities along the way. While there are many different possibilities for accomplishing the application of thought, the author recommends 1 simple one: brainstorming via Blind-Writing.

Blind-Writing is the act of blocking out a set amount of time every day to sit down with one’s thoughts and notes from recently consumed media and simply letting thoughts flow onto paper. During this period, the associate writes and explores connections between their current knowledge and the newly consumed content. This is when ideas can be more deeply researched as targeted growth points or conflicts are identified and broken down on paper. It matters not what is thought about. What is more important is the allowance of dedicated time for the brain to process, absorb, and tie together the different ideas and experiences of the associate.

By the end of these Blind-Writing sessions, a plethora of patterns and possibilities will become clear to the reader. This is the point at which they must switch gears from theoretical processing to action. For as Leonardo Da Vinci eloquently stated:

“It has long since come to my attention that people of accomplishment rarely sat back and let things happen to them. They went out and happened to things.”

The reality of this systemic approach to the pursuit of one’s “why” is that it can easily become bogged down in the acts of media consumption and thought. These behaviors are low risk and do not force the associate to grow in any measurable way. Without visible or measurable growth, the associate risks undermining their intrinsic motivation through a lack of progress of their self-determination traits. Therefore, the author must impose a strict diet of routine action on appropriately developed ideas.

Not every idea is going to change the world, make thousands of dollars or develop a new service, but the simple act of action will cause the associate to grow, learn new skills, and improve their sense of Autonomy, Competency and Relatedness, creating a positive feedback loop. The author cannot overstate the importance of this singular step and its role as the #1 reason associates fail to continually grow. Because as Tobe Brockner says:

“Ideas, even great ideas, are a dime a dozen. Without implementation-without action-those ideas are ultimately worthless.”

The final step in this niche development system is known as reflection. This means the reader simply looks back on the action, thought, and input steps and reviews how they worked. This is the stage where associates can take this system and craft it to their own interests or strengths.

Examples of reflection revelations might include struggling to read books but loving podcasts in the truck, and therefore changing the type of input they seek. Maybe they acted on a new service idea but selected the wrong client to implement it at and need to reevaluate who they seek to partner with in the future. Or they may just find that they need to work harder to develop their thoughts before taking action. No matter the conclusions from reflection, they will have a positive effect on the associate. This is the step in which they learn from their experiences regardless of the positive or negative result of their actions. As the famous Nelson Mandela said:

“I never lose. I either win or learn.”

Conclusions

That is it, associates! A simple system that leverages your neurobiology, psychology, “why”, and talents to send you on a path of self-discovery, resulting in a niche that you will perpetually be motivated to refine and grow.

While it may seem like a lot of information to simply find your niche, a superficial understanding of how each of these factors ties into your long-term success will ensure you are educated enough to identify whether one of these areas begins to slip during the development of your niche, and you will know how to correct it.

The author will leave readers with one final thought for those of you who feel as though you lack support within your current clinic for such a self-growth plan. You may feel alone and unsupported currently, but know that there are those of us out here taking note of your growth and achievements. Rare does an individual go unnoticed in his/her quest to have an impact. Until that day, take solace in this Paul Arden quote:

“We all want to be proud of the company we work for. It enhances our reputation, makes us look good, feel good and gives us access to the best people... But not everybody is fortunate enough to be able to work for the outfit that is currently favored. So, given that not everyone in your company is an idiot, what are you personally going to do to make it the company of the year? Start by talking it up. Begin thinking and behaving like a winner. It will stop the rot. It will temporarily halt negative thinking and a defeatist attitude...people will soon get the idea...Decide you are going to make the company great; at least decide you are going to make a difference..... You are on your own. Just do it. Better.”

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