



# Elevating Veterinary Technology Expectations

How the veterinary industry can raise its expectations for technology & learn from human healthcare to drive in-practice efficiency, stronger revenue performance, and better client experiences



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## What Makes Technology “Better”?

When debating the merits of any new technology or platform, it is important to remember that it is not about what technology is “better”—it is about what works best for the people and animals that rely on it. If technology does not serve its users, it fails. Plenty of technical marvels gather dust because, despite their ingenuity, they are not flexible enough to fit the evolving needs of users. Rather than having to adapt your needs to fit available technology, technology should be able to adapt to your evolving needs.

We know the most pressing needs of today’s veterinary practices are not immediately addressed by technology. In April of 2021, Covetrus partnered with research firm KS&R to conduct a blinded online research survey of 514 veterinary software decision-makers at US-based veterinary practices with patient populations of  $\geq 50\%$  companion animals. Forty-two percent of respondents reported hiring/staff retention issues to be the biggest challenge at their practice. In a structured list of values, 98% of respondents cited quality of care to be among the most important, with 88% citing it as “very important” and 10% as “somewhat important.” Comparatively, only 31% of respondents believed “leveraging technology to improve business operations” qualified as “very important.” Based on these results, it can be concluded that matters relating to clients, patients, and processes like quality of care are paramount in the veterinary world, with technology often being much further down the list of priorities.

However, quality of care and empowered, effective team members are not unrelated to technology. Technology should be thought of like the wiring, plumbing, or other infrastructural



# 42%

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parts of a home: we never think about it when it does what it is supposed to, but it is a big issue when it does not. Good technology, though, should not just hum along behind a curtain; it should actively enhance care delivery processes and be something that team members can easily use—and maybe even enjoy.

When it comes to an effective balance of people, processes, and technology in a healthcare setting, human healthcare has set the paradigm. Granted, human healthcare has the advantages of government support for technology sophistication and accreditation accolades such as Electronic Medical Record Adoption Model (EMRAM), and with these advantages come more structured programs to encourage adopting tech and gain efficiency and profitability, creating a virtuous cycle for adaptively enhancing care through technology.

In terms of sophistication and breadth of capabilities, human healthcare solutions are said to be a solid decade ahead of the veterinary

world, not because human healthcare professionals like technology more but because human healthcare demands have required more of technology.

Stringent healthcare standards are not the only force pushing human healthcare technology to be adaptable and effective for healthcare providers. As consumers, human patients have also been inundated with technological adaptations and innovations in everyday life. If a patient feels a provider is behind the times, outside of emergency situations, they'll take their business elsewhere, and the same goes for veterinary clients.

## The Cloud Is All Hot Air if It Is Not Adaptable

When it comes to essential, must-have technology, practice information management software (PIMS) is likely at the top of a veterinarian's list, but among the many veterinary professionals who have PIMS, looking for or expecting more from PIMS does not seem to be commonplace. In the Covetrus research study, 67% reported having their platform for  $\geq 6$  years, with most (47%) having had their platform for  $>10$  years. Moreover, 86% of respondents stated they are not actively considering changing platforms.

When considering available technology, to a degree, these results are understandable; if newer technology is not necessarily better, why change? One area of PIMS that has evolved significantly in recent years is the difference between cloud-hosted software and on-premise software. Operational up-time (both inside and outside the clinic), reliable access to information, and insights into practice performance software via always-on management capabilities are vital to both cloud-hosted and on-premise software. On-premise platforms have historically held the

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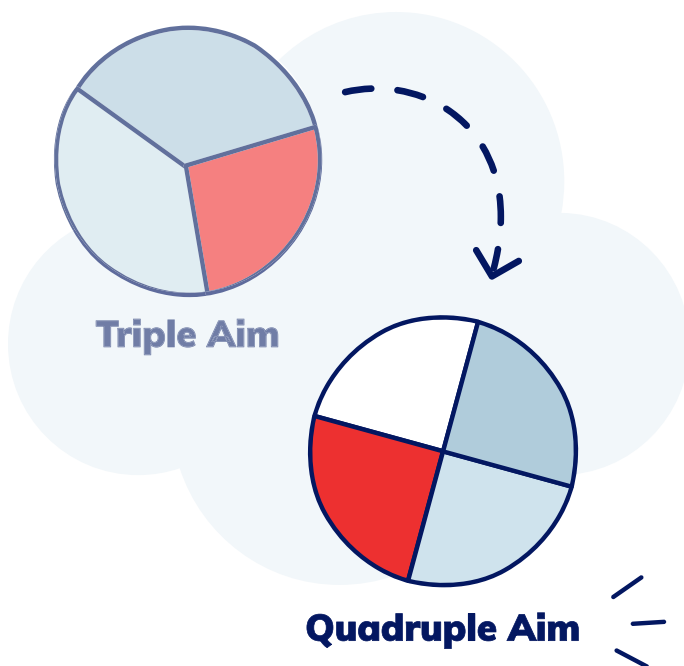
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advantage of simplicity, driven by an always-on accessibility that puts information right on a server in the practice when you need it. However, cloud-based platforms have grown more powerful and refined, challenging accessibility standards and revealing new efficiencies as practices shift to digital-first workflows.

In human healthcare, the question of whether cloud-based platforms are better suited to meet ever-evolving needs has been answered. In 2017, HIMSS Analytics found that 65% of surveyed healthcare organizations used cloud services for their data storage needs. Cloud-based electronic medical record (EMR) systems can now even extend the point of care; patient portals provide access to digital medical records, with consumers becoming more invested in their data and growing more comfortable with using it to guide decisions. With people becoming used to this approach with their own care, they may begin to develop similar expectations when it comes to the care for their pets. This shift gives cloud technology an edge, with a decided advantage over on-site systems in terms of accessibility, security, and adaptability.

Much of our ability to adapt as a society to the personal, cultural, and business challenges of COVID-19 has come through cloud infrastructures as well. The ubiquitous Zoom meetings, sharing information in Google Docs, listening to Spotify or other music-streaming services to focus while working from home—these are capabilities enabled by cloud infrastructures.

When best practices around people and processes change, it is also vital for technology to be capable of changing in kind. In 2007, the Institute for Healthcare Improvement introduced “Triple Aim,” a popular concept for optimum healthcare provider performance whereby hospitals and health systems simultaneously pursue 3 dimensions: improving patient experience and care, improving population health, and reducing costs of care delivery. In terms of operational and business performance, it consistently delivered compelling results for its practitioners but with one major side effect: an epidemic of burnout among providers.



Consequently, 7 years later, the Quadruple Aim was introduced and added a fourth element to protect and improve the health of the healthcare providers themselves. Within this model, healthcare technology adapted as well, as solutions could no longer just be cost-effective and good for patient and population health management. According to the Quadruple Aim framework, healthcare systems that did not function for the everyday ease-of-use and efficiency needs of providers did not work for the organization.

## What to Look for in Any New Veterinary Technology

One of the biggest perks of adaptable technologies (many of which are cloud-based) is that, when things change, the technology seamlessly changes as well. When users make requests, report bugs, or offer relevant suggestions, those improvements can be made to the system and can swiftly be rolled out to users in new version updates. Looking outside of healthcare and to users of cloud-based marketing software, despite ever-evolving regulations, spam-traps, and audience preferences, a million marketers or so worldwide have been able to produce an estimated cadence of 319.6 billion business emails on average per day. It is not exactly an endearing contribution to modern society, but it is a testament to technology-enabled productivity. When technology is adaptive and easy to use, it can make its users a force to be reckoned with.

An adaptable platform should allow veterinary teams to focus on the details of providing care. Team members should not have to worry about how to complete a workflow without getting a system error every time. In the Covetrus study, when asked what they look for when considering a new PIMs, 61% of respondents said a system's

ease of use was most important, and 52% said it must improve workflow and processes.

An adaptable platform also needs to be secure and reliable. It should save time and eliminate redundancies. The team's time and attention are precious and likely in short supply.

Technology needs to be adaptable to ever-evolving threats to its security. With on-premise solutions, although having a server in a locked room with password encryption might seem like maximum security, that technology puts all the security responsibilities on your team. All it takes is a single moment at an unattended workstation, a picked lock, or the click of a bad link to compromise the practice's data. With a cloud-based infrastructure, the veterinary team is not the only line of defense; an army of IT security experts are able to defend and protect the integrity of the practice's data.

Ideally, practice management technology should be an all-in-one solution that serves all vital business, practice, and communications functions, covering as much of the scope of work as possible so that minimal time is taken jumping from solution to solution and multiple tasks can be completed within a single process.

Ultimately, practice management technology should deliver the maximum amount of service and utility to your team, but should the team ever need to switch solutions, changing cloud-hosted software is an entirely digital lift without the need to replace servers or hardware.



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## Make Technology Serve the People & Processes at Your Practice

One of the biggest non-secrets to success for some of the biggest companies like Google, Amazon, Apple, and many others is the simple, optimized interplay of people, processes, and technology. Any business can harness this dynamic, but not every business does. In the veterinary world, people and processes have historically demanded the most attention, whereas technology has mostly been an underwhelming component of the general infrastructure for getting things done. The upside, though, is there is a massive opportunity for those practices that flip the script and utilize technology that contributes to people and process advantages as well.



# Key points to remember



## **The transition to better technology may seem difficult initially, but its value comes in making processes easier in the long run.**

Human hospitals and health systems have repeatedly invested in 18- to 24-month platform transition efforts. For veterinary practices, 1 to 3 months is a more common timeline. The key is recognizing solutions that will yield long-term, transformative advantages and efficiencies that eclipse the short-term transition windows.



## **The needs of the practice shouldn't conform to technology.**

Technology should conform to the practice's needs—not the other way around. With most PIMS users (67%) sticking with their platform for >6 years and 47% of that group sticking to a system for 10 or more years, it is clear that expectations for better technology are not exactly high. However, if anything, this gives practices a significant amount of leverage to shop around.



## **Familiarity with technology should never be a barrier to getting technology that works best for the practice.**

Cloud technology, for example, can seem inaccessibly complicated as compared with the analog, plugged-in set-up of an on-premise solution, but the flexibility and design of cloud solutions bring more security, options, and amenities, with far less effort to the veterinary practice.



## **Adaptable technologies can reduce future-ready friction.**

Adaptable technologies like cloud platforms do not fight against the tide of changing times—they go with the flow. With pet owners likely anticipating EMRs and data for their pets, technology that meets these needs will best serve practices in the future. Veterinary practices may prefer stability to the rapid changes required throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, but when well-served by technology, change—even rapid ones—can happen with minimal disruption.