

# Adaptability

Adaptability is the capacity to respond to a changing environment or circumstances in a way that meets a desired outcome. It can also be defined in terms of capabilities that are flexible and therefore can be developed and modified in response to change. Adaptability allows a person to utilize their resources in different ways as each new context presents itself. It incorporates both the readiness and the resources necessary to respond to change - in other words being **willing and able to change**.

Adaptability is a central construct of both employability and career development theory. Adaptability has been defined as “the quality of being able to change, without great difficulty, to fit new or changed circumstances.”<sup>1</sup> Adaptability is key to career development and success. Veterinary careers are not a linear continuum with a fixed path. The ongoing need to respond to new circumstances and novel situations requires a veterinarian to demonstrate plasticity and **innovation** in order to thrive.

In the shorter term, adaptability is a key part of **coping with uncertainty and ambiguity**, which is often the norm in the veterinary clinical environment. Individuals who are comfortable dealing flexibly with competing demands, abrupt changes, shifting priorities, and incomplete information are more likely to thrive in veterinary practice. Fortunately, recent graduates often told the VetSet2Go project that these same challenges form part of their motivation for becoming a vet — the intellectual stimulation and challenge of clinical problem-solving, and the daily variety of veterinary work. This shows that the challenging, unpredictable and variable nature of the veterinary environment can be a positive and motivating aspect of work, if approached flexibility and optimistically.

## What they said

*“I’m after someone who is not really dogmatic about their style of practice. You know, you’ve got to be somewhat flexible”  
(Employer)*

*“Because I think we all change inevitably, particularly in those first twelve months after we graduate. Our personalities change; our aspirations change. And I think having a degree of flexibility will put you in a really good position to say, right, my initial aspirations of where my career was going to go aren’t working out, so I’m going to go this way instead.” (Employer)*

*“Resilience is the word; the favourite word of everyone ... and, into that, is probably adaptability. Just to go with the flow of the day and what’s happening and being able to change and being able to adapt to the situation. You know, it’s not the end of the world if it didn’t go right, it didn’t go how I wanted it ... still moving onwards and forwards.” (Graduate)*

## How is adaptability recognised?

### Perceived by you:

- You are flexible and resourceful, and can adapt quickly to change
- You are comfortable with change and ambiguity, and can adjust ‘on-the-go’
- You have a ‘can-do’ attitude, and are open to new roles and experiences
- You can deal with sudden shifts in schedules or priorities
- You relish variety in your work

### Perceived by others:

- Comfortable with change, ‘not fazed’
- Willing to adapt to changing needs or new situations, even if it means changing how they work
- Rises to challenges with a solution-focused approach
- Flexible and open to new ideas; not dogmatic



## Why is adaptability important to employability?

Employability in the veterinary work environment of the future is not about finding that perfect job and sticking with it until retirement. Graduates need to be prepared for moving across a **number of different work environments** during the life of their career. Adaptability allows a veterinarian to apply knowledge and skills gained today, in situations that will present tomorrow. It gives a new graduate the ability to take advantage of both current and future industry needs. A veterinarian that is **open-minded and flexible** when faced with uncertainty and changing work structures will **thrive** no matter what veterinary employment looks like in the future.

An adaptable employee is valued because their success benefits themselves, their employer and the wider profession. They learn from experience. So the time spent supervising and mentoring a new graduate becomes time well spent when they demonstrate adaptability because they are able to transfer these skills to accomplish future tasks as their work circumstances change.

Adjusting to new conditions, coping with the unexpected and staying positive are key elements that link adaptability to **resilience**. Adaptable people are more likely to maintain personal equilibrium in the face of challenges, contributing to **wellbeing**.

*"Sometimes there was just constant attrition and no matter how much, how fast you did something there would still be more. So I think that was one of the hardest things, is not being able to plan your day. But I think I've learnt how to take the unknown. I'm much better at it now [but] I struggled with that."*  
(Recent graduate)

*"I'm very much a go-with-the-flow sort of person, and so I probably just took it on board. And I suppose it's more being flexible to new processes and ideas and environments and all that sort of stuff, really."*  
(Recent graduate)

*"Open mindedness, and also willingness to explore different paths and experiencing and learning new stuff that haven't been previously taught thoroughly before. It was just an openness, open mindedness and also positive outlook into the new stepping stone."* (Recent graduate)

*"The ability to learn and the ability to take on new tasks; I guess I want someone that's teachable, that's open to new ideas and open to being taught things and open to just developing themselves in many aspects. I don't want someone that sort of is not changeable ... not moldable when they come."* (Employer)

## Possible strategies to enhance your adaptability

### Practice creative thinking:

As veterinarians we are trained to think logically; identify the correct diagnosis without running too many tests and come up with a suitable treatment plan, in a very short space of time. Adaptability however, is not always about being logical; it often requires a creative approach to problem solving. So it is important to nurture your creativity and to consider other possibilities and other approaches even if 'the old way' is viewed as 'the right way'.

### Get feedback from others:

Self-confidence doesn't come easy when you are a new graduate so it is important to not only reflect on the merit of your own ideas and performance but also seek feedback from others. With time this will enhance your own self-evaluation skills

### Build your emotional intelligence:

Competency in the emotional intelligence domains provides the foundation for successful work relationships and building the social capital that is required for adaptability.

### Take stock of your resources:

It's easy to become familiar with the clinical skill set that is used every day in veterinary practice. But it is important to also draw upon those hidden resources that often get forgotten about, because you never know when they will become useful.

### Try something new:

Take the time to step out of your comfort zone whenever the opportunity arises. Make trying something new the 'new normal'.

### Laugh at yourself:

When you fail, reflect on what went wrong and consider a different approach for next time. Adaptability is strengthened when we learn from our mistakes, and this requires a degree of self compassion and a willingness to celebrate our weaknesses as well as our strengths.

**Further Resources:** Hartung, P.J. & Cadaret, M.C. (2017) Career Adaptability: Changing Self and Situation for Satisfaction and Success (Ch 2) in Maree K. (ed.) *Psychology of Career Adaptability, Employability and Resilience*. Cham: Springer International.

**References:** 1. Savickas, M.L. (1997) Career adaptability: An integrative construct for life-span, life-space theory. *Career Development Quarterly*, 45(3): 247-259.