

PEER REVIEWED



Technology Tools **New Ways to Talk to the Team**

Stacee Santi, DVM
Vet2Pet App Builders
Durango, Colorado

Sick of never-ending group email threads? Considering another dry erase board? Then read on!

No matter the kind of business, including veterinary practices, success—or failure—largely depends on good team communication, which requires using the most effective, up-to-date tools. If memos are still being emailed or printed and distributed, communication is far from effective.

Technology has come a long way with tools that improve team collaboration. Teams are no longer at the mercy of producing signed memos to prove information has been received. Companies whose team members are highly effective in communication are 3½ times more likely to significantly outperform their industry peers, studies show.¹ Better communication in veterinary medicine means increased efficiency, higher team satisfaction, and better patient outcomes.

A review of collaboration tools most relevant to veterinary practices follows.

TABLE
1 | **Team Collaboration Tools
Relevant to Veterinary Practices**

Tool**Pros****Trello**

Trello is the virtual mother of dry erase boards. Multiple boards can be created, each board has columns called lists, and each list contains cards. The cards can be used in many ways.

- Recording conversations from multiple team members about a specific topic
- Storing additional information (eg, due dates, checklists, labels)
- Cross-referencing conversations that include more than one topic
- Notifying the team who is leading a project by flagging a card with the team member's image
- Seeking a team member's input by tagging the card so he or she will be notified when his or her input is requested

- Free
- Easy to use, customizable, and fits most situations
- Task- and goal-oriented
- App and web platform; integrates with other platforms (eg, Dropbox, Google Drive, Slack)

**Slack**

Slack builds teams around topics. Team members use a hashtag to create channels (ie, topics) and invite other team members to the channel, where they can discuss topics, upload files, and have conversation threads and one-touch video calls.

Slack also can integrate "bots," many of which are great fun. For example, Hey Taco allows each team member 5 virtual tacos he or she can give away each day to other team members for jobs well done. Team members can be shown on a leaderboard and can cash in tacos for prizes (eg, Starbucks or Amazon gift cards).

- Many integrations are available
- Allows threads inside conversations
- Strong search feature
- All conversations can be seen easily at the same time
- Embedded video calls

Zoom Zoom

Zoom is a virtual meeting room that uses webcams to host a family-style meeting using Wi-Fi. The free plan can accommodate up to 100 participants for 40 minutes. Participants can avoid cell charges by easily accessing audio with their computer headphone jack and can also call in if necessary. Screen-sharing is no problem, and meetings can easily be recorded to the cloud and the link shared without the file being converted to a sharing platform.

- Easy to use—even the free version is good
- International access
- Has an app for iPhones and iPads
- Works well for meetings when team members cannot be onsite

**Glip**

Glip is similar to Slack but is free, easier to use, and features team-oriented conversations rather than Slack's topic-oriented approach. The powerful task feature includes due dates, assignees, and the ability to sort and reorder tasks based on priority and due dates, assign tasks to groups, and show when tasks are completed. Team members' calendars can be integrated and shared, which simplifies scheduling meetings. Files and links can be stored. Each team member has a personal note-taking section. Conversations can be converted to video chats with the click of a button. The often-hilarious Giphy feature, which allows team members to share animated GIF files, is a fun twist.

- Free
- Easy to use
- Powerful task feature
- Links and documents are stored in one place
- Calendar integration
- Embedded video calls

**Google Drive**

Google Docs and Google Sheets are live documents that multiple users can share and edit. Simply sharing a document with another team member allows him or her to edit a live document and update the document for every team member. Hot links (ie, live links to websites) can be easily embedded in the document. Comments can be attached to specific document sections. The document is live, so readers can easily access information.

- Free
- Easy to mark up
- Input from multiple team members is accessible

Cons

- Not conducive to general chatting

Applications

Start a card for a meeting of the veterinarians that includes date, time, and location. The veterinarians can add topics to the meeting checklist, which can be sorted by priorities, and comments and documents can be attached to the card. This helps ensure no topics are missed and unaddressed topics are carried over to the next card (ie, meeting).

- Free version is fairly limited
- Learning curve is higher because so much is happening that tasks and conversations can be hard to find without regular checks
- Tasks cannot be assigned easily to other team members

Publish the team schedule on Slack and add any shift-change conversations in the thread so the whole team can see and make comments (eg, if a team member unexpectedly needs a day off, he or she can post it to check with each team member in one place instead of speaking to them individually).

- Without a paid plan, group meetings end abruptly after 40 minutes

Use Zoom for small group meetings (eg, customer service representative meetings) or for team meetings that some members cannot attend and for those who work remotely. Being on video also helps with accountability for meeting participation and engagement.

- Conversation subthreads inside a team chat are not possible

Glip can be used by small groups (eg, customer service representatives, veterinary nurses) to alert team members about unfinished tasks and to assign the task for the following day (eg, Ms. Smith is waiting for a bag of XYZ dog food, which should be in tomorrow—can someone call her?) instead of using multiple sticky notes.

- User-friendly but has a steep learning curve

Google Docs can build a practice's library of content (eg, details about a new piece of equipment or new service, answers to FAQs, links to video training pieces recorded on a smartphone and loaded to YouTube). When new versions are ready or changes need to be made, the document can easily be edited.

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TAKE ACTION


- 1** Be familiar with the most up-to-date technical tools available, and their pros and cons, to choose the tool(s) that will be most effective in the practice.
- 2** Use the fun features technical tools offer to improve team collaboration and communication and to improve morale.

Worth Checking Out

The author also recommends checking out the following team collaboration tools:

- Cozi
- Facebook Workplace
- Humanity
- Skype
- WhatsApp
- WeWork

Conclusion

Whether a leader or team member, nobody operates well in the dark. Sharing information is a key component for every successful team and these tools make communication easy—and fun. 

Reference

1. Change and Communication ROI Study: How the Fundamentals Have Evolved and the Best Adapt. WillisTowers Watson. <https://www.towerswatson.com/en-US/Insights/IC-Types/Survey-Research-Results/2013/12/2013-2014-change-and-communication-roi-study>. Published December 2013. Accessed November/December 2017.



STACEE SANTI, DVM, is the founder of Vet2Pet, a technology startup that builds personalized custom apps for veterinary practices. She earned her DVM from Colorado State University in 1996. With more than 20 years of clinical experience in small animal and emergency practice, Stacey brings an in-the-trenches approach to innovation and solutions for veterinary teams. She has also served as a medical advisory consultant for NVA for 5 years, the medical director for AAHA general/ER practice in Colorado, and as chairperson and a member of the executive committee and of the Telehealth Task Force for the Colorado Veterinary Medical Association.

FUN FACT: Stacey is an avid fan of JLo, Abba, and George Strait.