

Itchy feet? Then plan a career break!

As a vet, you may think that going travelling or taking some time to further your education is out of the question. Jenny Moffett investigates why this might not be the case.



Itchy feet? A career break could be the answer.

These wintry days, it's easy to find yourself daydreaming about your summer holidays – where will you go, what will you do? Perhaps this year, however, you're longing for more than that fortnight in the sun. Perhaps you have an unfulfilled travel ambition or are simply getting itchy feet. Nowadays, with more and more people hiking up the Inca trail or down the east coast of Australia, exotic travel destinations are no longer off-limits. However, it's not just travel that whets people's appetites – it could be that you would like to further your education or simply take more time to spend with your children. In any case, a career break could be the answer.

Employment law

A career break will not suit everyone and will not be suitable at every stage in your life. It's helpful to look ahead to where you want to be in a year's time and in five year's time – both personally and professionally. If you are new in a job, and it's one you would like to keep hold of, it's probably best to stay put for a few years before leaving. However, if you are ready to move on from a job or you feel need a break from issues in your personal life, perhaps now is a good time. Age should not be a barrier: travel agents across the UK and Ireland

report a huge increase in the number of older adventurers or 'golden gappers'.

Under Irish employment law, taking a career break is labelled as 'special leave', which falls into two broad categories: paid and unpaid leave. Paid leave is nearly always of a short duration e.g., time to sit an exam or cope with a family emergency. Unpaid leave generally refers to longer stretches of time – often between one and five years. Some employers have a set policy on unpaid leave, e.g., who can take how much time and when they can do this. Vets employed in the civil service, for example, can take special leave without pay (up to five years in some cases) for 'domestic purposes, educational purposes and travel abroad'. Such defined policies often see you rejoining the business at an equivalent salary level and status but you may find yourself doing different slightly different work or in a different location than from where you set out. If your employer agrees with you and you decide to take a career break, the contract of employment between you is suspended for the duration of the break. According to employment law, service is regarded as 'continuous' but the period of the break is not used in the calculation of benefits such as pensions.

“Career breaks are also a well-recognised antidote for burnout”

Beneficial for bosses too

Allowing staff to take a career break in a smaller business such as a veterinary practice, is different. Traditionally, it can be more difficult to accommodate staff taking prolonged time off in a small business. But, ironically, it is often such places of work that benefit the most. Employees that take career breaks, or who can look forward to one, are often much more focused on their work and come back from breaks invigorated and enthusiastic. Similarly, if staff have taken time out to further their education or have experienced working as vets or vet nurses in a foreign country, there may be many qualities and skills that they bring back when they return to the practice. Career breaks are also a well-recognised antidote for burnout – a situation which is unfortunately common in the veterinary profession. Employers should look on employee career breaks as a short-term investment for a long-term payback. After all, if you have an efficient, motivated, ambitious veterinary assistant, would you rather facilitate their career advancement or risk losing them altogether?

If you are an employee and you want to investigate the chance of taking a career break, make sure you do your research. Firstly, find out whether your practice has an official or unofficial policy on leaves of absence. Can you think of anyone who has done something similar in the recent past? Secondly, frame your request to your boss so that it is obvious to them how your break will benefit them and the practice too.

Examples include:

- Look at your ideas from the point of view of your employer. Can you think of the best time of year to fit your break in with practice life e.g., outside of stud season in equine practice or outside Christmas or summer holidays, when other staff may be off, in the case of companion animal practices.
- Help your boss find a replacement for the period of time. Do you know of a locum or a colleague that would like to spend some time with your practice?
- Ask yourself how you can help achieve continuity of the practice structure and service to clients. Can you write up notes and instructions, including how your responsibilities will be covered, to help your co-workers for when you're away?
- Use examples that your boss can relate to. Can you think of another vet friend or colleague that has taken time out to study or travel? What skills did they pick up? How did they benefit their practice when they returned?
- Give plenty of notice for your plans. Talk to your employer well in advance of fixing any dates.

Another important way of getting your employer on-side is to make sure that you use your time away well. You may choose to find a short-term or locum job in a foreign country. Currently, Irish vets can work in many countries abroad with their MVB qualification – if you have somewhere in mind, you should check the requirements with the relevant veterinary authority in that country. There are also a number of charity bodies that can help you locate a veterinary role abroad in developing countries. Examples include: the Voluntary Service Overseas (www.vso.org.uk), the Worldwide Veterinary Service (www.wvs.org.uk), the Society for the Protection of Animals Abroad (www.spana.org) or Veterinaires Sans Frontieres (www.vsf.org).

Making the break

If your employer is happy to grant you a career break, make sure that you make a firm agreement over continuity of service and exact length of leave. It is also important to have a way of keeping in touch with your employer, e.g., an email address he or she can contact you on.

If your employer decides that a career break is not in the best interests of the practice, then your other option is to hand in your notice. Again thinking ahead to the future (e.g., can you see yourself working here in another five years?) may help you work out whether this is the right option for you. If you do decide to resign, do give plenty of notice (see your contract; this is normally a minimum of four weeks) and leave on an amicable basis. You never know when you'll need a reference or a recommendation in the veterinary field. Also, try to pick your timing carefully. If you are thinking of going on a 12-month trip, try to time your return so that you arrive back in January or September, two months where, traditionally, it is easier to find work.

So, whether your dream is to feed the Sumatran orangutans or embark on a course in veterinary homeopathy, be aware that a little bit of planning can go a long way. A change is as good as a rest and, let's face it, a rest would be pretty good too! All you have to do is convince your boss!

Helpful websites

www.thecareerbreaksite.com has useful advice about where to go and what to do – there's also a really good budgeting sheet to show you how much you need to save before you go

www.citizensinformation.ie – further information on employment law and career breaks can be found here

<http://foreignaffairs.gov.ie> has information about passports and visas but the site's UK counterpart, www.fco.gov.uk, has much more travel advice and information about particular countries

www.Lonelyplanet.com is the budget travellers bible. Lots of advice and information for single or small group travellers

www.Tripadvisor.com – travel advice and accommodation reviews from across the world