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Dairy farmer-female veterinary
advisor relationships in New
Zealand: Identifying the key attributes of a
flourishing partnership

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Programme

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Executive summary

Strong relationships between farmers and rural advisors, in particular veterinarians, lead to better implementation of advice and adoption of recommendations. Farmers value evidence-based advice from their veterinarians, but veterinarians are often criticised by farmers for not thinking about the big picture. For veterinarians, strong relationships with farmers can contribute to job satisfaction and retention. However, there is limited research on the key attributes of a successful farmer-rural advisor relationship from the perspective of both farmer and veterinarian. The aims of this project were to identify the key attributes of successful farmer-veterinary advisor relationships from both perspectives, specifically for female veterinarians who are in a paid advisory relationship with a dairy farmer.

A review of the literature revealed that a successful advisory relationship between a dairy farmer and veterinarian had benefits both from management and business perspectives and from a well-being and job satisfaction perspective, for farmers and veterinarians alike. For the farmer, a successful advisory relationship may lead to improvements in management of farm operations, animal health, and profitability. For the veterinary advisor and business, successful advisory relationships may be seen as beneficial for job satisfaction, retention of veterinarians and improved client loyalty.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted separately with seven dairy farmer-female veterinary advisor pairs, that were self-reported as successful relationships by both parties. Five owners or senior managers of these veterinary businesses were also interviewed. Open-ended questions were asked to understand the positive components of a thriving and flourishing farmer-veterinarian relationship. Thematic analysis was used to identify core themes and sub-themes, commonalities, and differences between the farmers, advisors, and business owners/managers.

Key findings from these interviews:

- Personal connection was highlighted as the most important theme contributing to the successful relationship between the veterinarian and farmer for all interviewees. This connection was created over time by mutual trust and respect, honoured by open and honest communication between the veterinary advisor and farmer, with a genuine understanding of the farmer and their business by the veterinarian.
- Value is provided by the veterinarian to the farmer in the form of support, expertise, growth and development, and accountability. Furthermore this value provision is not all one way; in order for the partnership to thrive, growth and development, and accountability go both ways.
- A strong understanding of personality characteristics (self-awareness) by both the veterinarian and farmer, and awareness of what was needed by the farmer to complement their strengths, was part of the success.
- Veterinary businesses clearly saw the value in supporting their veterinarians to work with farmers as advisors, citing benefits to the veterinary business, the veterinarians, and the farmer clients. The factors that need to be considered for veterinary businesses to be successful encouraging the development of these

flourishing advisory relationships are time, support, interpersonal skills, building of trust, monetisation of the work, emotional and personal investment, and gender.

Recommendations:

- Communicate to the veterinary industry the importance of personal connection as the pillar of flourishing advisory relationships. Clearly describe how the value in these partnerships is provided to (and from) the farmer by the advisor.
- Improve the emotional intelligence of veterinarians wanting to work as advisors through training and education.
- Communicate to the veterinary profession the complexity of the advisory role, and the different skillset required by veterinarians that are successful in this space.
- Veterinary businesses need to provide a range of resources to support their veterinarians to develop as advisors including time allocation, a structure to the advisory service but also the flexibility to adapt with each relationship.
- Identify farmer-veterinary advisory relationships that are not flourishing and make recommendations for changes based on the findings from this project.

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To the farmers – know that your veterinary advisors really do care and are wanting nothing more than to provide you value.

To the veterinary advisors – know that your farmers genuinely need you, you are an integral part of their team.

To the veterinary businesses – know that these flourishing advisory partnerships are crucial to the success of your business long-term, are extremely rewarding to your veterinarians and hugely valued by your farmers. Protect and nourish them at all costs.

“With your basket and my basket together, we can feed the tribe.”

1. Introduction

Strong relationships between farmers and their rural professionals, in particular veterinarians, lead to better implementation of advice and adoption of recommendations (Svensson et al., 2022). Farmers value evidence-based advice from their veterinarians, however veterinarians are often criticised by farmers for not thinking about the big picture (Kristensen & Enevoldsen, 2008).

Farmers perceptions of a good advisor have been described both overseas and in New Zealand (Duncan et al., 2021; Jansen et al., 2010; Svensson et al., 2022). Common themes include trust, commitment, integrity, personal recommendation from friends, empathy, longevity, and practical farm-specific advice.

From the farmer perspective, Duncan et al., (2021) presented the key reasons for erosion of trust of the advisory model. These included a 'telling rather than listening' approach from advisors, a perception of bias, a lack of follow-through and follow-up by advisors, and a lack of practical knowledge and experience in advisors.

Farmers have different learning preferences and all farms and farmers are unique, so a successful advisor-farmer relationship may mean different things to different people (Hansen et al., 2018; Kristensen & Jakobsen, 2011). Farming is becoming more complicated with increased compliance requirements and a plethora of information available to interpret (Allen, 2024), therefore a team of people supporting a farmer is important, particularly from a mental wellbeing perspective (Botha, 2015; Hammersley et al., 2023).

From the veterinarian and veterinary business perspective, retention in the profession is a concern worldwide, particularly in the rural production animal sector (Dykes, 2017). Much of the research has focussed on why veterinarians leave practice, with a dearth of research on why veterinarians stay in rural practice. Some studies have identified that rural production animal veterinarians often stay in practice due to the strong farmer relationships they have forged, i.e. this is a contributor to job satisfaction (Cantley, 2023; Dykes, 2017). However there is limited peer-reviewed research on the key attributes of a successful farmer-rural advisor relationship from the perspective of both farmer and veterinarian (Derks et al., 2013).

Success suggests a defined end point "it was a success", however farmer-advisor relationships are ever-changing as the parties change, grow and learn over time, and the objectives of the relationship mature (Caughlin & Huston, 2010). Therefore, for the current project, the term flourishing or thriving is specifically used as the description of a successful advisory relationship between these two parties. Farmer-veterinary relationships are increasingly complex, as is the social, political, and economic context in which they exist (Hamilton, 2018), thereby making the idea of thriving or flourishing relationships critical in understanding the future role of veterinarians on farms.

This study considers the positive side of these relationships, i.e. what is working, why are they successful? Nevertheless there is acknowledgement that the negatives do need to be considered in order to fully understand the positive aspects that

contribute to a successful, long-term, and mutually beneficial advisory relationship between a veterinarian and dairy farmer.

2. Aim

This project aimed to identify the key attributes of flourishing farmer-veterinary advisor relationships from both perspectives. The specific demographic assessed was female veterinarians who are in a paid advisory relationship with a dairy farmer.

3. Literature review

This literature review explores what is known about advisory relationships between production animal veterinarians and their farmers. The review focusses on what the benefits of this relationship are to all parties, the main attributes of these types of relationships, and the potential challenges and barriers to developing these relationships.

2.1 Conceptualising the paid advisory relationship

An advisory relationship is built on the ability of the professional being empowered to make recommendations but not enforce them, and the farmer seeking the advice is not required to take-action based on the advice provided (Duncan et al., 2021; Ritter et al., 2019). Paid advisory services in the context of farming and veterinary care have been seen as a means of improving animal welfare, increasing farm productivity, and supporting farmers in decision-making (Van der Leek, 2015). Paid relationships are often framed within formal contracts or service agreements that outline the specific roles, responsibilities, and expectations of both parties (Derks et al., 2013). These paid advisory relationships may be in the form of a formal herd health plan approach where there is a specific herd health issue (Derks et al., 2013; Lam et al., 2011; Van der Leek, 2015). This approach to herd management and disease prevention, that is within a traditional veterinarian's skillset, would include areas such as calf rearing, young stock management, milk quality and mastitis, herd reproductive performance, or herd-level disease prevention plans.

It is important to distinguish between paid advisory relationships and traditional transactional veterinarian services whereby a sick animal or herd is treated by a veterinarian and the majority of the relationship is based on these interactions (Derks et al., 2013). This review considers advisory relationships where the predominant interactions between the veterinarian and farmer are advisory in nature and the farmer is willingly paying for these regular advisory consultations over and above the normal services provided by their dairy clinician. Likewise, it is important to distinguish between paid and unpaid advisory services provided by a veterinarian. Payment by the farmer for the advisory process indicates a willingness to engage in the advice, even if it is not implemented (Hansen et al., 2018; Kuehne & Llewellyn, 2017).

One of the distinctive aspects and most likely benefits of a paid advisory relationship is the ability for the advice to be impartial and independent, i.e. not being

supported by sales or the advisor having a specific agenda (Sutherland et al., 2013; Sutherland & Labarthe, 2022). Veterinarians with their evidence-based training and with a professional code of conduct should be well-placed to offer paid independent advisory services to their farmers, however this does require a change in mind-set (Svensson et al., 2022).

2.2 Why do we want farmers and veterinarians to have flourishing advisory relationships?

2.2.1. Farmer benefits

Farming can be a stressful profession (Willock et al., 1999), therefore a strong supportive advisory relationship may be a useful resource for farmers to manage the stress on farm. Farmers in New Zealand are disproportionately represented in suicide statistics (Botha, 2015) indicating that there is something about farming or about those that farm that put them at increased risk of mental health issues. When preventative strategies are discussed for mental wellbeing one of the key approaches is to concentrate on the things that one can control, and therefore accept there are things that cannot be controlled (Morgaine et al., 2017). For farmers, factors outside their control include weather and product price, and these are both significant influences on their profitability. Having a long-standing relationship with a rural professional may support the farmer to be prepared for those uncontrollable factors by budgeting stock feed and cash flow, for example (Hammersley et al., 2023). This feeling of being in control may then help manage mental wellbeing (Morgaine et al., 2017).

With their evidence-based approach and skillset veterinarians have the potential to be a screen of information for the farmer. This could include helping the farmer filter the plethora of information that is delivered to them (Van der Leek, 2015), to help determine what is relevant to their situation. Farmers need to keep up to date with changing times and expectations from industry, be it council regulations, human resource laws, dairy company requirements or animal welfare code changes. Having a strong relationship with a rural professional that is 'looking out' for the farmer, will keep the farmer up to date and current with requirements (Hammersley et al., 2023).

Engagement of and empowering staff is crucial to a successful business, and an advisor may be well-placed to support staff training. Veterinarians are often involved with training specific to animal health, but a farmer engaging advisory services from their veterinarian may find that there is benefit in utilising this existing relationship with the farm team in order to increase staff engagement and productivity (Van der Leek, 2015).

A trusted advisory partnership with the veterinarian could also aid in relationships with other stakeholders in the dairy business, such as the banker, accountant, equity partners, trustees, and family members. A farm advisor can therefore be utilised to help manage the relationship between the farm owner and sharemilkers for

example, and in cooperative structures the relationship between the board and management (Van der Leek, 2015).

Moreover, a strong relationship with a trusted-advisor will help in the setting of goals and accountability for implementing actions to achieve those goals, as goals help to establish priorities and focus attention on relevant information (Willock et al., 1999). The motivations and goals of farmers will vary. Teamwork, animal welfare, knowledge dissemination and production (in that order) were identified as the key expectations of an advisory programme by Danish dairy farmers (Kristensen & Enevoldsen, 2008).

With the veterinarian engaged in advisory work with the farmer, there are considerable potential benefits for animal health and wellbeing, with the veterinarian's focus being on the cows first and foremost (Van der Leek, 2015). Improving animal health and wellbeing, specifically prevention of clinical and subclinical disease, leads to increased productivity, which will lead to a reduction in cow wastage, improvement in herd genetics and performance, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions (Džermeikaitė et al., 2024; Kyriazakis et al., 2024).

2.2.2. Veterinarian benefits

The benefits for the veterinarian of a thriving or flourishing relationship are extensive. Once a dairy veterinarian has become competent in the routine technical tasks of the job, moving into herd-level and farm-level advisory work is one potential career pathway progression (Remnant, 2020). Seeking professional development as an experienced clinician is important for ongoing intellectual challenge and job satisfaction (Gates et al., 2021).

The changing demographic of the veterinary profession is a crucial element to consider in ensuring future thriving relationships between veterinarians and farmers. The 2023-2024 New Zealand Veterinarian Workforce report showed that 64.2% of the veterinary workforce were female, and this proportion will continue to increase, as the mean age of female veterinarians was 41 and males 52 years (Veterinary Council of New Zealand, 2024). Working with farmers in a successful advisory capacity can evolve into a variety of roles, including facilitator and mediator, applied nutritionist, or champion of animal welfare, food safety and judicious antibiotic use manager (Van der Leek, 2015).

2.2.3. Veterinary business benefits

Job satisfaction, and therefore better retention of veterinarians is good for the veterinary business, as training inexperienced staff, building client relationships from scratch and managing team dynamics with every staff change is costly for any business. If a veterinary business supports and encourages their experienced veterinarians to move into advisory work, then this creates a career pathway that is attractive for younger veterinarians (Remnant, 2020).

Veterinarians that are more focussed on their farmers, with higher compassion score and increased tenure of the producer-veterinarian relationship, have a lower risk of burnout (DeGroot, 2020). Strong, sticky farmer-veterinarian relationships are crucial

to the success of the veterinary business, and therefore with the veterinarians developing these advisory relationships, the strength of the veterinary business-farmer relationship increases (Ruston et al., 2016).

By offering a broader base of services, aside from individual cow medicine, the veterinary business remains relevant to the future farmer, and resilient to the services of lay professionals offering technical services but without the capability to provide the equivalent advisory services (Crowe & Oxtoby, 2019; Van der Leek, 2015). This also holds true to the reduction in drug usage and individual sick cow medicine with improved preventative programmes. In order to remain an important part of the farm team veterinarians need to diversify; being reliant on drug sales is not a sustainable model for veterinary practices due to online retailers and reduction in drug usage (Comer et al., 2023; Ruston et al., 2016).

2.2.4. Rural community benefits

Healthy, happy, successful farmers supported by their veterinary professionals is exactly what the rural community needs to remain solid (Morgaine et al., 2017). Likewise, a healthy, happy, large team of veterinarians that remain in rural communities for a long-time support their farmers and contribute to the community; financially, emotionally, and physically. Advisors can provide a support network to farmers and that can strengthen the local community (Hunt et al., 2011; Stanley-Clarke, 2019) and a team of people are required to improve the well-being of farmers (Adams et al., 2020).

2.3. Key attributes of a self-defined flourishing relationship

A successful advisory relationship is likely to be associated with the farmer's opinion being that their rural advisor is a great advisor. The difference between a good and great rural advisor will be associated with their interpersonal skills such as their ability to relate, challenge, motivate, coach, and inspire their clients (Allen, 2024).

The key attributes of a successful advisory relationship are outlined below.

2.3.1. Trust and mutual respect

Trust is a central element in any advisory relationship (Bard et al., 2019; Crowe & Oxtoby, 2019; Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006). Studies have shown that farmers value veterinarians they can trust to provide accurate, unbiased, and timely advice, especially regarding the health of their animals (Kristensen & Jakobsen, 2011; Ritter et al., 2019; Svensson et al., 2019). This trust is rooted in consistent interactions and reliability and fosters long-term collaboration. Conversely it is known that farmers are less likely to implement advice given by a veterinarian or a rural advisor if there is a lack of trust (Cawley et al., 2023; Duncan et al., 2021; Svensson et al., 2019).

Mutual respect, where both parties recognise each other's expertise and role, is critical for the success of the relationship (Hamilton, 2018). Veterinarians who respect farmers' local knowledge, farming practices, and personal capability tend to build

stronger connections, resulting in more effective partnerships. Hamilton (2018) suggests "a mutually respectful approach moves beyond discourse between expert and practitioner, service provider and service buyer, towards *collaborative transformation* where the purpose is to actively alter the conditions in which farmers and their animals live/work."

The four attributes of trust inside organisations have been summarised as benevolence, ability, integrity, and predictability (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006). Many of these principles apply to the trust between a farmer and their advisor, as often the advisor is part of an organisation and has a brand they are associated with (Bard et al., 2019). Benevolence reflects benign motives and a personal degree of kindness toward the other party, and a genuine concern for their welfare; ability refers to the other party's capabilities to carry out their obligations (in terms of skills and knowledge); integrity involves adherence to a set of principles acceptable to the other party, encompassing honesty and fair treatment, and the avoidance of hypocrisy, and predictability relates specifically to consistency and regularity of behaviour (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006). In an assessment of one's trustworthiness, e.g. in the case of the farmer trusting their advisor, each of these qualities is significant, but are interdependent and the weighting on each is dependent on the individual farmer.

2.3.2. Effective communication

Clear and open communication between farmers and veterinarians is a vital attribute for a flourishing relationship. Veterinarians who take the time to listen and understand the farmer's concerns are more likely to have a positive impact (Atkinson, 2010a, 2010b).

Communication in an advisory relationship extends beyond technical advice and includes discussing farmers' goals, preferences, getting the whole farm team on board, and understanding the context of the farm (Lam et al., 2011). Effective communication is more than just communicating with the people present in the advisory meetings. Ensuring that effective communication occurs with the farm staff, other stakeholders for the farm and other rural professionals involved in the farm business is crucial for a successful relationship (Crowe & Oxtoby, 2019). This effective communication is required to be two-way, i.e. both farmer communication back to the veterinarian and the veterinarian to the farmer. If the communication is always one-way then the relationship will not be considered as flourishing by both parties. Bard et al., (2022) found that with a brief motivational interview training, veterinarians used more reflection statements, had a more empathic and partnership-oriented consultation style and had a greater emphasis on the clients' own language, and this consequently led to farmers contributing more to the conversations and discussing more herd health related factors.

Ensuring that the communication strategy is tailored to each farmer's perception of reality and specific needs will lead to an increase in uptake of advice, including farmers perceived by their affiliated veterinarians to be 'hard to reach' in terms of communication and advice-giving (Jansen et al. 2010). Veterinarians that are working as herd health management advisors are recommended to take a proactive role in making sure their communication is tailored to inexperienced staff

members as well as the experienced herd manager or farm owner (Kristensen & Jakobsen, 2011). Specific communication tools that have been identified as effective include empathy statements and open-ended questions leading to a more patient-centric approach to the consultative process (Ritter et al., 2018; Ritter et al., 2019)).

Communication means to 'make common' and one of the key roles of the veterinarian in the advisor role is not just to transfer their knowledge but to stimulate, qualify and empower the farmer to make informed decisions, bringing them closer to their own definition of success (Kristensen & Jakobsen, 2011).

2.3.3. Shared goals and values

A flourishing relationship requires alignment of goals and values (Caughlin & Huston, 2010). Veterinarians and farmers must have a shared understanding of what constitutes success on the farm (Hamilton, 2018; Kristensen & Enevoldsen, 2008; Kristensen & Jakobsen, 2011; Lam et al., 2011). This may include animal health, environmental sustainability, profitability, and social responsibility. When the advisory relationship is centred around common objectives, farmers are more likely to be receptive to their advisor's recommendations (Duncan et al., 2021). An example of the contradictory situation would be where a veterinarian believes the farmer is motivated by profitability of their business and therefore all the advice shared and recommendations are tailored to increased revenue, when in fact the farmer's primary motivation is more time spent with their family. This mismatch will not lead to a flourishing advisory relationship. The alignment of values (finding meaning) allows for a more holistic approach to problem-solving (Winsborough et al., 2009).

Kristensen & Jakobsen, (2011) recommend that veterinarians would be wise to invest time in discussions with each farmer, to match their expectations into a shared understanding of the farmer's reasons for participating in advisory service delivery.

2.3.4. Collaboration and co-creation

A self-defined flourishing relationship involves collaboration rather than a transactional exchange of services. The more farmers and veterinarians can work together as partners in achieving farm success, the more likely they are to form a lasting bond. A genuine, interactive engagement carries the potential for long lasting change through new knowledge (Hamilton, 2018). Co-creation of solutions, where the veterinarian collaborates with the farmer to develop strategies that fit the farm's specific needs and challenges, is seen as a key contributor to effective advisory relationships (Schein, 2016). This also helps in the practical application of veterinary advice, making it more relevant and actionable (Pink, 2011).

2.3.5. Flexibility and adaptability

The farming environment is dynamic and constantly changing, and the advisory relationship must be flexible and adaptable to meet evolving needs (Atkinson, 2010a, 2010b). Veterinarians who demonstrate an ability to adjust their advice based on changing circumstances, such as new regulations, climate challenges, or farm goals, are better equipped to maintain effective relationships with farmers (Van der Leek, 2015). Flexibility also means accommodating the varying levels of

experience and knowledge that different farmers and the people within their team may have. Schein, (2016) refers to the concept of humble consulting, whereby to become a successful consultant for your client, you need to be able to recognise the type of role you need to play. This requires really understanding the problem and then being adaptable in the way you lead the client to the solution. One of the keys of successful leadership is being versatile, recognising that at certain times and with certain people different approaches are required (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006).

2.3.6. Reciprocity and value perception

For an advisory relationship to be self-defined as flourishing, both parties must feel that they are gaining value. Farmers should perceive the services offered by veterinarians as worth the price they pay (Cawley et al., 2023), and veterinarians should find the relationship rewarding in terms of professional satisfaction and financial compensation (Van der Leek, 2015). The perception of value can be driven by both tangible outcomes such as improved animal health, productivity, profitability, and intangible ones such as a sense of partnership, personal growth, cohesion in the farm team and mental health and wellbeing of the farm team (Duncan et al., 2021).

2.3.7. Long-term engagement

A flourishing relationship is usually long-term, not just a one-time consultation (Caughlin & Huston, 2010). Continuous engagement and follow-up services, where veterinarians remain involved in the ongoing monitoring of farm health and productivity, contribute to the lasting success of the relationship. This sustained interaction leads to deeper insights into the farm's operations, which in turn can improve the relevance and effectiveness of the advice provided (Hamilton, 2018; Van der Leek, 2015). For example, producers perceive advice to be legitimate if they have an established or long-term relationship with an advisor and also greater comfort levels with adopting advice change over time (Duncan et al., 2021).

2.4 Challenges in establishing a flourishing advisory relationship

2.4.1. Farmer barriers

Perceived farmer barriers are often the things that advisors are not doing successfully such as developing a high trust relationship, as well as cost and value for money. Economic pressures may make it difficult for farmers to consistently afford paid advisory services, especially if they do not immediately perceive the benefits (Duncan et al., 2021). The cyclical nature of farm profitability may also challenge farmers who are engaged in advisory services to reevaluate the importance of this cost to their business, and this maybe perceived by advisors as a relationship breakdown, when in fact it was a perceived necessity for business survival. Veterinarians not being practical with their advice leads to farmers not implementing the advice, which then leads to a breakdown of a successful advisory relationship (Svensson et al., 2019). If farmers have experienced this approach by

other veterinarians previously then they may be less willing to try to engage in advisory services again.

Veterinarians are perceived as being the experts in animal health but not necessarily understanding the big picture of the farm system, or all the other tasks a farm business is taking into consideration (Bard et al., 2019). Therefore, this perceived lack of awareness of the impact of a suggestion on other parts of their farm business may lead to a lack of engagement in advisory services with a veterinarian.

Farmers and their businesses are ever evolving, and therefore if the veterinarian is not moving and growing with the farmer they will be left behind and irrelevant to the farmer. In order to continue to be a partner in the farm business veterinarians need to grow and adapt as the relationship changes with time (Van der Leek, 2015).

There is also the risk that veterinarians working the advisory space with their farmers become too familiar with their farmers. This may risk the objectivity and independence that is required by the farmer for a successful advisory relationship (Schein, 2016). It could also increase emotional stressors for the veterinarian due to deeper personal investment. This could be a barrier for both veterinarians and farmers.

2.4.2. Veterinarian barriers

One common issue is the time constraints that veterinarians face, limiting their ability to form personal, in-depth relationships with farmers and undertake professional development as they move into this advisory role (Gates et al., 2021). There may be a lack of willingness of veterinarians to invest in changing their approach away from evidence based, solutions focussed, expert provider to coach and problem finder (Hamilton, 2018). To be successful this change requires taking on the humble consulting approach (Schein, 2016). The veterinary advisor needs to know what the problem is right now for that farmer. As a result they need to facilitate the conversation required to produce the solution without the telling the farmer what to do, i.e. not be the expert.

Charging honestly and fairly for the time and advice provided, when providing advice, is challenging for many veterinarians. Appropriate charging is not an issue isolated to dairy advisory work but is an industry-wide issue (Atkinson, 2021; Williams, 2025). This is connected with the potential business barriers that may exist, such as veterinary advisors not providing the same level of sales and fees (in the short-term) as more traditional dairy clinicians. Therefore, the wider veterinary business must be considered when looking at barriers to veterinarians moving into advisory work.

2.5. Summary

A successful advisory relationship between a dairy farmer and veterinarian is beneficial to both parties. The wins are both from a management and business perspective and from a well-being and job satisfaction perspective for farmers and veterinarians alike. For the farmer, a successful advisory relationship may lead to improvements in management of farm operations, animal health, and profitability.

For the veterinary advisor and business, effective advisory relationships may be seen as beneficial for job satisfaction, retention of veterinarians and improved client loyalty.

A self-defined flourishing or thriving relationship can be understood as one that is based on the mutual satisfaction of both parties, emphasising collaboration, respect, and shared goals (Agenor et al., 2017; Caughlin & Huston, 2010). In this context the term flourishing would refer to ongoing improvement over time, i.e. the relationship is developing as the needs of the farmer change and the advisor grows as a person both in technical skills and life wisdom. However, what constitutes a flourishing relationship in this advisory context, and what are the specific attributes that contribute to it, remain under-explored.

3. Materials and methods

This project was undertaken with human ethics approval through the Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme.

A pilot interview was undertaken with a veterinary colleague, which identified some areas for improvement. This veterinarian had not operated in the advisory space, but she was able to undertake the interview considering a specific scenario with a farm client, whereby she was operating in an advisory role over a 12-month period for a specific preventative animal health issue. However, she did not fit the criteria for the purpose of this project, therefore her survey transcript was not used in the thematic analysis.

A convenience sample of seven dairy farmer-female veterinary advisor relationships were selected from known colleagues in the Waikato, Bay of Plenty, Central Plateau, Hawkes Bay, and North Canterbury regions. The criteria for enrolment were that these relationships were self-reported as successful by both parties and both parties were willing to participate in the interview process. These relationships were required to be for a farmer paid service for the veterinary advisory input. The owners or senior managers of these businesses were also interviewed to obtain the veterinary business perspective for this research question. There were only five veterinary business interviews as two veterinarians worked for the same business and one veterinarian was self-employed and was therefore the business owner and advisor.

A mixture of face-to-face and video qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted over two months (March – April 2025) where open-ended questions were asked to understand the positive components of a thriving and flourishing farmer-veterinarian relationship (Appendix 1). As this study design and research question has not been undertaken previously, especially with this demographic, it was important to keep the questions open-ended. Interviews were conducted separately with each of the farmers, veterinarians and veterinary business owners or managers.

Interviewees signed Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme standard consent forms prior to the interview, which confirmed their answers would remain confidential and

if direct quotations were used, the identity of the interviewee would not be revealed.

Interviews were voice recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Word for face-face interviews, and Microsoft Teams for video interviews. The transcripts were manually checked and corrected for obvious errors and the key concepts were highlighted manually and collated into separate documents. Each pair of veterinarian and farmer interviews formed a separate document put forward for further analysis. The approach was repeated for the five veterinary business interviews, with the key ideas being manually collated into one document.

Thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) was undertaken. The aim of the analysis was to identify core themes and sub-themes, commonalities, and differences between the three voices, describing the key attributes of a flourishing farmer-veterinary advisor relationship. Microsoft Copilot, a generative artificial intelligence chatbot, was used to assist in the collation of key themes from the eight summary documents (seven farmer-advisor pairs and one veterinary business). The transcripts and initial summary documents were read again with the themes now known and any contrary or missing themes or subthemes were identified and added. There was some repetition in the subthemes, particularly whereby the concepts were apparent under two different themes. These duplicated subthemes remained, as often under each theme they had a different meaning. The prompts used for Microsoft Copilot are included in Appendix 2.

The common themes and subthemes were summarised in flow diagrams and Venn diagrams created using Microsoft Visio.

4. Results

Nineteen people were interviewed: seven female dairy veterinarians, seven dairy farmers and five veterinary business owners or directors or CEO equivalents. The veterinary businesses included two club practices, four private practices and a self-employed veterinary farm consultant. Four of the interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams video calls and the remaining were face-to-face interviews.

Interviews took on average 45 minutes and all interviewees were very enthusiastic about engaging in the process. They were all interested in the purpose of the work and how the key messages would be disseminated to the key stakeholders.

There was a mixture of types of farmer-veterinary advisor relationships. Five veterinarians were conducting whole farm system consultancy with their dairy farmer clients as well as preventative animal health advisory work, while the remaining two conducted solely preventative animal health advisory work. Five of the veterinarians also undertook some or all of the clinical veterinary work on the farms, the other two had previously been the dairy clinician responsible for the farm but were not currently.

Topics of whole farm advisory services were varied but included feed budgeting, herd-level nutritional advice, people management, environmental management, financial management, agronomy, fertiliser, and pasture management. Topics of

preventative animal health advisory services included reproduction, young stock, milk quality and mastitis, calf rearing, lameness, Johne's disease, and bovine viral diarrhoea.

5.1 Farmer-veterinary advisory relationships

5.1.1. Themes common to veterinarians and farmers

Both the farmer and veterinarian in every partnership could clearly articulate what they did for each other in establishing and sustaining a flourishing farmer-advisor relationship. This confirms the strength of their relationship. There were five common themes identified from the seven sets of relationships, and although there were differences within those themes the overarching messages were consistent (Figure 1). These five themes were personal connection, expertise, support, accountability, and growth and development.

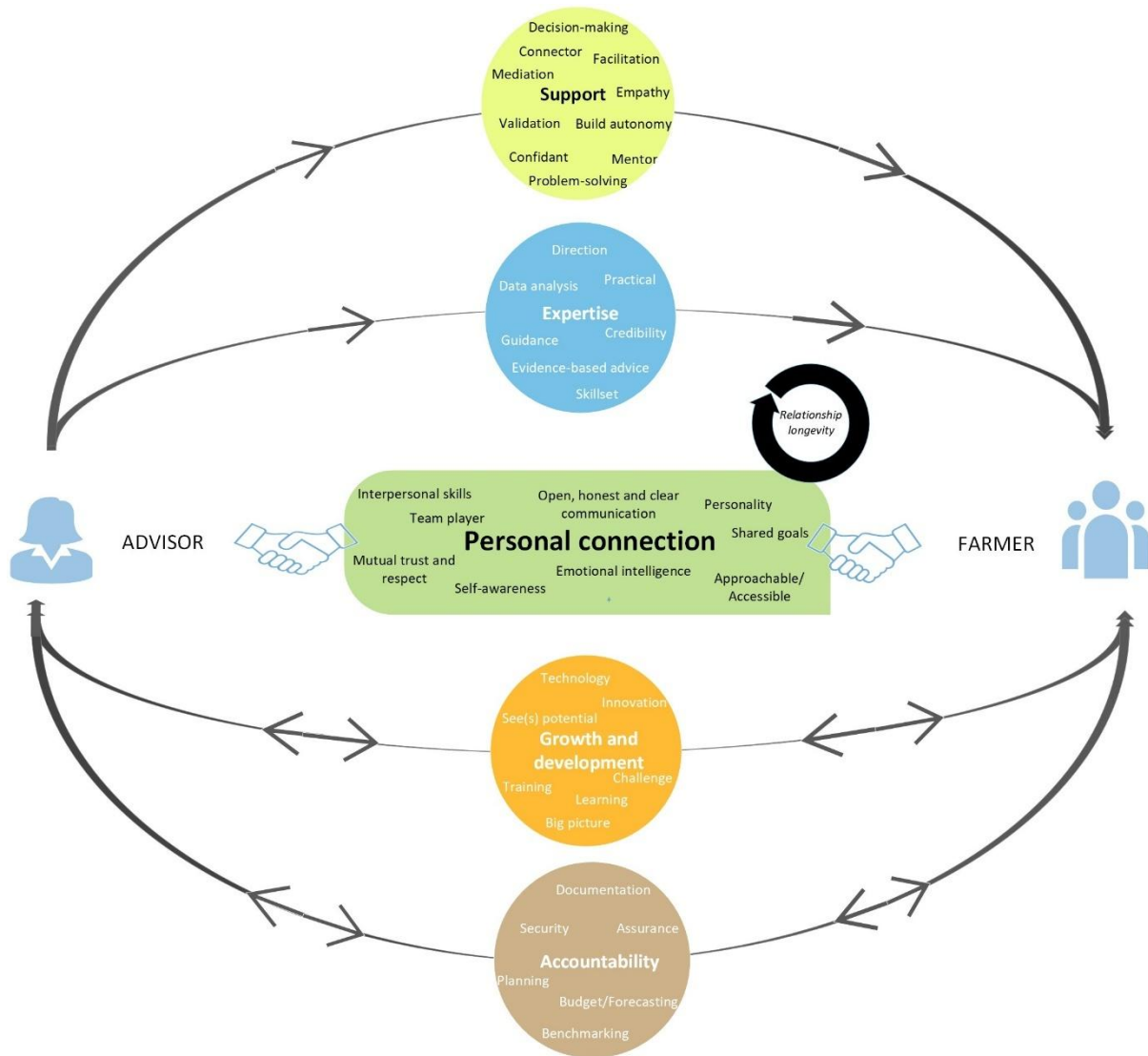


Figure 1 Diagrammatic representation of the five key themes that describe flourishing farmer-veterinary advisor relationships, based on semi-structured interviews with seven farmer-veterinarian pairs that were self-described as successful advisory relationships. Personal connection was the overarching theme, with expertise, support, accountability, and growth and development as secondary themes. Expertise and support were provided by the advisor to the farmer whereas growth and development, and accountability were two-way interactions.

Personal connection

Personal connection was highlighted as the most important theme contributing to the successful relationship between the veterinarian and farmer for all interviewees. Personal connection was considered to be the beginning of the relationship, and the four other themes together provided, the values needed by the farmer and veterinarian to sustain the successful partnership. If there was no personal connection, then there would be no successful advisory relationship. Every person interviewed referred to the idea that the personality was right. One farmer stated, "Because we click, and I think that's really important."

Personal connection was supported by a number of subthemes but fundamentally made the farmer feel that the veterinary advisor understood them and their business and made the veterinarian feel that the effort invested was worthwhile. The factors that contributed to the strength of the personal connection were related to the personality, self-awareness, and emotional intelligence of both parties. These interpersonal skills lead to a mutual respect and trust shared through two-way honest and open communication. One veterinarian stated, *"There's nothing that you can't say, you know that he's open and honest and you know that he listens to you, and it goes both ways."* The approachability and accessibility of the veterinarian were also consistent components of the personal connection. Sharing goals and having common goals was also part of the personal connection. One farmer commented, *"She understands our business."* Acknowledgement of the veterinarian being a team player was also important to the farmers. Interpersonal skills is a broad category for these key components, and one farmer summarised it as, *"We just got that great relationship that we can talk about whatever that needs to be done on the farm"* and another farmer confirmed the connection with this succinct statement, *"She's got the knack to make you comfortable."*

Longevity was a side theme of personal connection (Figure 1), as all of the pairs had been working together for more than five years in some capacity (either as primary dairy veterinarian or as an advisor) and one farmer had known their veterinary - advisor for 35 years. One farmer commented, *"But there's a lot of advantage as well having someone that understands our business for that period of time,"* and another farmer said, *"We'll stop using her when she retires, I would have thought!"* The veterinarians also recognised that change takes time, and they were committed to the farm team for the long-term in order to see success. One veterinarian commented bluntly, *"You hardly ever get success in one season, do you? But over time, over time, I think you get success."*

Expertise

Being a veterinarian who is functioning as an advisor means that the perception from the farmer is that credibility is a given. This statement was supported by this veterinarian who perceives this to be the case, *"I think they trust that whatever I say will always have a science base to it."* However expertise is more holistic than just evidence-based advice. It is also being able to consider the practical implications of that advice and take the evidence and convert it into direction and guidance for the farm team. One veterinarian summarised it as, *"So that makes you feel valued, that what you're saying is making a difference to this person, making them think, making them potentially change the way they operate."* Another veterinarian, who clearly understood the challenges of implementing complex advice stated, *"It has to be a two- way conversation, in where I accept their situation and their farm system."*

Expertise also encompasses skills outside the capabilities of a clinical dairy veterinarian, and these may include people management skills, farm systems management, environmental assessment skills, financial literacy, or specific herd health performance. The farmers recognised the breadth of the knowledge and skills that their advisor was bringing to the partnership, one stated, *"She brings to the table different stuff,"* and another farmer commented, *"Look, it's good just having some more brains in the business!"*

Expertise also considers experience, experience in this role as an advisor, on this farm, in this district and in this topic of interest. One of the veterinarians was acutely aware of the power of this local knowledge, *"I think a good consultant half the time, the stuff they're saying is stuff that they've learned from other farmers and they're just taking it to the next farm."* One farmer also articulated the value in this experience, *"Even though I've been doing this for 30 something years it's still good to have her input."*

Support

Support can mean different things, to different people. This veterinarian clearly understood the broad definition of support, *"Whatever the farm, as I drive out their gate I always say or think to myself: have I made a difference for them today?"*

Support was quite varied in what was needed by the farmer and what was provided by the veterinarian, i.e. different relationships had different emphasis in this category. One veterinarian described this perfectly, *"Sometimes you're a buffer, sometimes you're a go between. Umm, sometimes you're fighting 1000 fires."*

Farmers that had a team of people working for them, did tend to use their veterinary advisor as a facilitator and mediator, often between the farm owner and managers. There was also room for the advisor to function as a mentor for younger staff who needed to discuss on-farm issues. It was mentioned that junior staff were not comfortable to discuss issues with the farm owner, and this was recognised by both advisor and farmer. One veterinarian knew her role was, *"Mentoring and keeping the finger on the pulse with the young managers."* There was also an element of the advisor building capability and autonomy within the farm team through supporting independent decision making and problem solving where appropriate. Both veterinarian and farmer understood that the veterinarian was there if needed as a safety net, one veterinarian commented, *"I like to think that they know that I'm always their backstop and I've got their back."*

The problem-solving role of the advisor on most farms was often associated with the review process. One farmer commented on the value of the review process, *"When we have those meetings, you just sort of feel like you're like refocused and got something, yeah, a bit more of a spring in your step."* There was also a consistent subtheme of the advisor working with the farm team to create a clear focus through a thorough decision-making process. One farmer commented on the benefit of each meeting given clarity, *"But it's always good going away because we've normally always made a decision on something. We've got a way forward."* Another

aspect of decision-making, highlighted by multiple interviewees, was the help the veterinarian provided in prioritisation of resources to the right task. With multiple things always requiring attention on farm, the veterinary advisor was able to use their knowledge, understanding of the farm and where the farm is at, to prioritise the limited resources (often time and money) for the best return on effort/investment.

In the support role, the advisor was sometimes a confidant to the farm owner, providing emotional support, being a friend to listen to their concerns and showing genuine empathy. It was recognised by one advisor that there is an emotional cost to this personal investment, *"But what comes with it too (nothing in life's free) as you grow well in it, you take on some of the worry."* The farmers also noted the benefit of this support role, *"You know, it's actually in those harder years we probably need her more than ever."*

Having good interpersonal skills (communication and empathy) enables the veterinary advisor to function as a connector, being the person that brings everyone together i.e. is the conduit of information between multiple players. One farmer commented that she gets *"Buy in from the whole farm team,"* while one veterinarian commented that, *"I end up being a bit of a liaison almost between the clinic and the farmer."*

A major element of the support role is assurance and validation, celebrating success and confirming what is happening is on track. One farmer commented, *"It's not always about what you're doing wrong. It's about what you're doing, right."* This validation maybe based on formal benchmarking or based on what else is occurring in the district this season. This was a common important theme to farmers, one stated, *"Yeah, which is where we do need the outside eye because they'll come in and be like, what are you doing? Why? Why are you still doing this?"* and another farmer stating, *"It's good to get a second person's point of view on how the farm is been being run at the time, so sometimes it's good validation."*

Accountability

This theme was comprised of both tangible and non-tangible concepts. The tangible concepts were a mixture of looking back and reviewing performance (how have things worked) to looking forward to setting a plan, pathway and direction for the farmer based on agreed actions from both parties. One veterinarian understood that accountability was important, *"I think that the accountability side of things is probably an important part of the relationship."*

However, closely attached to accountability are the non-tangible aspects of honest and open communication, and mutual trust and respect (personal connection), i.e. the ability to bring an idea to the table or speak up if you think something is not working. Farmers were consistently clear on this point and expected it, *"If she's not pushing me, then I'm not getting value for money, you know, even if it makes me feel uncomfortable."* Another farmer stated, *"She'll tell me whether or not it was a dumb idea."*

All of the farmers interviewed needed a plan, and both parties felt they had a duty to the partnership to conduct the agreed actions when possible. One farmer stated, *"She's always been honest. She's never let me down. And I feel like the same."* Many of the farmers and veterinarians were acutely aware of how important being held to account was, *"And I rang him one day and I said, man, I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't tell you that, I think you're doing the wrong thing."* Another veterinarian stated, *"He wants me to keep him on the straight and narrow and to remember things, to do them in a timely fashion."* There were multiple times when comment was made that ideas were discussed openly and honestly at farm meetings, with all members being able to contribute equally. A decision was agreed upon as a team and then that decision was supported by the veterinarian even if it was not her preferred idea, *"She backs the decision that I make."*

The review and benchmarking process is a strategy for understanding what worked, what did not (both numerically and practically) and how it can be improved going forward. Farmers have many balls they are juggling, and the veterinary advisor knew their role was to help get the timing right on farm. One farmer clearly understood this role, *"I'm too busy. I don't have time to think about this. I need you to chase me."* Likewise the veterinarians understood this, *"It's almost like an approval to nudge,"* and the farmers too, *"I trust her to keep an eye on my business."*

There was a common thread of farmers being concerned about outside opinion of their business. One example of this was the risk of being audited, or outside organisations not being comfortable with what was happening on their farm. In these instances they saw their veterinary advisor as a record keeper and to provide their authority if needed. This was important insurance and security for the farm business, shown by this farmer comment, *"So her name and letters behind her name, and her title and her letterhead has a lot more weight than I do."*

Accountability was not only provided to the farmer by the advisor but also received by the advisor from the farmer. That is, the advisor not only needs to hold the farmer to account for their actions, but they also need to be accountable for their actions as an advisor in order for the relationship to be successful. Being accountable carries weight both ways when the personal connection is strong. One veterinarian commented, *"After a visit I feel a sense of ownership like I need to own, you know what we've discussed."* A farmer similarly stated, *"It wasn't the pat on the back. It was more of phew I haven't let her down."* One veterinarian confirmed the sense of ownership of their contribution, *"Am I making a difference on farm, if I'm not making a difference, why am I there?"*

Growth and Development

Like the accountability theme, growth and development is a two-way component of a successful relationship. The ongoing development and improvement for both parties support the notion that a successful farmer-veterinary advisor relationship is indeed a flourishing partnership.

One example of growth and development being two-ways is innovation, i.e. sometimes the advisor was bringing the innovation to the farm team and challenging them, but sometimes it was the farm team that was challenging the advisor. This was clearly identified by some farmers, particularly when the veterinarian had moved into the advisory role in recent years, *"She's growing more in the role than me"* but also from the veterinarian when they reflect on where they are now in their career and how their relationship with the farmer has evolved over time, *"What they need from me now is definitely a lot different to what it was when we started working together."* This concept is at the very heart of the definition of flourishing with both partners being different people, and functioning in different ways, to what they were when the advisory role was first developed on that farm.

Innovation can also be brought to the relationship from either party as it may depend on the personality of the veterinarian and farmer; who is more curious and who is more pragmatic? The collective approach to innovation is supported by farmer statements, *"We float ideas around"* and *"We're always evolving."* In some relationships the role of the advisor was to challenge and 'see the potential.' One veterinarian understood that was their role, *"It's thinking outside the box a little bit and it is that deeper dive and understanding more of the whole farm business,"* and *"I still see quite a lot of potential in those farms."*

Technology was identified as a specific subtheme within growth and development, as it was mentioned multiple times by veterinarians and farmers as an area where the advisor had evolved and learned in order to support the farmer, as they had adopted new technology.

Being challenged by each other and having the licence to challenge each other in an open and honest way was a subtheme of growth and development. One farmer commented, *"And I always try to challenge her as well on some stuff and ask her to bring something new."* For some veterinarians, this constant change is exhausting but for others this is exactly what they are looking for, and although there is variation in their response, the awareness of their situation shows high emotional intelligence. One veterinarian commented, *"But he's usually got something new on the go. And I like that, I'm always looking for the next challenge, and that's what he does."*

Supporting farm staff was also identified as a subtheme under the growth and development theme, with staff training being important in upskilling and training people on-farm. One farmer commented, *"She's got a way of educating us."*

Under this theme there was a concept that the advisor was able to see the big picture, a holistic understanding of the farm business and had developed an understanding of the long-term vision for the farm. One farmer commented, *"I guess it's tough to explain because she's very much a part of the whole thing now"* and one veterinarian commented that this partnership was still growing, knowing that *"It is still not finished."*

There was a contrary view to this by one of the advisors who saw their role as building capability in the farmer and their team to the point that they would not need her anymore i.e. they would become self-sufficient. This veterinarian said, *"I really don't see myself as an advisor that needs to stay forever alongside a farm."*

The farmer in this partnership, did not see an end to the relationship in the medium-term, and maybe this advisor underestimated the impact they have on the current farm team in their current role.

Self-awareness

In addition to the five themes (Figure 1) there was a clear personal awareness and emotional intelligence of all the farmers and veterinarians interviewed. The farmers knowing who they are, what they needed from their advisor, and the advisor knowing their abilities, and what they could deliver for their farmer. This was articulated clearly by one farmer, *"If I was on my death bed, she is the person I want involved in my business for the next 5-10 years."*

The veterinarians were self-aware not only with respect to their personality and impact on the farm business but also with respect to their strengths and weaknesses. This presented as their willingness to engage other advisors (referrals) in areas outside their interest and expertise to provide the best outcome for the farmer. There was confidence in their relationship with the farmer and the person being referred to, in order to undertake this referral.

The farmers were self-aware knowing exactly what they needed from their advisor in order to make the farm team and business successful. One farmer made the analogy with governance, *"That's fundamental, that's that is good governance, isn't it? Identifying what you're good at and going and getting other people with different strengths on the bus."* It was also interesting how clearly, the farmers could articulate what they needed from their advisor in the interview, what role the advisor plays and how they feel about having the veterinary advisor involved in their business. Many farmers made comments similar to this, *"I like the directness of her...I'm too wishy, washy, too emotional."* They were consistently aware of the value that the veterinary advisor provided them and what it meant to them, with the highest reference being made by one farmer, *"I'd love to have her on my payroll fulltime!"*

5.1.2. Themes that differed between farmers and veterinarians, and between pairs

Although the overall themes were clearly consistent, each farmer and veterinarian saw the relationship in a slightly different light. The farmers tended to focus on the personal connections, empathy and support provided by the advisor and the practical considerations the veterinarian shared. Whereas the veterinarians tended to focus on the more tangible tasks they were involved with such as specific advice, mediation, facilitation, and planning. Veterinarians also recognised the contribution of longevity to the success of the relationship.

One difference between the veterinarians and farmers was that the veterinarians needed to be sure they were providing value, i.e. if they are not providing the farmer value through one of the themes then the advisory relationship would end. Farmers in general, however, needed the personal connection to exist and if the trust broke down that would be when they would see the partnership failing.

There were differences between the pairs with how involved the veterinary advisor was with the farm team and staff, and how that role had evolved to, e.g. one veterinarian was very clearly independent of the farmer, such that the staff could raise concerns with her directly about on-farm issues. Other veterinary advisors were only providing resource related to staff training to the farm team.

One veterinarian raised the notion that advisory work, although extremely rewarding, required a lot of energy and personal investment, *"But it requires a lot of energy. It requires a hell of a lot of energy."* Another flagged that advisory work is quite solitary; there isn't a whole team working in this space and therefore case discussions are limited. Therefore, mentioned that team support around veterinarians working in the advisory space is important, she stated, *"You can end up working on your own quite a bit."*

Honest and open communication was a common theme, however there is still a veterinary professional conduct line that needs to be drawn when considering this honesty and openness. Many of the farmers acknowledged this professionalism and privacy held by their advisor, which were embraced in the mutual respect.

There were slight variations in the emphasis that pairs placed on various responsibilities. For example innovation and being challenged sometimes sat with the farmer to come to the veterinarian for scientific pragmatism, but sometimes the advisor was expected to be the one doing the challenging and bringing the innovative ideas. The key with these differences comes back to the open and honest conversations about responsibility, role, expectations, and highlights different farmers needing different things.

One of the veterinarians was involved with a farmer on three of their dairy farms and their dry stock block. Therefore this veterinarian was on farm functioning as an advisor weekly. She commented that this frequency of contact led to a fast development of a successful relationship and the strength of this partnership was evident in the conversation with both the farmer and the veterinarian.

Two of the veterinarians commented on the potential concern that their financial advisory skills were not at a standard that they felt was adequate to give financial advice to their farmer. Awareness of their limitations was clear and confidence to have these financial discussions with farmers was low. However, being the connector between other rural professionals, including the bank manager and accountant, was discussed openly.

Farmers comments relating to gender were very clear, with farmers stating, *"Personality was more important than gender," "Females are females, so that more they definitely have a better appreciation for considering staff and their feelings,"* and *"I couldn't give a rats if you're female or male, whatever you were. If you can do the job, I ask you to do, that's all I'm asking."*

5.2 The voice of veterinary business

Interviewees were unanimous that strengthening the farmer-veterinary advisor relationship was of benefit to the veterinary business, the veterinarians, and the farmer clients. There were slight differences in the degree of benefits discussed and where each business weighted the benefits, but that can be expected as each business was in a different stage of having advisory work as a key part of their dairy business.

Two themes were identified from the interviews: benefits of strengthening the farmer-veterinary advisor relationship (Figure 2) and considerations for the veterinary business when supporting the strengthening of farmer-veterinary advisor relationships (Figure 3).

5.2.1. Benefits of strengthening farmer-veterinary advisor relationships

The benefits of strengthening farmer-veterinary advisor relationships were split into three main categories: benefits for the farmer (value provided by the veterinarian), benefits for the veterinary business and benefits for the veterinarians. One business partner commented, *"It makes the relationship with the client more sticky, and it allows us to deliver more value to clients."*

When considering the value provided to the farmer, the veterinary business voice identified that in order to provide value some key elements needed to be met. They were that the advice needed to be practical; the advice needed to be formulated in a tailored package (not a one size fits all); farmer expectations needed to be met, meaning the veterinarian needed to ask the farmer what they wanted and understand their goals; the veterinarian moving into this advisory space needed to accept that they should start small (maybe with one topic or one area of interest) and then organically develop into a more holistic advisor with a farmer; the veterinary advisor needed to be willing to grow as the farmer grows, in order to continue to provide advisory services to the farmer; and the veterinarian needed to be flexible and adaptable to be able to provide value.

When considering the value provided to the wider veterinary business, the subthemes were the benefits of loyalty, longevity, enjoyment (multiple ways) and the veterinary business having a bigger impact on clients' farms. One business partner commented, *"Success, to me would be that our farmers would be thinking of us in that space, so when farmers form an advisory board, they will be saying, oh, we should get the vet on this board."* One business partner was so passionate about veterinarians working in the advisory space that they inferred if we don't do this, we won't have a business, *"But the consultancy side of the business is so fundamentally critical to the future of the profession, it really is. And I'll be challenging every*

veterinarian -what are you doing each year from a personal development perspective to improve your performance in this space?"

Another recognised benefit to the wider business was that because the advisors had a closer relationship with their farmers, they may hear things earlier that can benefit the whole business, *"Identifying and hearing emerging trends on farm because they're so integrally involved in their farms and sharing those with the wider business."*

The benefits to the veterinarian were associated with personal and professional development which were related to job satisfaction. Job satisfaction is comprised of different aspects for different veterinarians, including intellectual stimulation, health and wellbeing, diversification of roles and becoming a mentor to other members of the veterinary team; one business partner stated, *"Supporting and mentoring and educating the young vets and being there for them"*. Improved job satisfaction then leads to improved retention of staff within the business, which is of benefit to farmers, veterinarians themselves and veterinary businesses.

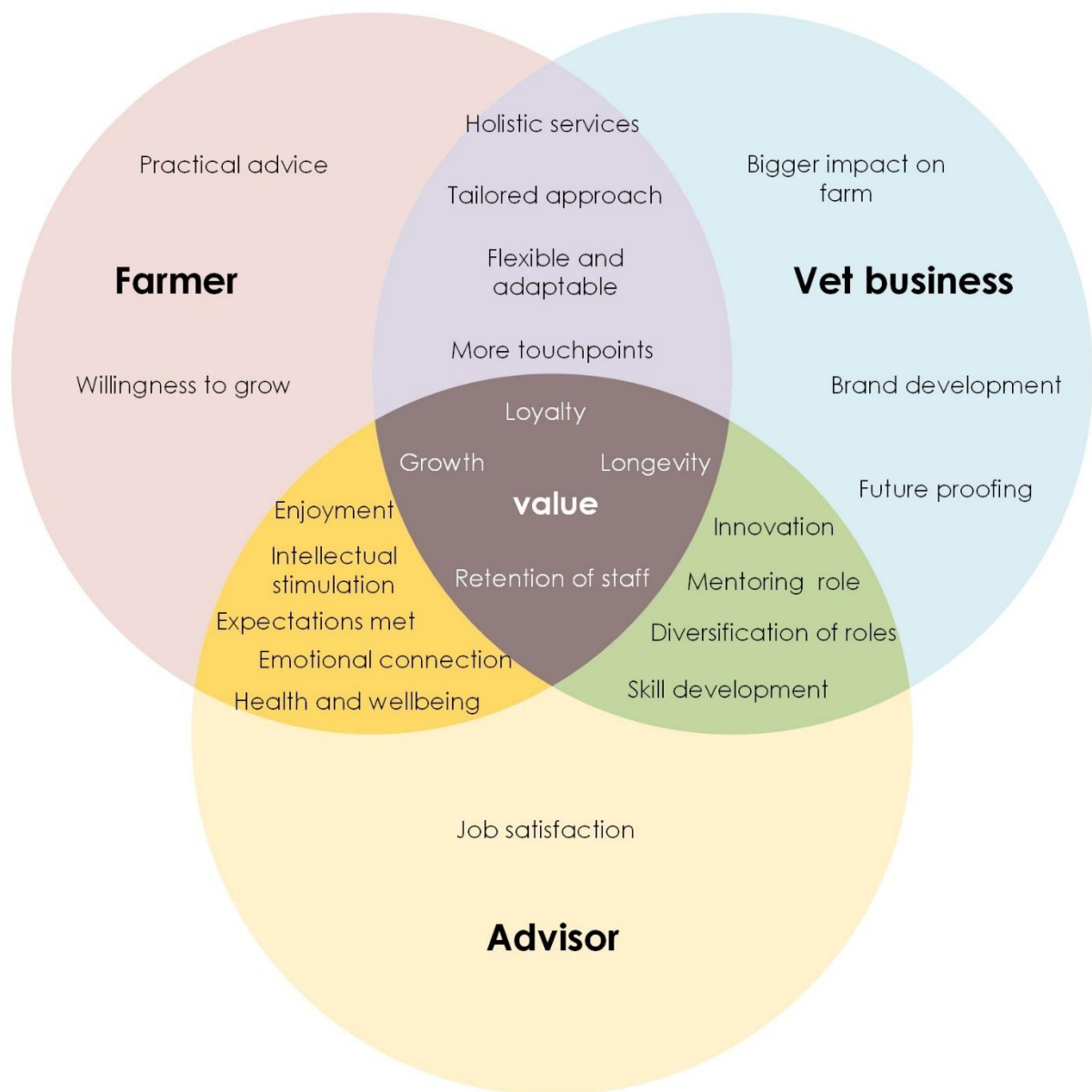


Figure 2 Venn diagram showing the benefits of strengthening the farmer-veterinary advisor relationship, for the farmer, the veterinary business and the veterinary advisor, based on interviews with five veterinary business owners or managers.

5.2.2. How can the farmer-veterinary advisor relationship be strengthened?

The theme of how the farmer-veterinary advisor relationship can be strengthened had two sub-themes; the challenges and barriers that need to be overcome, and the personal and emotional investment needed from the veterinarian.

Challenges and barriers for businesses supporting veterinarians in this role

The challenges identified by business owners and managers were categorised as time and resource constraints, monetisation, farmer engagement, business model adaptation and gender dynamics.

More than one of the interviewees specifically highlighted the need for a veterinarian to get their clinical skills right first, i.e. get a good grounding as a dairy clinician before transitioning into advisory work.

Veterinarians often struggle to allocate sufficient time for advisory work due to clinical responsibilities, one business partner stated, *"Allocating time to those vets developing advisory skills to actually go and cultivate those relationships."* Advisory work requires significant preparation and follow-up, which can be time-consuming. Therefore it is important to ensure veterinarians have time blocked out for more than just the on-farm time. Another important consideration was structure, especially to get started. One business partner commented that the model that worked for them was, *"Process potentially, you know like collegiality in that space, continuing professional development and specific tools are probably quite important."*

Difficulty in charging for advisory services was a challenge, especially when relationships are informal and organic. One business partner stated, *"If your value proposition is around imparting knowledge, you have to charge appropriately for that."* Another commented, *"Farmers pay for something tangible but then they've got all this advice from us for free. So how do we change their value concept to make them realise that there's value in that, and let's pay for it."* Ensuring advisory work is financially sustainable for the business is important. One business partner clearly made this point, *"It's not all about profit, but it's got to be sustainable and it's about growing business and growing remuneration levels."*

Some farmers are sceptical about the value of advisory services and may not engage fully; this is potentially more of an issue in businesses that have not been had veterinarians working in the advisory space. One business partner said, *"They need to see value that they're paying for something that is improving their business,"* and another, *"Have a conversation with them, build some relationships, and actually prove that we should be in this space. Don't just expect it."* Building trust and demonstrating value to farmers can be challenging, but once veterinarians have it, there is loyalty there, so putting in the effort to building trust is important. One business partner highlighted this, *"So they're not gonna go anywhere else because they're getting all of that provided and because you know the farm so well."*

Veterinary businesses need to adapt their models to support advisory work, including providing administrative support and ensuring a long-term strategy for selling knowledge. One business partner identified that although there needs to be a business change and process change there still needs to be flexibility in the process, *"So we need to be really flexible in our approach around supporting the vets to be the best they can be, so there's not necessarily a one style fits all, because different personality types will approach advisory slightly differently."*

Female veterinarians may face additional challenges in gaining confidence and balancing advisory work with personal commitments. One business partner stated, *"I think sort of from a woman perspective, we always want to do better, but sometimes we don't reflect that we're doing really well already."* Another commented, *"I think it probably is tougher for females to get a start with advisory work, particularly if it's male farmers, you know that it's often easier for male vets to form those initial bonds and relationships with male farmers."* Ensuring female veterinarians receive adequate support and encouragement is crucial. One business partner stated, *"Female vets or females in general, you know undersell themselves."* There was a common theme of allowing time for the veterinarians to be able to develop the necessary skills and providing resourcing for this to occur. However, one of the veterinary businesses suggested that females may need more support as they transition into the role of advisor due to their increased empathy and potential concerns about getting it right from the start.

Emotional and Personal Investment

Veterinarians need a high level of emotional intelligence and resilience to manage the emotional aspects of advisory work. One business partner stated, *"So it can be really, really tough. And so you do need a level of resilience. You simply need a very high-level emotional intelligence to be a successful consultant."* Dealing with the lows, such as when farmers do not follow advice, can be difficult for veterinarians, therefore there needs to be strategies in place to support this. One business partner stated, *"And so I think the best relationships aren't always going to go in a straight line and they're not always going to be positive all the time. And you are going to have to challenge farmers at times."* The work is potentially lonely and solitary as advisors are not collaborating with a team of veterinarians. There is also risk to the veterinary business if the veterinary advisors are not contributing to the wider veterinary team. One business partner noted this, *"Advisors, if you're not careful are walking into lone warfare and they tend to have high levels of autonomy, but they've got a lot of knowledge that you want contributing back to the wider veterinary team because that helps the team or the community or the workplace be better."*

The factors that need to be considered by a veterinary business to strengthen the farmer-veterinary advisor relationship are summarised in Figure 3. The overall strategy consists of building trust over time so the veterinarian can earn their right to be in these advisory relationships with their farmers.

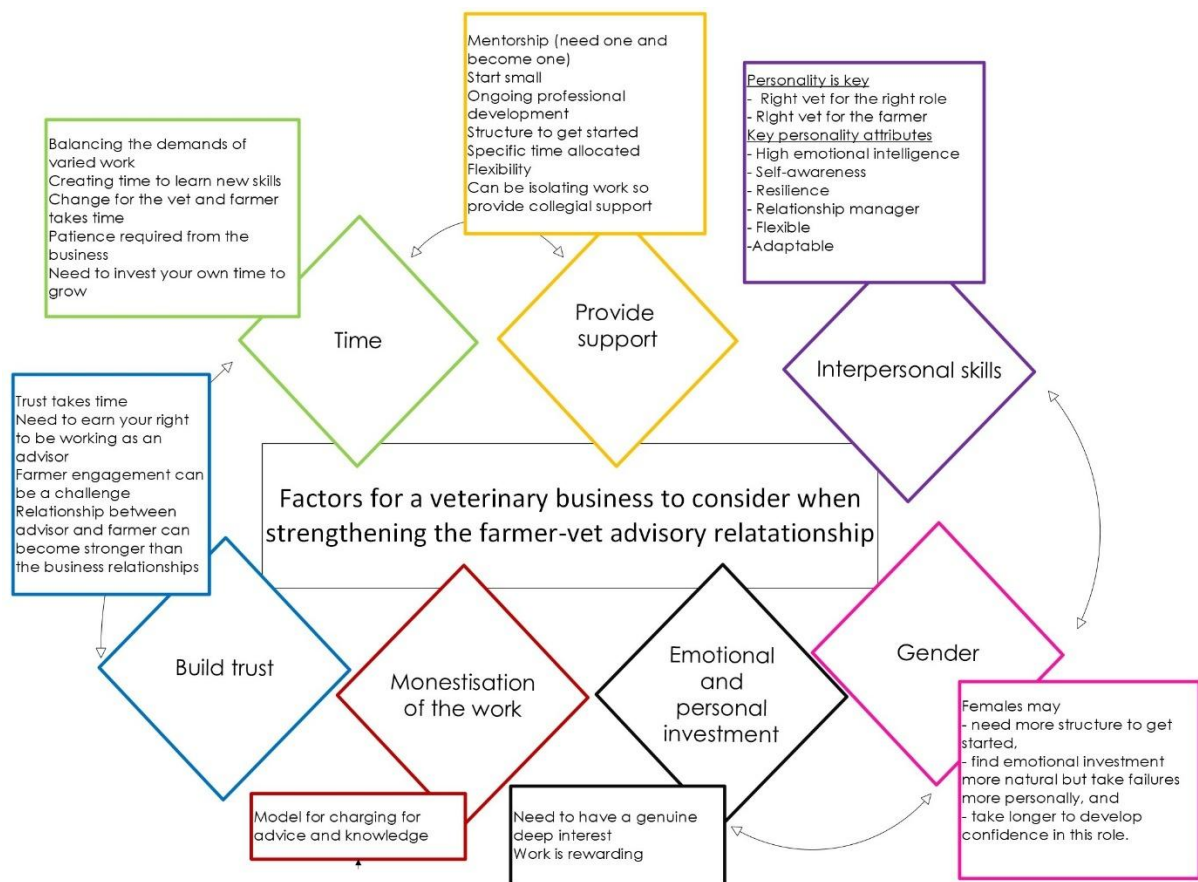


Figure 3 Diagrammatic representation of the issues that need to be considered by veterinary business when strengthening farmer-veterinary advisor relationships, based on themes and subthemes discovered in interviews with five veterinary business owners or managers related to successful farmer-veterinary advisor relationships.

5. Discussion

So what defines a flourishing farmer-veterinary advisor relationship? This study identified the importance of strong personal connection, created over time by mutual trust and respect and honoured by open and honest communication, which displays a genuine understanding of the farmer and their business by the veterinarian. There is value provided by the veterinarian to the farmer in the form of support, expertise, growth and development, and accountability. Furthermore, this value provision is not all one way; in order for the partnership to flourish growth and development, and accountability were also received by the veterinarian from the farmer. Veterinary businesses support their veterinarians to work with farmers as advisors as they see the provision of value to the farmer, to their veterinarians and to their business. In these flourishing advisory partnerships there was a competence in emotional intelligence and a strong self-awareness by both parties. There was significant meaning in the relationship for both parties, with a sincere, genuine acknowledgement of how important they were to each other, “She’s bloody gold” and “It’s just so rewarding isn’t it?” The repeatability of the themes and subthemes from all three voices (veterinarians, farmers and veterinary business owners or

managers) supports the clarity of the messages reported here, clearing supported by this farmer statement, *"It's a win-win having a vet as the farm consultant, it's a perfect scenario really."*

Personal connection was unanimously identified as the beginning of a successful advisory relationship. Although it has not been specifically reported in such a way in the literature, the themes are consistent. Bard et al., (2019) summarised that while expertise was valued, it was trust, shared veterinarian-farmer understanding, and meaningful interpretation of advice specific to the farmer that was most likely to lead to change on farm, this is consistent with the findings in this study where expertise was valued but personal connection was more important. Cawley et al., (2023) outlined that positive outcomes for farmers on profitability and productivity were dependent on a high degree of trust between the farmer and the organisation, and between the farmer and their adviser. Hamilton, 2018 recommended that a genuine, interactive engagement between veterinarian and farmer, carries the potential for long-lasting change, which was recognised as a collaborative transformation. Kristensen & Jakobsen, (2011) agrees that advisors must understand the fundamental and instrumental relationships between individual farmers' values, behaviour, and perception of risk in order to lead to success on farm. Svensson et al., (2019) clearly identified trust and feasibility of advice as the keys to farmers following veterinary recommendations, which may indicate success of the relationship.

Personal connection included personality traits such as being approachable and honest, emotional intelligence and self-awareness, interpersonal skills such as communication style, and having shared goals, and mutual trust and respect for each other. Allen, (2024) stated that the difference between a good and a great rural advisor was associated with their interpersonal skills such as their ability to relate, challenge, motivate, coach, and inspire their client and this study supports these findings. Knowing that personality is crucial to the success of these partnerships means that emotional intelligence education for veterinarians is an important consideration. Using widely available tools such as personality profiling for both farmers and veterinarians (and then matching people if required) would potentially improve the likelihood of creating a flourishing partnership.

Veterinarians placed emphasis on being able to provide tangible value to the farmer, with many veterinarians stating that if they were not providing value that would be the end of the advisory relationship. However most of the farmers, placed more emphasis on personal connection, i.e. for them the reason the relationship would end would be when trust was broken by the advisor. This potential mismatch in weighting of value versus connection means the veterinarian may misjudge what is trying to be achieved on-farm. Bard et.al, (2019) recommended when veterinarians are building engagement with advice, they need to consider three factors; the advice must be purposeful, promote veterinary trustworthiness, and ensure a perceived shared understanding is accurate. This also highlights the need for honest and open communication about the farmer's goals, and strengths and weaknesses of the veterinarian and farmer. These conversations need to occur regularly as both parties' needs will change over time in a flourishing partnership.

With the veterinarians placing more emphasis on providing tangible value there is a risk that their role as an advisor is too centred on being the expert, i.e. they are still the one providing solutions. Interestingly the word solution was not mentioned at all in the farmer or veterinarian interviews in this study. The recommendation from Shein, (2016), is that as veterinarians move into an advisory role, they need to move from a problem solver to someone who is asking the right questions and allowing the whole farm team to find solutions and creating a space for that to occur.

Support and expertise provided by the advisor to the farmer were two themes that contributed to the value of the relationship. These two themes were consistent with (Ritter et al., 2019), who concluded that veterinarians need to provide a balance between giving information (expertise) and giving farmers the opportunity to express their viewpoints (being supported by listening). Support and expertise were described in a variety of ways, and these subthemes were weighted differently for each partnership. These differences highlight that the advisor and farmer need to discuss their expectations and what they want from the relationship (Kristensen & Jakobsen, 2011).

Growth and development, and accountability were the remaining two themes, and they contributed value for both for the advisor and the farmer (two-way elements), i.e. both parties may benefit from and contribute them to the partnership. Growth and development for the veterinarian could be described as being challenged by the farmer and the situation, which is a positive for job satisfaction and growth in their role, as described by Lam et al., (2011). Growth and development for the farmer, could be education of the whole farm team by the veterinarian or being challenged by the veterinarian to consider different approaches to their farm. Accountability was important for farmers, which was consistent with other studies. One reason farmers reported not using advisory services was because there was no follow up (Duncan et al., 2021). Accountability is associated with trust; however it was also broader than that for both parties. For farmers it encompassed a mixture of non-tangible components; security and assurance, and tangible components of planning, budgeting, forecasting and benchmarking and for veterinarians it was associated with their commitment to deliver on their actions, the follow up that was referred to by Duncan et al. (2021).

The advisors and farmers interviewed all agreed that their relationship was consistent with the definition presented to them of a flourishing partnership. The idea of long-term improvement, growth, change and adaptability of both parties resonated with them.

The veterinary business interviewees unanimously agreed that flourishing farmer-veterinary advisory relationships provide real benefits to the veterinary profession (businesses and veterinarians), to farmers and their farm teams. These benefits are also believed to spread to the wider dairy industry (Hunt et al., 2011). Veterinary businesses acknowledged the importance of these strong relationships, and the different nature of the advisory relationship compared to a clinical veterinarian farmer relationship, as was reported by Van der Leek, (2015).

There are some challenges to developing the skillset and confidence of dairy veterinarians in the advisory field and there are some potential barriers to address.

One challenge identified was the balance between providing structure to veterinarians starting out in this role, and having room for the process to be flexible and adaptable. Schein, (2016) supports this idea of being adaptable when consulting, especially when a problem is complex. He also suggests that the consulting process, in order to really help, needs to develop organically. Potentially this doesn't resonate with veterinarians and makes them feel less confident in their role (Nettle et al., 2018), however in order to have flourishing advisory partnerships with their clients there is a need to change their approach to promote proactive disease prevention services (Ruston et al., 2016). Ruston et al. (2016) is quite explicit in their recommendations stating that, among other things, farm animal veterinarians need to improve their skills in preventative medicine and develop new business models appropriate to their services. Hamilton, (2018) digs deeper and states from a "veterinarian's viewpoint, one way of altering an individual's subjective knowledge is through offering professional advice, but this is only one way in which people come to knowing. And knowing does not imply action or change." Furthermore, they suggest that vets, like any advisers working at the theory-practice intersection, would benefit from considering the inter-connected nature of power/knowledge/advice and appreciate the knotty 'wickedness' of various farm-level problems.

Confidence to move into the advisory space is a challenge for veterinarians and veterinary businesses, and strategies to grow confidence include developing a structured approach, collegial support such as provision of mentors and adequate allocation of time. Nettle et al., (2018) highlighted three key processes that enabled advisory practice change: envisioning new advisory roles; experimenting with new advisory identities; and legitimisation of new advisory practices from both farmers and the advisors' business. These processes align with the voice of the veterinary business, whereby the challenges to successfully developing the veterinary-advisory relationships were not just limited to the individuals but also to structural and process challenges. Nettle et al., (2018) stated that support of the dairy industry in forming a new community was found to assist the development of new advisory identities, which aligns with the recommendations of this report to engage with the wider dairy industry (not just the veterinary profession) to encourage the development of advisory relationships.

Veterinary businesses and veterinarians identified that there is a significant personal and emotional investment required by veterinarians working as successful advisors. Schein, (2016) refers to this development of a personal relationships between a consultant and a client as necessary for a successful consulting interaction. He refers to this change in the relationship, moving from a professional, transactional relationship (which was historically accepted as the norm for client-professional relationship) to a personal relationship where trust and openness are key. However, with this increasing depth of the relationship, there is more personal investment from both parties. This increased emotional investment in a professional relationship has been highlighted in the difference between rural and urban professional relationships (Mellow, 2005). Mellow, (2005) states this difference in professional relationships in rural communities is due to a range of factors such as lack of anonymity and difficulty in compartmentalising roles. The veterinarians in the current study identified that these relationships were extremely rewarding, but there was an

emotional toll, in terms of both energy and enthusiasm required to maintain their role. This is consistent with others that have identified veterinarian compassion was positively associated with their perception of how farmer-centric their interaction was (DeGroot, 2020). It is important that the right personalities are identified for this type of work, support is provided to balance the ups and downs of these relationships, and time is provided by the veterinary business to allow veterinarians recovery from the additional personal investment in this role.

This study didn't specifically set out to identify gender-specific elements, although many of the interviewees did ask why the study was focussing on the female demographic. Farmers stated that personality was more important than gender, but there were some comments that personality traits more commonly associated with females such as empathy, may have led to the advisor providing a different perspective on their business, and a more caring approach to their wider farm team. Hansen et al., (2018) reported that the advisory style of female farm advisors was more of a coaching style, and the female advisors swapped between styles more freely. The farmers in that study were more satisfied with their female advisors than with male advisors, which was likely associated with increased empathy, less focus on power, and the females achieved higher inter-subjectivity in the consultations. Veterinary businesses identified that supporting female veterinarians moving into advisory work may require more time for them to gain confidence in this new field of work, as well as encouragement and support when things did not go to plan.

This study focused on a specific demographic (female veterinarians as paid advisors) for multiple reasons. Firstly, I am a female veterinarian working as a farm advisor and wanted to hear similar perspectives to mine across the industry. Secondly, the number of female dairy veterinarians is similar to males and in the future this proportion will increase with more females graduating from veterinary school (Veterinary Council of New Zealand, 2024). Therefore, female veterinarians working as advisors with their farmers will become more common, so understanding their perspective is important to shape the future. Thirdly, with a small sample size, it made scientific sense to consider one demographic, instead of interviewing a range of different farm advisors (veterinarians and non-veterinarians, females and males, paid and unpaid). If the themes were inconsistent then demographic factors may have been the cause for inconsistencies. However in this study the common themes tell a convincing story.

Although this study focused on female veterinary advisors, I believe that the themes would be applicable to other rural advisors working with dairy farmers, as many of the themes are reflected in findings from studies that included non-veterinarians (Knook et al., 2024; Kuehne & Llewellyn, 2017; Sutherland et al., 2013; Sutherland & Labarthe, 2022) and the key components of advisory relationships were similar.

The interview content did not specifically address the potential impact of flourishing farmer-veterinary relationships on the wider rural community, however, based on the key attributes identified and the personal development required for veterinarian advisors to be successful, these are good people to have in the community and strong connections with their farmers contribute to the factors holding communities

together (Hunt et al., 2011; Stanley-Clarke, 2019). Advisors that are working with whole farm teams (as some of the advisors were in this study) also strengthen communities through bringing people together (Adams et al., 2020).

This is the first time dairy farmer-veterinary advisor pairs in New Zealand have been interviewed to describe the characteristics of flourishing relationships, and this is the first time a definition of a flourishing agricultural advisory partnership has been the centre of a piece of research. These flourishing partnerships are invaluable to both parties, therefore as an industry we need to work on how we help veterinarians create these more satisfying relationships, encourage farmers to engage in these relationships with their veterinarians, and support veterinary business to embrace this service as core business.

6. Conclusion

We now have clearer understanding of a flourishing farmer-veterinary advisor relationship and what the benefits are of these partnerships to farmers, veterinarians and their businesses. The results provide some useful insights into the challenges and barriers that veterinary businesses face when strengthening farmer-veterinary relationships as well as the factors that need to be considered when supporting veterinary advisors.

The purpose of understanding the core themes of a successful farmer-advisor relationship is that I can make recommendations to veterinarians who are struggling to step into the advisory space, farmers who are struggling with their current advisor or those who are unwilling to engage with an advisor at all, and to veterinary businesses who are struggling to consider this area of veterinary work a significant income stream and role for their veterinarians and wider business.

7. Recommendations

Key messages from this project need to be shared with the veterinary sector and the dairy industry using conferences, media, and journal publications. In addition to those involved in advisory relationships we need to challenge those not doing advisory work and those farmers not engaged in advisory work (particularly with their veterinarians). There is also the opportunity to speak to veterinary students about long-term career opportunities for dairy veterinarians and presenting a more realistic impression of what advisory work entails. Specific recommendations are given below.

7.1 Communicate to the veterinary industry the importance of personal connection

Clearly describing how the personal connection is the beginning of a successful advisor farmer relationship, and how the value is provided to (and from) the farmer by the advisor is important for veterinarians and veterinary businesses, particularly when building capability in this role.

7.2 Emotional intelligence education

Further training of veterinarians (and their farmers) in the areas of emotional intelligence and essential soft skills will be useful before veterinarians move into an advisory role, or before a farmer employs an advisor. Veterinary businesses need to be aware that different personalities may not suit advisory work and not every veterinarian suits every farmer.

7.3 Communicate the complexity of the veterinary advisor role

Veterinarians need to appreciate the complexity of the role they provide on farm once they are working as an advisor, and this requires a different set of skills to a dairy clinician. This will be aided by the findings of this project and also the use of emotional intelligence training.

7.4 Veterinary businesses need to provide resource for advisory services to succeed

Veterinary businesses need to provide a strong support structure, which includes mentoring, for their veterinarians moving into the advisory field.

Veterinary businesses are well placed to be able to develop advisory work but need to have clear process in mind when supporting veterinarians in their changing role.

7.5 Identifying farmer-veterinarian advisory relationships that are not flourishing

Assess farmer-advisor relationships that are not flourishing and understanding why (based on what we know from this research), and what can be done to improve them. This further work could occur in focus groups or workshops with farmers and advisors. This small group work could be undertaken at a veterinary, consultant or farmer conferences.

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Appendix 1. Semi-structured interview questions

Semi-structured interview questions including pre-interview blurb read to all participants.

Project title:

New Zealand Dairy Farmer-Female Veterinarian Advisory Relationships: Identifying the Key Attributes of a Flourishing or Thriving Partnership

Katrina Roberts

Thanks for agreeing to meet with me, I really appreciate your time.

I'm Katrina Roberts and as a dairy veterinarian also working as a farm advisor I am really interested in the relationships between farmers and their veterinarians. I have been working in the NZ dairy industry, based at Anexa in the Waikato for over 20 years and for over half of that time I have been a farm consultant with Headlands as well. I have been involved in building many industry-good projects such as InCalf, Healthy Hoof, Smart SAMM and Feedright and I am really enthusiastic about the contribution that female veterinarians can make on farm. This research is looking to understand the key attributes of a flourishing relationship between a dairy farmer and their female vet.

Before we start, I just need to remind you that you have signed the Kellogg consent form for this project, and you agree to your interview being audio-recorded and then AI will transcribe it. I also want to confirm that you understand that all information provided for this study will be treated confidentially. You also understand that in any report on the results of this research your identity will remain anonymous. Just to clarify your answers will not be shared with the other interviewees so please answer honestly.

Do you have any questions before we start (off the record)?

Okay, I will start recording now.

INTERVIEWING VET

Both you and farmer Brown have agreed that your paid advisory services are a successful relationship.

1. Describe the role you play on Farmer Brown's farm.
2. How long have you been working with Farmer Brown as a paid advisor?
3. Were you working with him in another way (or know him) previously and if so for how long?
4. What was it about Farmer Brown that made you want to work with him as a paid advisor?
5. When your first starting working with Farmer Brown what was it about the visits that meant, you kept wanting to return for another visit.
6. Tell me what it is when working with Farmer Brown that you think makes it a successful relationship?
7. How do you measure the success of the relationship?
8. After finishing a visit with Farmer Brown how does the visit make you feel?

Prompt: I appreciate the word feel may be a little unusual, but I'm interested in how would you describe your emotions after a visit? Sometimes it's a mix of feelings depending on the situation. If you need to think of a specific example or visit, then please go ahead and describe the whole scenario if it helps clarify your feelings.

9. Give me an example of a specific success story that has occurred because you have been involved in Farmer Brown's business as a paid advisor.
10. My project focuses on a relationship between vet advisor and farmer that is thriving or flourishing, which means getting better and evolving positively for both parties over time. What things about your relationship make you willing or not to agree with this definition.
11. Describe a time in your relationship with Farmer Brown when the relationship was less successful and what were you and Farmer Brown able to do to turn it around?
12. So taking this a step further, what would an example be where the relationship with Farmer Brown becomes such that you would not want to continuing working with them?

Prompt: If stuck turn the questions into a scenario as a third person i.e. "if a colleague at work asked you what the reasons are you continue to deliver paid advisory services for farmer brown what would you say?"

13. Is there anything you would like to add that you feel you have not covered that relates to your relationship with Farmer Brown?

Thank you so much for your time, I really appreciate it.

Recording stopped.

INTERVIEWING FARMER

Both you and Vet Sam have agreed that her paid advisory services are a successful relationship.

1. Describe the role Vet Sam plays on your farm.
2. How long have you been working with Vet Sam as a paid advisor?
3. Were you working with her before then and if so, how long in another capacity (or did you know her previously)?
4. What was it about Vet Sam that made you want to work with her in the role as a paid advisor?
5. Tell me what it is when working with Vet Sam that you think makes it a successful relationship?
6. How do you measure the success of the relationship?
7. When you first invited Vet Sam into your business as a paid service what was it about the visits that meant you kept wanting her to return for another visit.
8. After finishing a visit with Vet Sam how does the visit make you feel?

Prompt: I appreciate the word feel may be a little unusual, but I'm interested in how would you describe your emotions after a visit? Sometimes it's a mix of feelings depending on the situation. If you need to think of a specific example or visit, then please go ahead and describe the whole scenario if it helps clarify your feelings.

9. Give me an example of a specific success story that has occurred because you have invited Vet Sam into your business as a paid advisor.
10. My project focuses on a relationship between vet advisor and farmer that is thriving or flourishing, which means getting better and evolving positively for both parties over time. What things about your relationship make you willing or not to agree with this definition.
11. Describe a time in your relationship with Vet Sam when the relationship was less successful and what were you and Vet Sam able to do to turn it around?
12. So taking this a step further, what would an example be where the relationship with Vet Sam becomes such that you would not want to continuing working with them?

Prompt: turn it into third person "if your neighbour asked you what the reasons are you continue to pay for Vet Samantha's advisory services what would you say?"

13. Is there anything you would like to add that you feel you have not covered that relates to your relationship with Vet Sam?

Thank you so much for your time, I really appreciate it.

Recording stopped.

INTERVIEWING VETERINARY BUSINESS OWNER

You have told me that at least some of your veterinarians have successful paid advisory relationships with their farmers.

1. Describe the role your veterinarians play on your clients' farm when they are in their paid advisor role.
2. How long have you had your veterinarians doing paid advisory work with their dairy farmers?
3. Thinking specifically about veterinarians working as paid advisors on dairy farms - What was it about a paid advisory relationship that means that you want your veterinarians working with their farmers in this way?
4. What is your definition of a successful vet farmer advisory relationship?
5. How do you measure the success of the relationship for your business and veterinarians?
6. What does a successful relationship between these two parties mean to you as the business owner?
7. What is it about your veterinarians functioning as paid advisors that means you want to keep this work stream a priority for them as dairy veterinarians.
8. Have you spoken to any farmers about how this advisory relationship makes them feel? What do they tell you?

Prompt: I appreciate the word feel may be a little unusual, but I'm interested in how the veterinarians come across after a visit. Sometimes it's a mix of feelings depending on the situation. If you need to think of a specific example when the vet team have spoken to you about a specific farmer and visit, then please go ahead and describe the whole scenario if it helps clarify the vet's feelings.

9. Give me an example of a specific success story that has occurred because you have enabled and supported your veterinarians into this role as a paid advisor with their dairy farmers in your business.
10. My project focuses on a relationship between vet advisor and farmer that is thriving or flourishing, which means getting better and evolving positively for both parties over time. What do you think about this statement as a journey for dairy veterinarians and their farmers, and how does it align with your business values?
11. What would your veterinarians have to do or not to before you would not want to support them in this advisory relationship development?
12. Can you describe an example of a vet-farmer relationship that was not thriving or flourishing at some point, and there has been an intentional awareness and action from the vet or the farmer to build the relationship back, and now it is thriving/flourishing again?
13. Is there anything you would like to add that you feel you have not covered that relates to the farmer -female vet advisor relationship in your vet business?

Thank you so much for your time, I really appreciate it.

Recording stopped.

Appendix 2. Microsoft copilot prompt

Prompt requested of Microsoft copilot to collect key themes from the notes from the interviews.

"I have provided you with of key points from interviews I have conducted with vet functioning in an advisory capacity with their dairy farmers. The interviews were to understand the key attributes of a successful advisory relationship. The farmer transcript is in black text and the veterinarian is in blue. Functioning as social scientist, could you please undertake a comprehensive thematic analysis and identify the common themes and subthemes and differences between what the farmer and veterinarian have said. There is no limit the number of themes that you identify."

"Now I have provided you with of key points from interviews I have conducted with vet business owners that have dairy veterinarians functioning in an advisory capacity with their dairy farmers. The interviews were to understand the key attributes of a successful advisory relationship from the vet business perspective. The different coloured transcripts are each business. Functioning as social scientist, could you please undertake a comprehensive thematic analysis and identify the common themes and subthemes and differences between what the farmer and veterinarian have said. There is no limit the number of themes that you identify. I would also like any barriers or challenges to veterinarians doing advisory work to be identified please."

Appendix 3.

Farmer and veterinarian quotations direct from the interviewees.

3.1. Farmer quotations

Personal connection

"She calls it how it is, which is what I like, because I know where she's coming from and that trust is there."

"She's got the knack to make you comfortable."

"Because we click, and I think that's really important."

"I like the directness of her...I'm too wishy, washy, too emotional."

"But you know I've never ever walked away from a farm consultancy meeting feeling bad, you know like it's I've always enjoyed it."

"It's the personality you know."

"We just have that great relationship that we can talk about whatever that needs to be done on the farm."

"She is just so genuine. She is invested in what we're doing."

"So she's, yeah, that vital link, I guess that I wouldn't want to be without her now."

"I guess the plain enthusiasm in the relationship is one measurement."

"I trust that she has our best interests at heart."

"She understands our business."

"And she gets it. She understands."

"It's business. It's what I'd like to say; a mate sort of thing and she's very professional."

"So yeah, she reads me."

"It was a gut feeling."

Longevity

"But there's a lot of advantage as well having someone that understands our business for that period of time."

"we'll stop using her when she retires, I would have thought!"

Expertise

"Win-win having a vet as the farm consultant, it's a perfect scenario really."

"It's good to have the facts and you know I love she says it how it is."

"So if I trust her and what her judgement is then we're better off - then I'm good."

"She's bloody gold."

"Even though I've been doing this for 30 something years it's still good to have her input".

"She brings to the table different stuff."

"Look, it's good having just some more brains in the business."

"That's fundamental, that's that is good governance, isn't it? Identifying what you're good at and going getting other people with different strengths on the bus."

Support

"Feel that I need somebody else to push me over the edge, you know... and I think that's probably one of the key things too."

"Yeah, which is where we do need the outside eye because they'll come in and be like, what are you doing? Why? Why are you still doing this?"

"It's not always about what you're doing wrong. It's about what you're doing, right."

"When we when we have those meetings, you just sort of feel like you're like refocused and got something, yeah, a bit more of a spring in your step."

"So her name and letters behind her name and her title and her letterhead has a lot more weight than I do."

"You know, it's actually in those harder years financially we probably need her more than ever."

"But it's always good going away because we've normally always made a decision on something. We've got a way forward."

"Buy in from the whole farm team."

"It's good to get a second person's point of view on how the farm's been being run at the time, so sometimes it's good validation."

"It gives me a little bit more direction."

Accountability

"She'll tell me whether or not it was a dumb idea."

"I need that input; I like that plan."

"If she's not pushing me, then I'm not getting value for money, you know, even if it makes me feel uncomfortable."

"She backs the decision that I make."

"We would come to conclusions together through a discussion if that makes sense?"

"She's always been honest. She's never let me down. And I feel like the same."

"I'm too busy. I don't have time to think about this. I need you to chase me."

"It wasn't the pat on the back -it was more of I haven't let her down."

"I trust her to keep an eye on my business."

"I'm going to try and be as honest as I can and thorough as I can, but it's just not always easy."

Growth and Development

"She's got a way of educating us."

"She's growing more in the role than me."

"I guess tough to explain because she's very much a part of the whole thing now."

"And I always, I try to challenge her as well on some stuff and ask her to bring something new."

"We're always evolving."

"We float ideas around."

Other general quotations about the relationship overall

"Females are females, they definitely have a better appreciation for considering staff and their feelings."

"I couldn't give a rats if you're female male, whatever you were. If you can do the job, I ask you to do, that's all I'm asking."

"I'd love to have her on my payroll fulltime!"

"If I was on my death bed, she is the person I want involved in my business for the next 5-10 years."

3.2. Veterinarian quotations

Personal connection

"There's nothing that you can't say, you know that he's open and honest and you know that he listens to you, and it goes both ways basically."

"Sometimes you can leave a visit with quite a buzz, yeah."

"He did compare me to a load of palm kernel once! And he said as long as you're giving more value than a load of palm kernel..."

"I feel like I can have a pretty easy conversation with him."

Expertise

"I think they trust that whatever I say will always have a science base to it."

"So that makes you feel valued, that what you're saying is making a difference to this person, making them think, making them potentially change the way they operate."

"But I've certainly been a key driver and a key communicator."

"And I mean, it comes back to awareness, you know, one thing at a time, like don't focus on everything at once."

"And we debate some stuff, but most of the time he would take the advice."

"I think a good consultant half the time, the stuff they're saying is stuff that they've learned from other farmers and they're just taking it to the next farm."

Support

"Sometimes you're a buffer, sometimes you're a go between. Umm, sometimes you're fighting 1000 fires."

"It has to be a two- way conversation, in where I accept their situation and their farm system."

"Keep that mentoring and keep that finger on the pulse with the young managers."

"You hardly ever get success in one season, do you? But over time, over time, I think you get success."

"I like to think that they know that I'm always their backstop and I've got their back."

"Whatever the farm as I drive out their gate I always say/think to myself: have I made a difference for them today?"

"But what comes with it too (nothing in life's free) as you grow well in it, you take on some of the worry."

"I end up being a bit of a liaison almost between the clinic and the farmer."

Accountability

"I think that accountability side of things is probably an important part of the relationship."

"He wants me to keep him on the straight and narrow and to remember things, to do them in a timely fashion."

"The prompting ahead of the knowing it's going to get busy soon."

"Am I making a difference on farm, if I'm not making a difference, why am I there?"

"And I rang him one day and I said, man, I wouldn't been doing my job if I didn't tell you that, I think you're doing the wrong thing."

"After a visit I feel a sense of ownership like I need to own it, you know what we've discussed."

"So I think being able to rely on each other- back and forth is really good. I think that helps us move forward."

"It's almost like an approval to nudge."

"Got their back."

"I think my role more is trying to get all this information out of the farmer's head and into an organised state."

"I'm happy if we've got a small number of actions that are going to have an impact."

Growth and Development

"It is still not finished."

"I guess that's the theory of the umbrella needs to be open to be heavy. His umbrella was completely shut, so there was no point even going there."

"I like seeing the bigger picture."

"Because it's it just doesn't finish with the one visit, does it? you can't just deliver a thing and then walk away, can you? Because everything changes."

"I still see quite a lot of potential in those farms."

"It's thinking outside the box a little bit and it is that deeper dive and understanding more of the whole farm business."

"So for me success looks like the fact that they are valuing my value."

"What they need from me now is definitely a lot different to what it was when we started working together."

"But the continuing relationship he's usually got something new on the go. And I like that, I'm always looking for the next challenge, and that's what he does."

"It's incredibly rewarding, there's no doubt about that."

"I really don't see myself as an advisor that needs to stay forever alongside a farm."

Other general quotations about the relationship overall

"You can end up working on your own quite a bit."

"It requires a lot of energy. It requires a hell of a lot of energy."

"Have I been of service and have I been value for money?"

"But you know, like for me, a good day is, you know, wandering through a paddock in the sun looking at happy cows eating."

"But, you know, when you break it down, you're, just standing in the sunshine getting licked on the back."

Appendix 4.

Veterinary business quotations

4.1 Benefits of the farmer-veterinary advisory relationship

"But the consultancy side of the business is so fundamentally critical to the future of the profession, it really is. And I'll be challenging every veterinarian what are you doing each year from a personal development perspective to improve your performance in this space?"

"If you're going to grow this consultancy business, the counter staff and the sales team are your eyes and ears, they are hearing conversations. They are seeing stuff every single day. And if you want that pipeline of information to come to you, you have to elevate them and make them feel part of what you're doing. If you don't, they will cut you off."

"But I think where there's practices that have relationships working together to see how you can actually combine and find the synergy to develop your people."

"They trust us and they will ring us, and they value what we're going to say to them."

"If they're growing it and it's working and they're happy and they've got professional development and it's also gaining skills in that space within your business, then you will continue to commit time to that."

"I think in the end it's building that solid relationship with the people that you know."

"Having the knowledge of their business and sticking with the same person, I see value in that and then they value your advice."

"Do you turn it into some opportunity as a platform to be more involved and make more of a difference?"

"Success, to me would be that our farmers would be thinking of us in that space, so when they form an Advisory Board, they will be saying, oh, we should get the vet on this board."

"So they're not gonna go anywhere else because they're getting all of that provided and you because you know the farm so well."

"When it's going well and you can see your clients being successful, I think it's a huge amount of pride and it really gives them a lot of purpose. It really it hits their why and the enjoyment."

"It's a good way of lengthening the career of a dairy veterinarian."

"Vets are generally lifelong learners that they enjoy learning and developing and growing."

"You're getting more ingrained in their business and sitting around the table; you know as a part of their trusted advisor team."

"Our why is making a positive difference in the lives of our clients and their animals. You know that it's a long-term gig and it's adding value over time."

"It's not all about profit, but it's got to be sustainable and it's about growing and growing remuneration levels."

"It makes the relationship with the client much more sticky, and it allows us to deliver more value to clients."

"Identifying and hearing emerging trends on farm because they're so integrally involved in their farms and sharing those with the wider business."

"It's about attracting and retaining really good vets to have really good relationships and add really good value to our clients."

"Expectation the advisors contribute to the mentoring and bringing younger vets through and bringing other advisory people up through the business too."

"Each season is different, and so there's always that ongoing engagement."

"Almost creating little steps and pathways for what the future could look like, so it's nice to have a few people that are sort of innovating and pushing and just looking and trying to find new areas."

"So there's a lot more loyalty and connection."

"It's just building a better engagement with the client, you know, just a really good strength in relationship."

4.1 How to strengthen the farmer-veterinary advisory relationship?

"Advisory work doesn't suit everyone, need to have the right personality and a passion to work in this space."

"Process potentially, you know like collegiality in that space, CPD and specific tools are probably quite important."

"Supporting and mentoring and educating the young vets and being there for them."

"They need to see value that they're paying for something that is improving their business."

"Farmers pay for something tangible but then they've got all this advice from us for free. So how do we change their value concept to make them realise that there's value in that, and let's pay for it."

"Getting a firm grounding, get the basics right first (clinical vet skills and competencies)."

"One of the biggest positive with vets and probably one of the biggest handbrakes is that they are slow to trust and they don't give out their recommendations easily."

"And so I think the best relationships aren't always going to go in a straight line and they're not always going to be positive all the time. And you are going to have to challenge farmers at times."

"So it can be really, really tough. And so you do need a level of resilience. You simply need a very high-level emotional intelligence to be a successful consultant."

"Have a conversation with them, build some relationships, and actually prove that we should be in this space. Don't just expect it."

"So we need to be really flexible in our approach around supporting the vets to be the best they can be, so there's not one necessarily a one style fits all, because different personality types will approach advisory slightly differently."

"Allocating time to those vets developing advisory skills to actually go and cultivate those relationships."

"If your value proposition is around imparting knowledge, you have to charge appropriately for that."

"Farmer and advisory vet need to have an equal understanding of what they're trying to achieve."

"So you just keep evolving and stretching and bringing some new things into the thinking."

"And we can use shared experiences from the wider Headlands relationship to help our vets get there faster."

"I think you've gotta have it in your DNA to actually really want to serve and make a difference and help people."

"Advisors, if you're not careful are walking into lone warfare and they tend to have high levels of autonomy, but they've got a lot of knowledge that you want contributing back to the wider team because that helps the team or the community or the workplace be better."

"It's a little bit to do with the relationship and there's that degree of empathy and understanding and being able to build that connection quite quickly."

"Make sure we've got those hygiene factors right around customer service, good advice every day and then we can introduce the advisory side of the business."

"It's just that ability to be able to go into something new and know when to kill something off as well, be able to pivot."

"I think we've still got a mismatch between expectation, but all more to the point, what the farmers needs are or what they're what they really want from us and what we're providing now."

"Got to maybe change the model and really think about it. Umm, so quite a lot of barriers and in the way the industry perceives it."

Gender considerations

"I think sort of from a woman perspective, we always want to do better, but sometimes we don't reflect that we're doing really well already."

"I think it probably is tougher for females to get a start with, particularly if it's male farmers, you know that it's often easier for male vets to form those initial bonds and relationships with male farmers."

"Female vets or females in general, you know undersell themselves."

"I think the challenge is they will naturally think they're not good enough. Oh yeah, I could do that and so I think they possibly need more support."

"They will probably take the negatives to heart more."

"It doesn't matter what gender, but the personality is really important."

"I think people look at people based on their skills and their personalities and what value can you add to my business."

"Maybe females can bridge the gap between the expectations of the owner and the realities of the workers, what they can actually say."