

PAWS FOR THOUGHT

With more and more companies letting pets come into the office, Business & Management looks into the benefits and drawbacks



While owning a pet can be an attractive idea, people often cannot make the commitment due to the amount of time spent in the workplace. However, the recent emergence of 'bring your pet to work' policies means it is no longer necessary to leave an animal home alone.

According to 2016 figures from recruitment firm REED, up to 8% of workers enjoy bringing a pet to work. Company goldfish aside, the majority tend to be dogs. But what are the practicalities of ushering in such a system? And what benefit do pets bring to workforces as a whole, rather than just being convenient for the owner?

Numerous studies have cited the benefits of allowing dogs (and pets in general) into the workplace. A 2012 study by Randolph Barker found that dogs in the office reduced stress. Central Michigan University found that dogs could improve employee emotions, enhancing communication and co-operation. Nationwide and the Human Animal Bond Institute found that pet friendly companies were more likely to attract, engage and retain employees.

"There do seem to be indications that benefits of dog-friendly workplaces may manifest at lower rates of absenteeism and higher worker morale and productivity," said a Mental Health Foundation spokesperson.

BETTER ATMOSPHERE

This is also the case anecdotally. REED found employers who described the

effect of pets in the office as "calming", "light relief" or acting as a "great conversation starter". People reported making new friends across the company, with plenty of offers to join them on lunchtime walks.

There will, of course, always be places such as factory floors and sterile environments where animals are forbidden on safety and hygiene grounds. But, beyond that, there is no typical size or place of work where dogs cannot be accepted. They are common in companies where dogs are central to the work being carried out - such as pet food manufacturers Purina and Mars and the dog rehoming charity Blue Cross. But architects' practices, charities, literary agencies, magazines and tech companies are all places where dogs - or cats - have been welcomed.

PET PLANNING

What is most important about welcoming animals into office environments is that the process is properly planned. There are numerous things to weigh up and the outcome may differ depending on the size of the space and number of people working in it. Will a dog or other animal become too much of a distraction, especially if it is making noise? What about any damage that might be caused to company equipment or furniture? How will your business deal with the issue of liability, perhaps for injury as a result of a bite? Do you need to revise company insurance policies or fire safety

procedures as the result of inviting animals into the space?

Purina, which is part of Nestlé, has allowed animals on the premises for 16 years and set up a special pet passporting scheme at its head office. At present about 60 dogs are registered to be allowed on the premises where 1,000 people work. They had assistance from animal behaviourist professor Peter Neville in establishing the scheme. It involved assessing whether dogs are suited to joining the office 'pack', with regular reviews. Neville looked at how animals behaved within an office environment and monitored how they were settling in.

It is a rare workplace where the owner is not the person with ultimate responsibility for an animal. Most also require that a pet's presence be signed off by a manager. This means that should a person put in a request to bring in their pet, if another person objects (perhaps on grounds of suffering from allergies or phobias), the case can be heard fairly. Purina, for example, maintains animal-free zones. It even has a web page offering guidance to other companies wishing to set up a pet policy.

ACHOO!

Whether people suffering from allergies have been detrimentally affected by pets in the workplace remains to be seen - most available reports speak only in terms of the benefits witnessed. For example, a study issued by Purina of other workplaces said that 40% believed having a pet policy had improved their work-life balance. In workplaces without a scheme, 50% believed having one would be a benefit.

But it is important to recognise that office animals remain a privilege not a right. Those considered beneficial to our mental wellbeing cannot be conflated with genuine assistance animals. Only guide dogs and other registered assistance dogs helping people with disabilities are granted unfettered access to places of work and leisure.

As the Mental Health Foundation points out: "The decision to accept dogs or other animals into a work setting is complex and ought to be made with careful consideration of all relevant factors, for example, the need to take into account cultural sensitivities of employees, whether the workplace is able to accommodate the dog safely, and whether some people are scared of animals and so on." ●