

## See Spot Run? The Dogs in the Workplace Debate

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*“In other words, they [pets] make us feel better” – Sable, 2013, p. 94.*

Tony Treanor, Director of Human Resources at Northwestern Counseling & Support Services (NCSS), was faced with making an important policy decision. Employees at his Vermont-based nonprofit human services agency wanted to bring dogs to work. “At different times clients and staff have wanted to bring pets into our facilities,” he said. Treanor, a pet owner himself, was open to the idea but was concerned about the consequences of allowing dogs in the workplace. For example, would all employees and clients welcome dogs at NCSS? How would people who fear or are allergic to dogs react to dogs in the workplace?

NCSS currently didn’t have a written policy addressing the issue. “We do not have a policy but, as a rule, we don’t allow pets in the workplace,” Treanor noted. “That is by choice with us so that we can bend as we may need or want to.” Treanor added that employees had, on occasion, brought a new puppy or dog to work if they had a veterinary appointment during the workday.

Confounding the issue was that service dogs had long been permitted at NCSS. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) required that service dogs be permitted where the public is allowed. The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) defines service animals as “dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities” (“ADA Requirements,” 2011). DOJ guidelines made a distinction between service animals and pets characterizing service animals as trained “working animals” that provided a service not merely comfort or emotional support.

Should Treanor continue with no official policy, adopt a policy permitting dogs, or should he adopt a written policy prohibiting them? Should he maintain the current distinction between service animals and pets? Adopting an informal “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy on dogs at work was also an option. Concerned with maintaining good employee morale, Treanor researched the issue of dogs in the workplace in order to make a recommendation to members of the NCSS leadership team.

### **Northwestern Counseling & Support Services**

Founded in 1958, NCSS was a private nonprofit human services agency whose mission was to “ensure that the residents of Franklin and Grand Isle Counties have access to high quality services, which promote healthy living and emotional well-being” (“Northwestern,” 2015).

NCSS provided over 75 community mental health programs to children, adolescents, and adults in Northwestern Vermont near Lake Champlain and the Canadian border. These programs were designed to help Vermonters with behavioral or emotional problems; mental and/or

developmental disabilities; autism; and substance abuse problems. Services were provided in schools, homes, at a family center in St. Albans, Vermont, and at a parent-child center in Alburg, Vermont. The agency's administrative offices were located in St. Albans. NCSS was accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), an independent accreditor of health and human service agencies.

In fiscal year 2013, NCSS had a budget of \$32 million and had 505 employees-300 of which worked off site in the community. NCSS's budget was spent on Developmental Services (41%); Children, Youth and Family Services (39%); Adult Behavioral Services (16%); Crisis Services (4%); and Administration (<1%). NCSS served approximately 55,200 Vermonters- 48,214 in Franklin County and 6,983 in Grand Isle County (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2013).

### **Pet Ownership**

Americans love pets. In 2012, sixty-two percent of U.S. households (164 million) had at least one pet. Forty-seven percent had at least one dog while 46% had at least one cat ("Humane Society," 2013). Additionally, Herzog (2010) reported that in 2009, Americans shared their homes with 15 million birds, 14 million reptiles, 16 million small mammals, and 180 million fish. Considered members of the family by many pet owners, pet care is big business. In fact, in 2013 it is estimated that Americans spent more than \$55.5 billion on pet food, veterinary care, grooming and boarding, and pet supplies and medicine ("American Pet," 2014).

### **Benefits of Pets**

Researchers have long studied the impact of pets and pet ownership. Studies have looked at the role of pets in health and wellness, grief recovery, and relationships. Sable (2013) summarized the results of much of this work and concluded "there is now convincing scientific evidence that companion animals have positive effects on psychological and physical well-being, helping shape how people regulate their emotions, deal with stress or trauma, and relate to others" (p. 93).

Herzog (2010) described pets as social lubricants, helping us meet other people. The responsibility of caring for pets also brought structure to the lives of pets owners and pets provided unconditional love. After reviewing national surveys looking at the relationship between dog and cat ownership and adult health, Headey and Grabka (2011) concluded that pets offered health benefits. "Owners see general practitioners and other physicians less often and so presumably make less use of the whole health care system" (p.160). Friedmann, Barker and Allen (2011) suggested the physiological effects of pet ownership may, in part, explain the health benefits of pet ownership. Their study concluded that the presence of pets reduced stress in children and adults. In light of his research, Treanor wondered how dogs at work might impact stress management and the \$2.5 million annual health insurance budget at NCSS.

American workers experience stress at work, which can be manifested through decreased employee morale, increased absenteeism and turnover, and higher medical expenses. Kudesia (2010) reported that 80 percent of employees experienced stress at work and that workplace stress cost American businesses \$300 billion annually. In a study of women executives, Nelson and Burke (2000) found that workplace stressors included task stressors, overload, organizational

politics, sexual harassment, and workaholism. Not surprisingly, work-home conflict also created stress.

For his part, Treanor believed NCSS employees were not immune from stress. “A lot of the work is very stressful,” he said. “But I think we are very conscious of peoples’ stress and the need to relieve it and we do a lot with health and wellness events.” Additionally, NCSS has long maintained and promoted its Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to help employees deal with work/life balance issues, personal problems, and stress. Treanor characterized employee morale at NCSS as “very positive.”

### **Pets at Work**

Treanor learned that the concept of taking dogs to work had grown increasingly popular. In 1999, Pet Sitters International created Take Your Dog to Work Day (TYDTWDay) to celebrate dogs and promote their adoption (“Pet Sitters,” 2013). The group provided a downloadable “TYDTWDay action pack” outlining suggestions for the annual event. Pet Sitters International identified Friday, June 20 as the date for 2014’s Take Your Dog to Work Day. The site also suggested using any day during the week of June 16-20 if an employer is closed on Fridays or “if the cat lovers want equal time.” More than 10,000 employers have participated in TYDTWDay annually (Hill, 2013).

Surveys also supported the increased presence of pets at work:

- A 2008 study found that 17% of U.S. employers permitted pets at work (Suddath, 2012).
- In 2011, 1.4 million dog owners took their dogs to work (Cohen & Davis, 2012).
- In 2012, employees brought dogs to work an average of 22 times (Swan, 2013).

From an employee recruitment and retention perspective, permitting dogs at work allowed an employer to inexpensively differentiate itself from its competitors. Treanor learned that Google, Replacements, Ltd., The Onion, Amazon, and Mars Petcare are among the firms that permitted pets at work (Hill, 2013; Suddath, 2012; VanderMey & Kaplan, 2013). In Vermont, Seventh Generation, Burton Snowboards, Ben & Jerry’s Homemade permitted dogs at work while Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, Perrigo Nutritionals, and Vermont’s Department of Public Safety prohibited them. Employees seemed to value the opportunity to bring Spot (or Max, Bella, Bailey, etc.) to the workplace. Sixty-five percent of respondents to a survey in *Modern Dog* magazine said they would take less salary if they could bring their dog to work (Evans, 2013).

So what impact did dogs have on the workplace? Did the benefits of pet ownership as described above apply at work? In attempting to examine the psychological and organizational effects of pets in the workplace, Wells and Perrine (2001) surveyed 193 employees at 31 employers that permitted pets. They found that pets were perceived to reduce stress at work. “Participants reported that pets make the work environment more comfortable, provide a pleasant diversion from work, and provide companionship” (p. 85). Barker, Knisely, Barker, Cobb and Schubert (2012) looked at three groups of employees- employees who bring dogs to work, employees who do not bring dogs to work, and employees without pets- when studying the relationship between dogs at work and stress, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. They found that over the course of a workday, stress increased for employees who didn’t own pets or didn’t bring their

dogs to work while stress decreased for employees who brought a dog to work. Wells and Perrine (2001) also found that pets relaxed and entertained customers. When describing pets in law offices, Cohen and Davis (2012) arrived at a similar conclusion, stating that pets “help to improve mood and even lower blood pressure” (p. 30).

Permitting pets at work is not without problems. According to the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology (ACAAI), approximately 10 percent of Americans suffer from pet allergies (“American College,” 2010). This is of particular concern to the 20 to 30 percent of people with asthma. The American Lung Association (2015) described asthma as a chronic health problem that can be life threatening. “The exact cause of asthma is not known. Asthma tends to run in families and may be inherited, but environmental factors may also play a key role” (“American Lung,” 2015). Unfortunately for Treanor, environmental factors that trigger asthma included exposure to dog and cat allergens like dander.

In addition to allergy concerns, some participants in Wells and Perrine’s (2001) study saw pets in the workplace as a nuisance or unclean. Concerns about dogs at work raised in Barker, Knisely, Barker, Cobb and Schubert’s (2012) study centered on the ability to get the job done. “... a small group of those without pets in the workplace perceives dog presence as hurting their personal productivity” (p. 25). Flea outbreaks, aggressive behavior, and dog accidents on carpets and other NCSS property were also potential downsides of permitting dogs.

Treanor was also concerned about legal issues surrounding permitting dogs at NCSS. When describing the liability issues involved in dogs at work, Rampenthal (2012) outlined personal injury, property damage, and problems with landlords as potential legal concerns. Rampenthal suggested that these issues could be addressed, in part, by requiring employees who bring dogs to work to sign insurance and indemnification forms. While Hill (2013) largely agreed with Rampenthal’s recommendations, she concluded that there is no way an employer like NCSS could avoid all liability concerns. “While a dog owner would, in most cases, be liable if the dog were to bite someone, there is also a possibility the employer would be jointly liable in a personal injury lawsuit.”

NCSS employees who fear dogs (a phobia known as cynophobia) also concerned Treanor. In a study of more than eight thousand Americans, Curtis et al. (1998) found that 22.2 percent of participants reported an intense fear of animals. Antony and McCabe (2005) characterized animal phobias as involving “an experience of panic and fear upon confronting the feared animal, avoidance of the feared animal, anxious thinking patterns, and a feeling of disgust” (p. 10). Finally, in an increasingly diverse workplace, Treanor was worried about cultural sensitivities to dogs at work. While Americans appeared to embrace dog ownership, some cultures and religions viewed dogs as unclean.

### **Treanor’s Policy Dilemma**

Treanor was torn. Through the course of his research, he learned that some employers allow employees to bring their dogs to work. Other employers have policies forbidding them. Why the difference? What value, if any, did allowing dogs at work have on employee morale and stress management? What legal issues, if any, applied? If NCSS were to permit dogs at work, how could he meet the needs of both dog lovers and people who might dislike, fear, or be allergic to

them? And if NCSS were to permit dogs in the workplace, what should a model “dogs at work” policy include?

These were some of the questions Treanor grappled with as he considered his policy recommendation to the NCSS leadership team and how to communicate the decision to NCSS employees.

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