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## HR Plaza PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT...

### Day After Day

## How Much Is That Doggie in the Cubicle?

by Dorrit T. Walsh

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We all know how much Americans love pets, particularly [dogs](#).\* The old popular saying "a man's best friend is his dog" is probably a misquotation from a speech given by Senator George Graham Vest of Missouri sometime in the late 1800's. The actual quote is: "The one absolutely unselfish friend that man can have in this selfish world, the one that never deserts him, the one that never proves ungrateful or treacherous, is his dog. . .When all other friends desert, he remains."

The great human/canine love affair used to be confined to one's personal life. In the staid, button-down workplace of yesterday you would never think of doing something as "outrageous" as bringing your dog with you to work. But times have changed. For one thing, attitudes are more enlightened in corporate America. Women are no longer confined to the secretarial pool, "casual" clothes are the norm at many offices, and companies pride themselves on their ability to be innovative and progressive.

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\*CAT LOVERS: Please don't send me angry e-mails, I'm not professing a personal preference for canines; as a matter of fact I have many pets, and the cats outnumber the dogs. I'm just stating a fact--America has always been a predominantly dog-loving culture.

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Add to that the fact that since the U.S. unemployment rate is at the lowest it's been in over 25 years, employees have their pick of jobs, and the result is businesses scrambling to institute or increase their work/life benefits in order to retain their employees. (It's estimated that when factoring in all direct and indirect costs, replacing an employee could cost anywhere from 50 to 100 percent of his or her salary. And that's assuming you can even find a qualified replacement in today's market. . .) And, although you don't read about them as much as programs such as telecommuting and flextime, an increasing number of forward-thinking companies now offer pet-oriented benefits to their employees.

Of course, the bottom-line purpose behind work/life benefits as a whole is to retain employees. But there's a different thrust driving the increase of more "nontraditional" work/life benefits--issue equity. (See archived "Day by Day" article, "The Childless Backlash: Myth or Fact.") Many work/life benefits, as evidenced by the fact that this genre was first named work/family benefits, center around a "conventional" family where the chief concerns are often children. Benefits that appeal to people other than parents show that a company is concerned with the needs, wants, and rights of all its employees, not just a select group. And, according to Tyler Phillips, president of work/life consulting firm the Partnership Group, pets can be just as time-consuming and difficult to take care of as children or elderly parents. His company once even helped find an iguana owner an iguana support group. (The Partnership Group also welcomes pets in the office.)

So what are some of these new pet policies? They include covering costs of taking care of a pet when the employee has to take a business trip, working at home to take care of a sick pet, and paying a fixed amount toward veterinary costs. However, the most popular pet benefit seems to be allowing employees to bring their pets to work, and companies with an open-pet policy cover all industries and include everything from software companies to law firms. The majority of pet-welcoming offices okay visitors of any species, and employees have brought in snakes, birds, cats, rabbits, and even monkeys. But dogs definitely seem to be the most frequently accepted office pet.

Generally for this concept to work, there have to be certain rules that all employees must agree to abide by. These vary from company to company, but the most common ones are: pets must be socialized and get along with other pets as well as people (no snappers or biters); they must be licensed and have up-to-date vaccinations; they can't be noisy; they can't attend meetings; and they can't use the carpet as a bathroom. (One company realizes there can always be accidents and has a "three poops and you're out" rule.) If an employee is allergic, or afraid, of a type of pet, most companies try to rearrange either duties and/or offices so everyone can stay happy.

Allowing employees to bring pets to the office has had the desired effect for some companies--retaining employees who might have otherwise left. While researching this article, I read a statements by a number of employees. One lawyer said she would have left the firm if she had to leave her dog at home, some workers at software company Autodesk have either stayed or decided to take a job at the company solely based on being able to bring their dogs to the office, and one accountant was actually going to switch professions had he not found an dog-friendly office in his field.

And those are only the more quantifiable benefits. There are other more subtle benefits to having pets in the office, and one of the most important of those is stress reduction. Researchers have found that positive contact with animals usually releases endorphins in the brain, slows down the heart rate and lowers blood pressure. Although this has been proven by the extensive successes with various pet-therapy programs, most people don't care about the scientific facts; they just know that when they pet a dog's head, they feel better.

It doesn't have to be your dog either. Anyone can benefit from taking a few minutes for a doggie play break. Being able to bring your dog with you can also be a great icebreaker for new employees, and frequently results in employees socializing and getting to know other employees who, if a dog or dogs weren't involved, normally wouldn't even meet each other. And the most obvious benefit is that pet owners are happier employees because they no longer have to worry about poor Wozell being alone at home and maybe eating the sofa because he's bored or lonely.

So are you ready to share your office with a dog? Despite some naysayers, more companies are doing it every day. The trend is obviously here to stay, because it's already spawned a business--Chicago's K9 Poop Patrol ("Chicago's Number 1 LandScraper; Where Business is Always Picking Up"), which specializes in taking care of, well, what you don't want to, from office high rises. In today's tight labor market anything that helps retain employees is worth a try, especially a benefit that makes for a more productive and less-stressful workplace. Just don't forget to put a jar of dog biscuits on the main reception desk.

#### **NOTE:**

The speech I quoted from earlier in this article was made by Senator Vest as his summation at a trial where he was representing a man who was suing a neighbor for shooting his beloved dog, Old Drum. The full speech is also known as "A Tribute to the Dog," and most of it (according to records only the first half of the speech survives) is inscribed on a statue of Old Drum erected in front of the Johnson County Courthouse, where Vest originally gave his speech. The speech is also widely published on the Internet, including at [Petlife News](#) and [The History Place](#).

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