

CHANGE @ WORK

Throwing employees a bone

How some Employers are helping workers care for their pets

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About a month ago, Alethea Immoor came home from work to find her cat, Cosi, was ailing. The 7-year-old, 30-pound tabby had an abscess on his chin that had burst, resulting in a bloody trail on the floor and pools of blood on the couch in her Middle Island apartment.

"It was terrifying," says Immoor, 33, who, like so many of us, sees her cat as her family. "I felt helpless."

She got an appointment with her veterinarian first thing the next morning. And then came her moment of truth: what to tell the boss?

Would it be a cover-up - a ploy to mask taking time off for pet care?

Immoor, a public relations assistant, expected that her boss, Ron Gold, president of Advertising Works Inc. in East Setauket, would be supportive, as his own dogs often "work" right along side of him. Not only did he tell her to take as much time as she needed - he also suggested she bring Cosi to work if she wanted to keep tabs on him.

"He understood and went beyond that," she says - a gesture that meant a great deal. Immoor had been granted custody of Cosi after a divorce and says "that cat has gotten me through some tough times.... I have an emotional bond with him."

Desk photos at the office routinely display the loving smiles of children and



significant others, but these days we are also seeing shots of Buddy, Sparky and Little Miss Coco. These are what Charlotte Reed, author of soon-to-be-published "The Miss Fido Manners Complete Book of Dog Etiquette," calls our "fur kids."

And even as we're proud to display our affection and attachment to our non-human family members, we're also trying to figure out how to deal with their care and well-being in the hours we're at the office and they're not. Employers are finding they're being called on to address matters related to Buster and Ginger, right along with child care and elder care, amid a focus on attracting new employees and retaining current ones in a tightening labor market.

What's at play here? For starters: demographic shifts that find both empty nesters and young workers without children showering considerable affection on their critters, says Roxanne Szczpkowski, director of work-life resources with ComPsych, a Chicago-based employee assistance program with clients worldwide. Her role is to help clients' employees wrestle with non-work issues that might otherwise spill over to the workday and affect performance.

The pet care portion of the business is small but one of the fastest growing, says Szczpkowski (pron. chipCOWski) , with pet-related calls up an estimated 15 to 20 percent from last year.

Her group has offered such support as locating dog walking and pooper-scooper services; providing help sheets on pet illnesses such as kitty leukemia and renal failure; and providing information on pet funerals and bereavement support groups. And when employees are relocated overseas, her department handles the pet transportation and, when called for, quarantines. Recently it was called on to have the corpse of an employee's cat transported from Sweden back home to New York for burial.

Szczpkowski, who has five dogs and a rabbit, says she's finding that some employers are "embracing pets in a whole different light ... understanding they are part of the family."

In that spirit, employers are showing signs of enhancing pet perks and accommodations. According to annual benefits research from the Society for Human Resource Management, 5 percent of employers responding to the survey last year offered pet health insurance, up from 2 percent in 2001.

Many are coming to understand, too, that productivity can dip when employee attention is focused on an ailing pet and that ill will can result when employees feel forced to lie and/or put on a happy face.

Immoor compares her experience with that of her sister, who started a new

job on the same day she had to put her dog to sleep when she got home. The next day the boss gave what she felt was an obligatory "sorry to hear that." And she ended up leaving two months later, in part as a result of what she saw as an uncaring response.

Indeed, says Melville veterinarian Elizabeth Cohen, a significant number of owners of her emergency patients say they've fabricated a story about an ailing aunt, uncle or child. "'I'll lose my job if the boss knew I took off for a dog,'" they've told her.

The human resource society's research also shows an increasing percentage of employers offering support programs for grief of all kinds, programs that in most cases would cover pet bereavement. And Reed says she's heard of employees' sending sympathy cards - even flowers - when a colleague's "fur kid" moves on to, say, kitty cat heaven.

When employees call National EAP, a Ronkonkoma-based employee assistance program serving employers mostly in the Northeast, counselors treat pet grief "the same as we would any other grief/loss issue," says Michael Hack, chief executive. He cited two recent examples: someone who was grieving the loss of a horse and another person going through a divorce who was experiencing stress over the custody question of a pet boxer.

As a manager, employee and pet lover, Janine Dion says she's grateful to work for a pet-friendly employer, Crest Hollow Country Club, where she is director of sales and marketing. As the caretaker of three cats and two dogs, she gets up an hour early each morning to tend to feeding, watering, walking and litter-box cleanup. On days she and/or her husband have after-work events, they negotiate who'll get home first to care for the critters. At work, when one of her staff has a pet issue, she says, she's quick to be accommodating.

And while pets can add anxiety and stress to an employee's life, that's more than tempered by just one lick or tail wag, says Dion, who is also founder and president of Pet Peeves Inc., a Woodbury-based animal advocacy group.

Certainly the big tail-wagging job perk is the ability to bring pets to work, seen most often in smaller offices where bosses may work side by side with their own pets, as does Gold - he and his wife also breed "Labradoodles."

But pets don't seem to be making many inroads at the office; the human resources research shows that workplaces welcoming pets have remained fairly stable, at 4 percent, in the past five years. Matthew Halpern, a partner in the Melville office of the law firm Jackson Lewis Llp, points to issues such as the potential for bites and scratches, other employees' and/or clients' allergies and phobias, distractions. And then there is a need for a sense of

professionalism among those who feel "I didn't sign up to work in a menagerie."

Pat Lupino, a marketing professor at Nassau Community College, has two dogs of her own but still says she was turned off a number of years ago when she worked for a small cosmetics firm in New Jersey. Another executive there brought her pug to the office on Fridays, which Lupino says had a negative impact on the woman's image. Meeting-goers would be startled when the dog snorted or dozed off and started snoring.

Bringing a pet to work in special circumstances, such as a vet appointment or kennel drop-off, is one thing, says Lupino, but, she asks, "How do you take someone seriously when the dog is sitting in the office every Friday?"

Still, it's easier these days to find some of those workplaces that do welcome Fifi or Butch. That's through a collaborative endeavor between job search engine SimplyHired.com and Dogster.com. At SimplyHired.com/DogFriendly, you'll find some 1,400 such openings in New York State - many of them at the offices of Google.

One job posting is for the director of preserves and facilities in the Cold Spring Harbor office of the Nature Conservancy. Just pay a visit to the East Hampton office of that conservation organization and you may be welcomed by as many as five dogs, who, for the most part, curl up for the day in their owners' offices.

The ability to bring her 13-year-old golden retriever, Luna, to the office "is a joy," says Marian Lindberg, finance and policy adviser in the conservancy's East Hampton office. She and her family relocated two years ago from Manhattan to Wainscott for, among other reasons, the well-being of their aging dog.

Lindberg says, sure, there are distractions: You might sit down to lunch to be joined by a drooling dog or see a tennis ball whiz by your door, with a large dog in hot pursuit. But she calls them "happy distractions," ones that have no more effect on productivity than normal office water cooler chat.

Work longer hours 66%

Commute farther 55%

Switch jobs 49%

Take 5% cut in pay 32%

Take 10% cut in pay 11%

Source: SimplyHired.com/Dogster.com survey of dog owners

RESUMES FOR PETS

Sweet P.

6-year-old feline

SKILLS

Horticultural proclivities, such as pruning houseplants whether they need it or not.

Mario

8-year-old mini poodle

SKILLS

Tour guide for guests, with especially long pauses at the kibble storage area

Laundry presort: Adept at choosing from the dirty laundry pile the most embarrassing undergarment to carry around the house.

Gabby

5-year old Cockapoo

SKILLS Nutritionist tendencies, actually snubbing dog treats in favor of raw broccoli and carrots

Pet perks

A few more employers are offering benefits to pet owners

Offer pet health insurance

2001 2%

2006 5%

Make arrangements for pet care during business travel

2004 1%

2006 2%

Allow pets at work

2001 4%

2006 4%

Source: Society for Human Resources Management benefits Survey 261 responses

Yes, it's April Fool's Day ... but stop for a moment and consider this:

Writing a pet resume can actually help us with writing our own. It can prime us to let go of the minutiae and jargon of our jobs and open up our thinking. Karen Bomzer, a resume writer in East Northport, concurs: "Observing your pet's behavior and the methods it uses to attain its goals should give you an insight into writing your own resume...", she says. "What makes your pet different from others? What makes you as a job candidate different from others? "

Bomzer is a publicity volunteer for Woodbury-based pet advocacy group Pet Peeves Inc., who with a couple of board members took on the task of writing and submitting resumes for the creatures in their homes who, some would say, really run the show.

Here's what we learn about Bomzer's kitty, Jean-Claude: He's a "resourceful, food-oriented feline with proven lounging, sleeping and doughnut-eating abilities. "

And this about the two kitties of Laurie Bloom, marketing and communications director for Rivkin Radler Llp in Uniondale: Max Bialystock is "a results-oriented, seasoned leader adept at managing multiple priorities and species. " And Tiger Lily is "an expert shredder, providing government-quality destruction of any available documents. " (You can see more examples at www.newsday.com/workplace.)

Bomzer has this advice for others willing to give this exercise a shot: "If your pet tells you when it's hungry, then it has excellent communication skills, particularly in food-oriented matters. If it chases its toy, you could say it is energetic, skillful and resourceful in pursuing objectives, especially those that are made of rubber. If it steals food from the table, one might infer that it applied creative skills in meeting goals while overcoming obstacles. "

So, go make a list of your pet's quirks and rituals that you find endearing and

try describing them in workplace language. And for those who pooh-pooh the idea, "keep laughing," says Bloom. Because "when Max gets that big executive job offer, he can take care of me for a while!"

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