

# Policies for Pets in the Workplace

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PEO clients look to their human resources experts to create innovative ways to help build a progressive culture and provide attractive employee benefits. Whether it is given as a perk or used as a recruitment tool, one trend that is finding traction is allowing pets in the workplace. According to a 2016 employee benefits research report<sup>1</sup> from the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM), 7 percent of employers allow pets in the workplace. Businesses that allow furry friends tend to have creative, open working environments with a corporate culture that places an emphasis on employee satisfaction.

We are a pet crazy nation and in 1999 designated a holiday dedicated to our pets—Take Your Dog to Work Day—that is celebrated in June each year. Studies show that bringing pets to work

helps to improve work-life balance, stress reduction, and employee productivity.

A survey conducted by Banfield Pet Hospital<sup>2</sup> found that dogs in the workplace can be a

key to a happy office. The survey included responses from approximately 200 human resources professionals and 1,000 employees from a variety of company sizes and industries. It measured the prevalence, impact, and perceptions of pets in the workplace. The report overview states: “Overwhelmingly, responses indicate that pet-friendly workplaces are viewed as highly positive, boosting morale, contributing to talent retention, and providing employers with a competitive edge in the recruitment process.”

While a growing number of companies allow pets—including Google, Zynga, Ben & Jerry’s, Huffington Post, Etsy, and many others—there is also discussion about the practicality of the whole idea. While studies show that pets in the workplace help lower blood pressure and reduce work-related stress, there are factors that need careful consideration.

## Allergies and Reactions to Animals

According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, there are millions of people who suffer from pet-related allergies. The latest figures indicate from 15 to 30 percent of the total population suffers from pet allergies that manifest in a variety of ways. Cat allergies are about twice as common as dog allergies. Many people have severe reactions that may cause rashes, temporary breathlessness, panic attacks, and even severe respiratory disorders. At Google, people with animal allergies have the last word about whether it’s okay for their coworkers to bring their pets into the environment.

In addition to a physical reaction, there are individuals who are genuinely afraid when in the presence of animals and this can create a stressful situation instead of a soothing and relaxed environment. It is important to recognize that the presence of an animal could cause a true threat to someone’s sense of well-being and safety.

## Pet Policies

To ensure a seamless integration of pets into the workplace, it is important to develop a comprehensive pet policy that leaves no room for interpretation of rules and regulations. Please consider the following:

### Executive Buy-In

- It is important to have the support of your executive team to create a great pet-friendly environment.

### Pet-Proofing

- Create a safe and productive environment for both employees and pets. Before allowing pets in the office, it’s important to pet-proof. This includes incorporating items such as baby gates and hiding electrical cords.

### Number of Pets

- Determine the number of animals allowed in the workplace at one time.



Barron is working hard at ARCO Marine in Pensacola, Florida. (Photo courtesy Jan Miller.)

<sup>1</sup> <http://bit.ly/2nq6MA2>, requires membership credentials.

<sup>2</sup> [www.banfield.com/about-us/news-room/press-releases-announcements/banfield-shares-data-on-the-positive-impact-of-pet](http://www.banfield.com/about-us/news-room/press-releases-announcements/banfield-shares-data-on-the-positive-impact-of-pet).

### Licenses and Vaccinations

- Before any animal is permitted to enter the workplace, owners should provide verification that vaccinations and licenses are up-to-date, and the animal is free of parasites and insects.
- Animals must be well-groomed to decrease the amount of shedding.
- Animals must wear legally required license tags and information with owner's name and telephone number at all times.

### Animal Behavior in the Workplace

- Animals must have no history of aggressive behavior or biting and be well-socialized.
- Any aggressive behavior, such as barking, chasing, or growling, would mean immediate removal from the workplace.
- Animals should be house broken and "accident-free" while in the workplace.
- Owners are responsible for cleaning up after their animals. Waste bags must

be sealed and discarded in designated receptacles.

- Animals should be friendly toward other animals.

### Respect for Property

- Have a designated outside area for pets to go to the bathroom and ensure the owners understand it is their responsibility to clean up after their pets.

### Work Environment

- Determine if your policy will allow pets to roam freely, require use of harnesses, leashes, or other tethers, or require pets to be in the offices/workspaces of their owners.
- Ensure the working conditions are conducive to the presence of pets. Noisy or hazardous work environments can be disturbing to animals.
- Identify areas accessible to pets, such as office spaces, hallways, open areas, and outside designated areas.
- Identify areas that are off limits, such as food areas.

### Liability

- Ask employees to provide copies of their homeowners or renters insurance policies to ensure there is coverage for any damage to person or property caused by pets.
- Consider having an indemnification policy in case the business gets sued because of something a pet does.
- Have a written policy available for employees to sign agreeing to the acceptable rules of conduct for themselves and their pets. Include an agreement to reimburse the company for any damage caused by pets.

### Service Animals

When discussing animals in the workplace, it is important to note there are laws and guidelines in place for service animals, comfort animals, and therapy animals. These animals are considered "working" animals and should be treated as such.

Service animals are protected by Title II and Title III of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Under federal law, a service animal means any



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dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability, including a physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other mental disability. (However, there is one exception to this law. A miniature horse can be covered if it has been trained to perform tasks for an individual with a disability.) Many states also have laws that provide a different definition of service animal. It is important to review your

state's law and follow the law that offers the most protection for the service animal. Even if you have an established policy for pets in the workplace that allows restricted access to animals, please note that a service animal must be allowed to accompany the employee to any place in the building or facility where members of the public, customers, or clients are allowed.

*However, emotional support animals, comfort animals, and therapy animals are*



Casper was the first service dog at Children's Hospital of Atlanta (CHOA). CHOA has 12 service dogs working in multiple facilities. (Photo courtesy Lisa Kinsel.)

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not service animals *under Title II and Title III of the ADA*. While emotional support or comfort animals are often used as part of a medical treatment plan, they are not considered service animals under the ADA. Some state laws allow therapy animals; however, these animals are not covered by federal laws that protect service animals. Under federal guidelines, it does not matter if a person has a note from a doctor that states that he or she has a disability and needs to have the animal for emotional support. A doctor's letter does not turn an animal into a service animal. Employers should engage in what the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) refers to as the interactive process. This is when an informal meeting takes place between employer and employee to determine if a reasonable accommodation can be made without causing undue hardship.

In conclusion, there are certainly positive aspects and inherent risks with this new trend of pets in the workplace. For those clients interested in offering this special benefit to employees, the PEO HR team can assist by establishing written policies to help limit liability and provide guidelines for a safe work environment. It is recommended that HR start the process by providing clients with samples of pet-friendly workplace policies that will help them properly formulate their own policies. In guiding clients in this area, HR fulfills an important role of leading the way in encouraging innovative, progressive benefits in the workplace. ●

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