

Working with animals could result in employees that are more compassionate

May 23 2022



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New research findings have shown that employees who work with animals gain an unintended benefit—developing greater compassion. The research from the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business

School suggests that this greater compassion leads employees to work better with their colleagues.

Published in *Personnel Psychology* on 10 May, the research was led by Associate Professor Sam Yam Kai Chi, Head of the School's Department of Management & Organisation.

"Humans and [animals](#) often work together to achieve a certain goal. For example, [police officers](#) work with [sniffer dogs](#) to detect [illegal drugs](#), and equine therapists work with horses to improve the physical and mental health of the rider. But not much is known about the impact of working with animals on [employees](#). That is what we set out to find out," said Assoc Prof Yam.

The research team conducted three studies. The first study surveyed 71 employees from the Life Sciences departments of Mandai Wildlife Group in Singapore on their emotions and prosocial behavior towards others over two weeks in 2020. The respondents also answered questions on their perceptions of whether animals can think or experience emotions.

Findings from the first study revealed that the employees reported a higher level of compassion when they had greater interactions with animals. The more they perceived the animals to be able to feel and think, the stronger the impact of animal interaction on their compassion and behavior towards others.

Assoc. Prof. Yam explained, "Compassion means being aware of others' suffering and having a desire to help. It is hard to spot your colleagues' struggles, because humans are afraid to show their vulnerability and are surprisingly good at hiding their suffering. In contrast, employees who work with animals are trained to constantly look out for animals' non-verbal signs of discomfort. Interestingly, this animal-induced

compassion spills over to make them more prosocial towards their colleagues, such as going the extra mile to help others."

The second study, conducted in 2021, involved 121 employees in Hong Kong who come from different organizations and work with animals in providing services or entertainment. Participants in one group were instructed to write about a recent incident of working closely with animals to achieve work goals. In the control group, participants were just instructed to write about an incident involving pursuing goals at work. Both groups were surveyed on their compassion levels after the writing, and the researchers found that those who recalled working with animals felt significantly more compassionate than the control group.

Similar to the first study, the third study held in 2021 surveyed 178 employees in the United States on their animal interaction and compassion levels. However, this time, the employees' prosocial behavior was reported by their direct supervisors.

Findings from the third study showed that when there were higher levels of working with animals, the employees developed greater compassion and prosocial behavior too.

"Our research suggests that working with animals can lead to benefits for both employees and organizations," said Assoc. Prof. Yam.

"Organizations can actively consider whether it is feasible to introduce animals to the workplace, such as in compassion training workshops. The relationship between humans and animals has evolved over thousands of years. While the benefits of interacting with animals are well known, we are surprised to be one of the first to study the effects of working alongside them."

Research assistant Carisa Lam added, "While the presence of animals is unconventional in many workplaces, we believe that with the right

structure and rules in place to tackle practical considerations, working with animals can be a novel way to cultivate compassion in employees."

For future studies, the research team aims to examine whether working with animals can bring negative effects, such as the traumatic experience when veterinarians euthanize animals.

More information: Kai Chi Yam et al, Working with animals: Implications for employees' compassion, awe, prosocial behavior, and task performance, *Personnel Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/peps.12517](https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12517)

Provided by National University of Singapore

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