

Paws for thought: The pros and cons of a pet-friendly office

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Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

For you and your pooch a pet-friendly workplace may seem a no-brainer.

More of us are facing pet separation anxiety than ever before. Dog ownership surged with pandemic lockdowns and working from home. Now, with the boundaries between work and home already so blurred, shouldn't every inclusive, caring employer embrace an open-doggy-door policy?

What's the harm? After all, isn't there a growing body of research showing the benefits of pets in the workplaces?

Maybe. Yes, pets certainly can bring benefits to the workplace. These include [reducing stress](#) and [improving social interaction](#) and job satisfaction.

But the same studies showing benefits, and that most people support pet-friendly workplace, also highlight the risks, hazards [and concerns](#) that must be considered for a pet-friendly workplace to be inclusive, equitable and sustainable.

Dogs aren't for everyone

Not everyone loves dogs. Some people just don't like them, and a small percentage fear them—a condition called cynophobia.

A commonly reported number of how many this affects is [5% of the population](#), but this is likely U.S.-specific, with rates differing by country and culture. Global studies suggest about [3.8% have a lifetime animal phobia](#) (2% of men, 5.4% of women), including dogs and cats.

About [10–20% of the global population](#) are allergic to dogs or cats. This rate is increasing.

But 100% of workers have a right to feel safe and not have their health compromised at work.

This doesn't automatically rule out a pet-friendly policy, but it does require exploring and addressing all these issues adequately.

Equity matters

Does everyone get to bring their pet to work?

If the boss can because they have a separate office but those sharing a open-plan space can't, it's likely to cause resentment.

The time spent petting, feeding or taking a dog for toilet breaks may also stoke [negative feelings](#) among some colleagues.

What about those with other types of pets? Some cats also suffer [separation anxiety](#). Parrots (budgerigars, cockatiels, conures and others) also [form strong attachments to humans](#) and can become highly stressed when left alone.

Getting to work is also an equity issue. In many countries a pet-friendly workplace will require driving to work, because only registered assistance animals are allowed on public transport and in [public spaces](#). It's unfair if the only workers able to take advantage of a pet-friendly workplaces are those who can drive.

What's in it for the dog?

Even though [most dog owners](#) want to take their dog to work, it's very important to ask if that really is in your pet's best interest.

Yes, dogs are a highly social species; and yes, your dog likes to be around you. But, like humans, not every dog is a people person. For some dogs [home is their safe space](#). Even with their "human" they may

be stressed away from it.

Dogs, being sensitive to human emotions, may well feel stressed by your workplace if it also stresses you.

Other animal issues to consider include the presence of [other dogs](#).

Organizational factors

A [workplace](#) therefore needs to consider multiple factors to make a pet-friendly policy work.

It needs to ensure the feelings of all workers have been considered, and whether the policy favors some at the expense of others.

It needs to ensure the work space is suitable for both human and animal well-being and hygiene. Though dogs' space needs vary enormously, even the smallest dog needs space out of walkways and kick zones—being under a desk is not really suitable—as well as ready access to water bowls and outdoor toileting areas.

It needs policies codifying expected standards of behavior—both human and animal. This may include requiring proof of proper socialization, such as a certificate of basic obedience.

It needs procedures mapping out all contingencies. Owners should be responsible for cleaning up after their [dogs](#) and ensuring they do not cause disruption. But whose insurance will cover potential animal or human injuries, or damage to property? Do workers' compensation policies cover animal-related incidents?

How to make pet-friendly work

It may seem we're focusing on barriers to workplaces being dog-friendly. But assessing and addressing all the risks makes the likelihood of success much greater.

A useful document to help work through all the issues is the [Pets at Work Toolkit](#) (funded by pet food maker Mars Petcare) which covers things from making a case to [senior management](#) to how to [create a workplace pet policy](#).

Another useful document is the [Safe Animal Friendly Environments multi-species companion-animal risk management tool](#) developed in 2021 by University of South Australia researchers for the U.K.'s [Society for Companion Animal Studies](#).

Though designed specifically to promote people entering aged care to keep their pets, this document includes a comprehensive list of risks, responsibilities and mitigation actions.

So if taking your dog to work appeals to you, chat to your colleagues, identify the issues and put a policy in place.

It may prove to be a great thing for your colleagues, you and most of all your dog.

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