



Barking mad: Can office dogs reduce stress?

Study: Dogs also appear to be 'communication energizers'

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LONDON (CNN) -

If you are wondering how to improve morale, encourage collaboration and limit stress in your workplace -- without spending too much money -- maybe you should consider getting an office dog.

At an architecture practice in East London, director Vivian Chan believes Tiger, a long-haired Jack Russell, is good for morale.

"Architecture is quite stressful, so having a dog around is very therapeutic," she says. "After we have a phone call with a difficult contractor, for instance, sometimes we just talk to Tiger about it. You can't really be all that serious when Tiger is jumping between chairs."

Far from interfering with the company's appearance of professionalism, Tiger appears to be a useful marketing tool. "When we have meetings with clients, he falls asleep on their shoes," Chan says. "Some clients talk to me while they're stroking him. Some even bring treats for him."

Next door, at a web and app development company, a four-year-old border collie accompanies his owner to work every day.

Project manager Imke Siefkes says Rabobi (which means "Spiderman" in South Africa's Xhosa language) doesn't cause any problems. He walks himself around a nearby park when employees go outside to smoke, responds to commands spoken in English, German and Polish, and has even managed to win over employees who suffer allergies and a fear of dogs.

"At first she found it a bit hard," Siefkes says of a dog-phobic colleague. "She was cool about it, though, and now she really likes it."

Siefkes believes Rabobi also has a de-stressing effect on the office environment, but not "at an instant level."

"It's not like, 'Where's the dog? Let's stroke him'," she says, "but his presence is pretty calming. He's friendly and he creates a friendly atmosphere."

"Sometimes we go to the pub after work and everybody knows him -- it's nice. When we go out together, he's always circling around us, making sure everybody's there."

According to a preliminary investigation published in March in the *International Journal of Workplace Health Management* by researchers at Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Business, employees who bring their dog to the office can cap the amount of stress experienced during the day, and improve job satisfaction for all.

Randolph Barker, a dog-loving management professor, monitored the stress levels of employees at a retailing and manufacturing business with a 14-year history of allowing dogs in the workplace.

On any given day, the firm would have 20 to 30 dogs and 450 to 550 employees working across a facility about the length of five to seven football fields, Barker says.

A sample of 76 employees were studied -- some brought their dogs to work, some didn't, and some didn't own dogs. The study found that while everyone started the day with low baseline levels of the stress hormone cortisol, those who didn't bring their dogs to work reported drastically higher levels of stress by the end of the working day.

Those who had their dogs with them had low levels of stress throughout the day, and about half of that group felt that dogs were important to their productivity. Of the two groups without dogs, 80% felt that the dogs in the workplace had no negative effect on productivity.

The study's participants all rated the company higher than the industry mean for job satisfaction and perceived organizational support. Barker also noted that the dogs appeared to be "communication energizers," sparking conversations amongst employees, and increasing engagement.

"We think dogs' presence in the workplace may reduce stress for their owners, increase job satisfaction even for those without pets, and it may increase perceptions of organizational support," says Barker. "It's a low-cost wellness intervention, or benefit, that's available readily to any organization."

Dogs have long been deployed for their therapeutic value in rest homes, hospices, shelters, funeral parlors and disaster zones. And in the United States they are permitted in court to help calm witnesses giving potentially traumatizing testimony.

There could be a chemical explanation for this effect. Researchers have discovered that interaction between dogs and their owners, even if it's just exchanging glances, can increase levels of oxytocin, the "feelgood" hormone thought to bond breastfeeding mothers and their babies.

It's also possible that having an office dog could engender a pack mentality in employees.

In 2010, psychologists at Central Michigan University ran tandem experiments to find out what impact the presence of a dog could have on team work. Paired groups were given a collaborative exercise that involved generating ideas and then reaching a consensus on which one was best.

Another set of groups were asked to run the prisoner's dilemma, a puzzle that gauges cooperation by asking participants to decide whether to "snitch" on their conspirators in a hypothetical crime.

The research team found that those who had a dog in the room in the first experiment rated their colleagues higher in

terms of trust, team cohesion and intimacy, and in the other experiment, those with a dog around were 30% less likely to snitch.

Although they may seem the preserve of small companies with manageable logistics, dogs are welcomed at some large companies too, including Google (a self-declared "dog company") and Amazon (where company policy requires them to be on a leash).

Pet Sitter's International, which runs an annual Take Your Dog To Work Day to promote pet adoption, recommends employers check with their landlords and insurers before allowing dogs in the workplace, enforce a zero-tolerance policy toward aggression, and designate dog-free areas for employees who don't enjoy canine interaction so much.

Its sample policy stipulates that dogs must be clean, disease-free and vaccinated, as well as toilet-trained. They may attend meetings, but only "if they are quiet and do not distract participants."

But Barker suggests that dogs may be preferable meeting participants than some colleagues. "They don't judge us," he says, "and when no one else will listen to you, your dog will listen to you."

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