

How to Ease Return to Work for Employees with Pets

By Kylie Ora Lobell

August 11, 2021

Throughout the pandemic, pets played a key role for many remote employees. This became evident as dogs, cats and other creatures were featured stars on workday Zoom calls. But now that many workers are starting to return to physical workplaces, what happens to pets that have become used to having owners around most of the day?

"A lot of people, including some of my employees, have adopted pets in the span of more than 12 months," said Sherry Morgan, HR manager at Petsolino, a West Virginia-based website with 50 employees. "As we have shifted to a work-from-home setup, they've been with their pets 24/7 from the beginning, so they'll definitely feel anxious and worried" as they return to the office.

A recent survey from Paw.com found that among more than 1,000 respondents, 82 percent would bring their pet to the workplace if they could. Of those, 61 percent would do so for companionship or stress relief or to overcome separation anxiety. Additionally, 12 percent are considering quitting their job in favor of finding a more pet-friendly workplace.

SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Return to Work (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/Return-to-Work.aspx)

Pets of all kinds have provided workers with emotional support during the pandemic. "It's like their pillar of hope during these trying times," Morgan said. "I myself am a fur mom, and that's exactly how I feel."

Before you bring employees back into a physical workplace setting, it's important to consider their needs in relation to their furry friends. Here are three steps you can take to ease the transition and make the adjustment simpler for everyone involved.

1. Give Advance Notice of Changes

It's important to provide employees with plenty of notice before resuming in-person operations so they can figure out how to accommodate their pets, said Stella Kwon, director at Pumpkin Pet Insurance in New York City. She expects that returning to the office will be a complex transition for her 61 employees regardless of whether or not someone is a pet parent.

"We have colleagues at all life stages, and it's important for us to create inclusive policies that will support our employees while driving the business forward," Kwon said. "Clear communication and ample notice before a large policy change, like returning to the office, has been key. By giving advance notice, it provides our employees the time and headspace to put together a plan that works for their unique situation."

Informing staff of a physical workplace reopening at least six weeks in advance "will allow them to design a pet schedule that corresponds to [their] working hours," agreed Daniela Sawyer, HR director at FindPeopleFast.net in San Mateo, Calif. "Pets can be prepared by practicing the new routine ahead of time—for example, [by] gradually increasing the length of time pets are left alone, [implementing] changes in food schedules or leaving the pets with a pet care center. This will benefit both the pets and the employees."

2. Allow Employees to Bring Pets to Work

If your office is equipped for it, you could consider allowing employees to bring their pets to the workplace. As a website for pet owners, Petsolino has a vested interest in allowing employees to do just that, but only if they're also getting their work done.

"[I feel] like they will be more motivated and productive knowing that they don't need to worry about leaving their pets behind [and] alone in the house," Morgan said. "This benefit will not only help the company get moving, but it will keep our employees from worrying too much. Hence, [they] will focus more on their work."

At Spycic, a software monitoring firm in Washington, D.C., each employee can bring a maximum of two pets to work each Tuesday and Friday, said Katherine Brown, chief human resource officer. The firm also offers a dedicated pet nursery whenever employees aren't available to watch their pets, which comes in handy during meetings, she said.

To help this policy work effectively, Brown said her firm requires that all pets brought into the office must be fully vaccinated, house trained, and friendly with other pets and people.

"We chose to be pet-friendly because pets provide stimulation, support and socialization throughout the workday, which contributes to a healthier and more collaborative workplace," Brown said.

3. Offer Specific Pet Owner Benefits

During the pandemic, the ASPCA reported that 23 million U.S. households adopted a new pet. Considering that many first-time pet owners are frantic when a pet becomes ill, FindPeopleFast.net decided to provide paid time off in the event of a pet's illness or hospital visit. Employees simply have to present a doctor's note, Sawyer said.

Additionally, once a year "we give free medical checkups and vaccinations for our employees' pets," Sawyer added. "We also made arrangements with a pet insurance firm to assist our employees with the tangle of paperwork and other details."

Paid pet leave is also a popular benefit at Petsolino. Newly adopted pets need time "to adjust to their new environment, hence they need extra care from their 'pawrents,'" Morgan said. "For example, puppy leave includes not just from adoption day, which is a seven-day leave, but our employees can also take carer's leave when their pet is unwell, [which is an additional] three days."

To be sure, employees can become anxious about many aspects of returning to a physical workplace, but leaving their pets behind may be at the top of the list, Brown said.

"When human interactions were minimal at the peak of the pandemic, pets became a vital part of most workers' lives, especially those who worked from home," she said. "For some employees, pets have become necessary emotional support animals for better mental health."

As a result, she advised that employers need to be sensitive to their employees' needs and work with them on pet policies that will benefit both the worker and the company.

"Pets provide companionship [and] emotional support and encourage physical activity through daily walks or active play at home," Kwon said. "Pets are more than just cute animals to come home to. They're family."

HR DAILY NEWSLETTER

News, trends and analysis, as well as breaking news alerts, to help HR professionals do their jobs better each business day.

CONTACT US (WWW.SHRM.ORG/ABOUT-SHRM/PAGES/CONTACT-US.ASPX) | 800.283.SHRM (7476)

© 2021 SHRM. All Rights Reserved

SHRM provides content as a service to its readers and members. It does not offer legal advice, and cannot guarantee the accuracy or suitability of its content for a particular purpose.

[Disclaimer \(www.shrm.org/about-shrm/Pages/Terms-of-Use.aspx#Disclaimer\)](http://www.shrm.org/about-shrm/Pages/Terms-of-Use.aspx#Disclaimer)

Feedback