



Easing Stress with Office Pets

Things go better when the office goes to the dogs

by Jamie B. Gates

Some people work like a dog, and have the stress levels to prove it. Others take their pets to work, and suddenly working like a dog doesn't seem so bad.

According to a recent study by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, one in five American firms allows employees to bring their pets to work (cubicles for Fido?). Businesses with pet-friendly policies say it improves the atmosphere for all employees, especially at companies where people work long hours or sit at a computer all day. With pets on the premises, employees are encouraged to take a break once in awhile to play with one of the office dogs. It's a stress reliever and morale-booster for everyone. The study found:

- Seventy-three percent of the companies said pets create a more productive work environment.
- Twenty-seven percent reported a decrease in employee absenteeism.
- Seventy-three percent indicated pets led to a more productive environment.
- Ninety-six percent said pets created positive work relations.
- Fifty-eight percent of employees stayed late with pets in the office.

Fort Myers psychiatrist Jitka Vasek reports mixed results in studies exploring the relationship between stress and pets at work. "While there are innumerable articles in the lay literature about the benefits of pets in the workplace, there are no well-designed controlled studies that have been performed," he says. "The few articles available that investigate the effects of animals on human health, not necessarily in the office, vary widely in their findings. It seems somewhat contro-

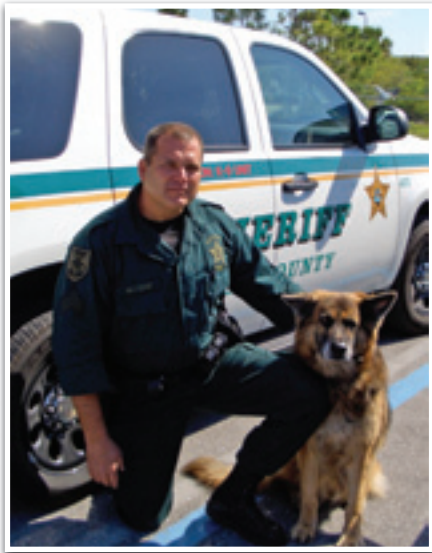
versial, although the adoption of animal therapy by major medical facilities seems to validate the proponent theories."

Dr. Vasek cites the findings of an exploratory study examining the perceived functions and psychological and organizational effects of pets in the workplace. Participants included 193 employees from thirty-one companies allowing pets in the workplace who completed anonymous questionnaires. Results indicated that participants perceived pets in



Sammy (center) joins lunch with *Times of the Islands* magazine's Maria Dispenza (left) and Lauren Davies (right).

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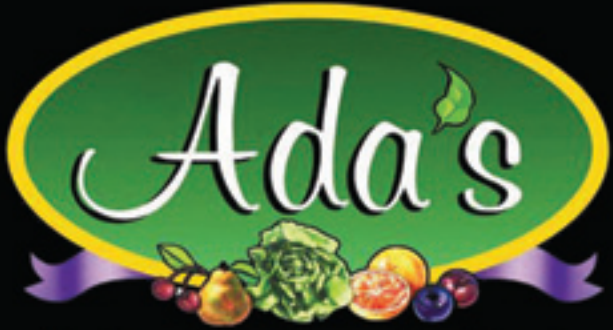
Sergeant Frank Glover and partner Taro, of the Lee County Sheriff's Office.

the workplace to reduce stress and to positively affect employee health and the organization. Participants who brought their pets to work felt they received greater benefit than those who did not bring their pets to work or did not own pets.

Various pet therapy programs exist, including The Pawprint Dog Visitation Program at Children's Hospital in Boston, Paws for love at Hebrew Rehabilitation Center, and other sites such as nursing homes and psychiatric inpatient or outpatient settings. It has been clinically proven that petting, touching, and talking with animals helps lower blood pressure and ease depression.

"Dopamine and endorphins cause a sensation of pleasure," says Dr. Vasek, explaining the relationship of neurotransmitters in the brain. "Stress causes a release of dopamine and cortisol. Decreasing cortisol and increasing dopamine and serotonin will decrease stress." Of course there are instances where pets could cause the opposite effect, according to Dr. Vasek. A person with allergies, for example, would most definitely experience an increase in stress levels if exposure to an animal at work resulted in sneezing and hives.

Few people have more stressful jobs than police officers, many of whom spend their day in an office on wheels. Those in the Canine Unit are luckier than most. Once a police dog is assigned



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Guests at *Times of the Islands* magazine are always greeted by furry staff members: Sammy, Tyra, and Bijou.

to a handler, the two remain together, at home and at work.

Sergeant Frank Glover, Training Sergeant with the Canine Unit of the Lee County Sheriff's Office, has worked with police dogs for eight years and claims they reduce stress. "Dogs offer companionship, as well as serve as a partner," says Glover. "[Officers] carry on conversations with their dogs, especially on long nights."

Visitors to the offices of Fort Myers-

based Insight Strategies, a tourism-focused brand marketing company, are greeted by American Eskimo Sophie, Yorkshire Terriers Elliott and Barkley, and Long-Haired Chihuahua Cheyenne. Owners Marianne Cushing and Kimberly Powers have been bringing their dogs to work for years. It is a friendly office, and the canine welcoming committee adds to the atmosphere.

"The dogs ease stress by forcing breaks. Walking the dogs gives me an



Kimberly Powers and Marianne Cushing of Insight Strategies with Sophie, Barkley, Cheyenne, and Elliott.



opportunity for relaxed creative time,” says Powers, who is often overwhelmed with scheduled obligations. “There’s no posturing when Elliott is walking across the conference table!”

According to Cushing, “We started our business as both professionals and mothers not wanting to sacrifice our families.” Or pets. She describes how having dogs in the office adds warmth and spontaneity to the day. “Dogs don’t have good timing and will do something that reminds you not to take your day too seriously.”

Sophie has been known to interrupt a critical conference call with an obnoxious squeaky toy, which helps break down the stiff and often stressful walls of corporate life. “It helps that we’re in a creative field. People expect us to be a little quirky and unusual,” says Cushing.

Insight Strategies recently won a bronze and two gold awards at the Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International’s Adrian Awards in New York City, selected from over one hundred and thirty entries from thirty-five countries. Possibly one secret of their success is stress relief provided by dogs in the office that has allowed them to relax, amp up the creativity, and produce award-winning products. 🐾

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