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Good Counsel

A Dog-Friendly Law Office

By Robert K. Jenner

When *Trial* invited me to write a Good Counsel column, I mulled over decades of legal experience as I considered a topic. Discovery? Experts? Tech strategies for the small law office? Unable to settle on one, the sight of my canine companions Callie and Zoom brought clarity. Our dog-friendly law office is a defining joy of our practice and emblematic of a firm culture we want to set for our employees and our clients.

Law firms continuously seek innovative ways to enhance workplace morale, foster strong relationships with clients, and attract top talent. It may seem unconventional to allow employees to bring their pups to work, but it offers benefits that can significantly improve the office atmosphere and overall productivity. Here are some key advantages of a dog-friendly law office.

Stress reduction. Plaintiff law firms can be a hotbed of stress, characterized by long hours and the pressures of a contingency fee practice. The presence of dogs in the office can offer a much-needed respite. Studies have shown that interacting with pets can lower stress and blood pressure, reduce feelings of loneliness, boost mood, and increase feelings of social support.[1] This can lead to a more relaxed and harmonious workplace, with the end result of better mental health.

Increased productivity and creativity. While it may seem counterintuitive, allowing dogs in the office can boost productivity and creativity. Taking a few minutes to pet a dog or go for a quick walk gives employees a mental break—they'll return to their tasks with a fresh perspective and renewed focus. Studies have shown that these brief moments of disengagement from work can foster creative problem-solving and more efficient work strategies.[2]

Attracting and retaining talent. A dog-friendly policy can be a significant draw for prospective employees and can play a crucial role in retention efforts. For many, the ability to take a dog to work is an invaluable benefit that can tip the balance in favor of a particular employer. This policy demonstrates a firm's commitment to a supportive and flexible work environment, making it an attractive place to work for dog owners and animal lovers alike.

Therapeutic effects for clients. Petting a dog can soothe clients and distract them from intrusive thoughts. If you have clients dealing with anxiety or past traumas—such as survivors of sexual abuse—the calming presence of a dog can create a sense of safety and nonjudgmental support that may not be communicated through human interaction alone.[3]

For abuse survivors—who often experience heightened feelings of vulnerability and mistrust—a dog's unconditional acceptance can facilitate more comfortable communication with their lawyer. Moreover, the presence of a dog can help humanize lawyers, breaking down the anxiety that can come with walking into a law firm—especially for the first time. A dog's empathetic nature can help you develop and enhance an alliance with your clients.

Things to consider. While the benefits of a dog-friendly law office are clear, people have varying responses to animals, so the presence of pets may not suit everyone. And not all dogs fit well in an office environment, particularly those who are triggered by strangers and delivery people. For these reasons, it's important to have specific policies in place to ensure the well-being of both the pups and the people around them. A comprehensive policy should outline behavioral expectations and include being well-trained, non-aggressive, and housebroken. It should also address the needs of employees who may be allergic to or uncomfortable around animals.

Have a procedure for addressing any issues that arise, including the steps to be taken if a dog becomes disruptive or behaves inappropriately. Having these policies in place not only sets clear expectations for all employees but also safeguards the firm from potential liability. Ensure these policies are well-communicated and agreed on before pets come to the office to help maintain a "pawsitive" working environment for everyone.

Notes

1. U.S. Dep't of Health & Hum. Servs., *The Power of Pets: Health Benefits in Human-Animal Interactions*, NIH News in Health, Feb. 2018, https://tinyurl.com/fausb5x3.
2. Zhanna Lyubykh & Duygu Biricik Gulseren, *How to Take Better Breaks at Work, According to Research*, Harvard Bus. Rev., May 31, 2023, https://hbr.org/2023/05/how-to-take-better-breaks-at-work-according-to-research.
3. Kirsti Marohn, *Court Dog Nova Helps Ease Victims' Trauma*, MPR News, Sept. 7, 2023, https://www.mprnews.org/story/2023/09/07/court-dog-nova-helps-ease-victims-trauma.

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