

Sick as a dog? Nope, it's the dog that's sick

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Daria Weiss has just returned to the office after working from home for a month as she cared for a family member who had major surgery on both hips.

When Ms. Weiss wanted to check on the convalescent, all she had to do was look to the floor - and make sure her patient was not licking her sutures.

Not licking her sutures? That's right, for Penny is a nine-year-old German shepherd, one of two dogs Ms. Weiss calls "my kids."

In seeing her pets as family members, Ms. Weiss is certainly not alone. What is more unusual is having her Winnipeg employer, F. H. Black and Co., treat them as such.

When her dog went in for surgery, for example, Ms. Weiss didn't have to make up any white lies about why she had to be off work.

And when she learned about Penny's long recovery time and post-op care, "I felt completely comfortable simply asking if I could work from home so I could look after her," says the manager of caseware services at the certified management accounting and consulting firm.

In large part, this is due to the very pro-dog culture at F.H. Black, where four-legged friends often accompany their owners to the office.

"The issue is, we have a very busy practice, and it takes time to attend to an animal's health," says managing partner Harry Black, who brings his miniature schnauzer to work.

He's aware that making allowances for employees to take time out of the office to care for their pets is treading new ground, but, he adds, "it's been very successful so far."

It may be new ground in Canada, but not in other places.

In Britain, for example, you no longer have to be sick as a dog to stay off work - you just have to have a sick dog. That's thanks to a growing number of companies that have brought in "peternity" policies, which allow employees to take time off to care for their pets.

Britain's Royal Mail, Halifax Bank and the Bank of Scotland are among companies granting peternity leave.

While not formalized, "staff can take time off, as long as their position is covered," says Bank of Scotland media relations officer Zoe Redhead who herself e-mailed her boss one evening to take off the next morning to take her cat to the vet. "I just made up the time on my own."

Taking it one step further is Courier Service. Co-owner Mark Oliver says the London-based delivery company not only allows its employees and independent owner-drivers to take time off to deal with sick pets, it will pay them. And if a pet dies, the company will deem a few days off as compassionate leave.

"So many people are living on their own with pets these days and, to be a good employer, you have to understand the needs of your employees."

There are a number of good arguments for pro-pet policies, says Toronto psychotherapist **Shiri Joshua**. The most obvious: They make official what goes on unofficially anyway.

A recent study by British insurer PetPlan found that 35 per cent of its customers admitted to taking time off work to care for sick pets or settle in new ones. Half said they took off a whole week a year.

The numbers are even higher for pet bereavement, according to another survey by British insurer, Direct Line. It found that one in four people in Britain whose pet had died were too upset to go to work. But, rather than admit what was going on, more than 10 per cent who stayed home told their boss they were ill. It also found that workers took an average of eight days a year off to grieve the death of a pet.

"We need to normalize pet bereavement, and the grief that goes along with it," Ms. Joshua says.

Indeed, employees worried about or grieving over their pets are bound to be less productive and in the same emotional state as someone coping with a human loss, Ms. Joshua says. "I wouldn't want my employees to show up in that state of bereavement."

With companies increasingly trying to find ways to attract and retain good employees, a pro-pet policy would seem to be a low-cost benefit with high potential rewards, says Kevin Aselstine, managing principal for Towers Perrin. "It's the sort of thing that is good for engagement and morale."

Though institutionalized pet bereavement and sick day policies are "a little bit out there in terms of where we are today, you can see it having a positive impact."

Debb Bertazzon, a counsellor with the Blue Hills Child and Family Centre in Aurora, Ont., was certainly appreciative of the support she received when she had to put her cat down.

She sent an e-mail saying she wouldn't be coming in. Her understanding bosses told her to take as much time off as she needed. And when she did return to work, Ms. Bertazzon was told, "we know what kind of shape you're in, and, if you have to, just leave."

It's not just time off that matters. When Dorothy Puddester's 13-year-old cat, Cleo, died recently in her arms, "I was totally devastated."

Surprised by the strength of her reaction, she says it was a great help that workmates not only didn't make light of her loss but let her talk about it.

Ms. Bertazzon was also surprised but warmed by the positive response she received from colleagues. If she had had to show up at work when her pet was sick, "I wouldn't have functioned very well."

And when she did go in, being able to be honest about what had happened was a great help. "Just having that permission to feel what I needed to feel freed me to express it so I could then focus on my work."

Still, Ms. Puddester recognizes that the office is a "place for business" and that, in many work environments, the kind of talk she had over her pet would have people "thinking that you're loopy."

Mr. Black, however, believes that acknowledging the importance of pets in peoples' lives and accommodating issues about them in the workplace should be no different than how other personal needs are treated. "It doesn't really matter what the issue is."

Pet policies

Here are some suggestions from the experts on dealing with people and their pets:

Employers

Be aware: Just as you would ask after an employee's family, occasionally bring up pets.

Be flexible: Try to find ways to accommodate an employee who needs to deal with a pet's illness. Otherwise, risk the employee coming up with a ruse to get away or being too distracted to be of much use.

Make allowances: Cut some slack on the performance of an employee whose pet is sick or has died.

Encourage communication: Create an atmosphere that allows an employee to talk freely about a pet's illness or death.

Employees

Communicate: Let your manager and colleagues know you have a pet. Their reactions and interest may also help you gauge how amenable they'd be if you needed to take time off to care for pets.

Be proactive: Help your employer be able to accommodate your need for time off. For instance, make arrangements for how others will cover you off.

Consider other ways to work: Investigate your employer's policy on telecommuting. Working from home may be a good compromise to be able to care for a sick pet or overcome grief about one that has died.

Let it out: Take advantage of support colleagues may offer. Talking about your loss may help your grieving and clue fellow workers into your state of mind, which may help your ability to work.

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