

Is Your Workplace Going to the Dogs? Managing Pet Friendly Policies

by Christina M. Michelson on August 26, 2013

Companies are increasingly adopting pet-friendly policies as a way to attract and retain employees. Employers that now accept pets include Google, Amazon and even Congress.

Overall, approximately three percent of workers in the United States are permitted to take their dogs to work. While the figure may seem low, it represents a three-fold increase over just five years ago.

For employers, allowing dogs in the workplace has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, pet-friendly policies can reduce employee stress, boost morale and help workers strike a work-life balance. On the other hand, dogs can be a distraction and even a liability without the proper rules in place.

One of the most important issues is that not everyone loves man's best friend. Some employees may suffer severe animal allergies, while others may have a real phobia.

To maintain a positive working environment for everyone, employers should restrict pets to certain areas of the office rather than letting them roam free. If an employee does raise a concern, it is important to take it seriously and follow procedures under the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) to assess whether further accommodation is necessary.

Employers also do not want the office to literally become a zoo. It is important to establish rules for how many animals are permitted in the workplace. If a large number of employees show interest in bringing their dogs to work, the employer may have to establish a set schedule. In addition, even the best-behaved dogs can get into trouble. Therefore, employers should have a policy for dealing with pet damage, such as stained carpets or chewed wires.

Finally, companies can also face liability if an animal bites another employee, client or delivery person. To avoid personal injury claims, employers should require pets to be on a leash at all times or confined to an office or cubicle. Employers should also review their insurance policies to determine if coverage exists for dog bites or other related claims. If not, companies may consider asking employees to obtain their own insurance or sign an indemnification agreement.

If you have any questions about dog-friendly workplace policies or would like to discuss the legal issues involved, please contact me, Christina Michelson, or the Scarinci Hollenbeck attorney with whom you work.