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 THE NATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT
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Canadian HR Reporter
 May 23, 2011

Home Depot bans pets in stores after dog attack

Pet-friendly workplaces should be backed by policy: Experts

By Amanda Silliker

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Anne Riel was working at an Ottawa-area Home Depot in late April when a customer came into the store with her Shih Tzu in her shopping cart. Riel greeted the customer and bent down to pet the dog when it jumped up and bit her nose. She was taken to the hospital for emergency surgery where doctors stitched the skin together over the tip of her nose and reattached her left nostril.

In light of the incident, Home Depot has banned all pets — except certified assistance dogs — in its 180 stores across Canada, as of May 16.

“I am a pet-lover myself and many of us are and, yes, we love seeing Fido in the store, it makes us all happy, but we’re putting the safety of everyone as the top priority,” said Tiziana Baccega, manager of public relations and external affairs at Home Depot.

While this situation took place in a customer service environment, it could have occurred anywhere — including an organization where employees are permitted to bring their pets to work. So employers need to weigh the pros and cons of such a policy.

In the United States, 17 per cent of workplaces are pet-friendly, according to a survey of 1,000 working adults in 2008 by the American Pet Products Manufacturers.

“A lot of employers are looking for ways to increase employee satisfaction and this would be a low-cost way to do that,” said Colleen Alexander, principal consultant at Colleen Alexander HR Management in Bedford, N.S. “And there is some evidence to show it can lead to higher productivity and morale.”

Forty-nine per cent of dog owners would switch jobs to work at a pet-friendly organization, according to a 2006 survey by Simply Hired of 150 dog owners in the U.S. Sixty-six per cent of respondents said they would work longer hours and 32 per cent said they would take a five-per-cent salary reduction.

“When you think about recruiting in a competitive market, companies can actually attract top talent through a pet-friendly approach to the workplace,” said Alexander. “Pets have also been associated with lowering stress, anxiety and improving overall emotional and physical health.”

Employees at Softchoice, an IT solutions provider in Toronto, are greeted every morning by a bullmastiff named Lebowski. His owner and co-workers grab their morning coffee and gather around to pet him and chat to one another.

“Dogs are a social lubricant of sorts — they’re a great way to meet other employees,” said Eric Gardiner, manager of communications at Softchoice, which has 950 employees across Canada. “They kind of break the ice and that’s great because people want to know who they’re working with and dogs sort of enable that.”

But organizations that are considering allowing pets at work should think it through carefully and discuss it with employees to determine the level of buy-in, said Sharaf Sultan, associate at Rubin Thomlinson law firm in Toronto. Employers must consider the potential downsides, such as employees who are afraid of or allergic to dogs.

“Allergies, technically speaking, might be kind of a disability and it becomes a health issue for employees,” said Sultan. “Let’s suppose you let pets in — now you’re running up against an employee with severe allergies and are potentially

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not providing a healthy work environment.”

Before permitting pets in the workplace, an employer should discuss the idea with the building owner and its insurance company, and draft a comprehensive pets policy, said Sultan.

The policy should outline the types of animals that are permitted, the requirement to provide proof of vaccinations, any behaviour that will not be tolerated (such as excessive noise), behaviour expected of the owners (such as walking, cleaning and feeding their pets), areas where pets are not allowed (such as a designated pet-free area, washrooms, kitchens and boardrooms) and the expectation pets are there for accompaniment only and should not interfere with work, said Sultan.

An employer should also consider having a written agreement with each pet owner citing that if any damage occurs as a result of the pet, the employee would take full responsibility, said Sultan. For example, if a dog bites an employee, the employer could be liable. This indemnification may help protect the employer, he said.

“You want to build as many protections as possible into the policy because one of the things a judge would look at is, ‘What would a reasonable employer do?’” said Sultan. “One judge might say a policy is enough but another might not.”

Employers should consider allowing pets on a trial basis, such as one day per week or during Take Your Dog to Work Day in June to see how it works in the organization and if the policy meets business objectives, said Alexander.

“This is where an HR person has to really know the workforce and have good insight,” she said. “You want to link it, in some way, to the HR strategy and you should do some homework yourself to make sure it’s linked to the areas you want to focus on in the business.”





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