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The Secret Life of Pets: The Intersection of Animals and Organizational Life

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Summary

Although often overlooked, pets and other animals intersect with organizations in interesting, important ways. We seek to define how various animals intersect with organizations, highlight opportunities for theory development, and illustrate important areas for future research. We also explore how pandemics such as COVID-19 might affect the animals we highlight.

Keywords: animals, pets, human-animal interaction, COVID-19

The Secret Life of Pets: The Intersection of Animals and Organizational Life

“Maybe it’s animalness that will make the world right again: the wisdom of elephants, the enthusiasm of canines, the grace of snakes, the mildness of anteaters.” – Carol Emshwiller

As an integrated part of modern life, animals play the role of domestic companions, give physical and emotional support to humans, and provide value to many types of organizations (e.g., search and rescue dogs, zoo animals). Animals are also becoming more present in organizations due to employees and customers who bring their pets into the workplace. In addition, the integration of pets into individuals’ family lives also plays an important role in employees’ work-family dynamics. Even though animals are becoming more present in organizational life and play an influential role in employees’ lives, management research has lagged behind these social trends. Therefore, we seek to define the ways in which animals intersect with organizations, highlight opportunities for theory development, and illustrate important areas for future research. Further, as we are writing this *Incubator*, COVID-19 is currently wreaking havoc on governments, organizations, and individuals. Thus, in each section, we also mention how pandemics such as COVID-19 might affect the animals we are highlighting.

Different Ways Animals Intersect with Organizations

The way in which animals intersect with organizational life has not been well defined or well described in prior research. Given this lack of overall clarity, it is not surprising that research that deals with animals and organizations has been relatively scattered and disorganized. To provide more precision about how animals relate to organizations, we posit four types of animals that intersect with organizations: 1) animals who work alongside humans, 2) animals as the focus of organizations or employees, 3) companion animals brought into the workplace by employees or customers, and 4) employees’ companion animals that stay at home. Below, we describe each of these four categories of animals in more detail.

Animals Who Work alongside Humans

First, some animals in organizations work alongside humans. For example, certain dogs are trained to detect drugs and are used by police forces in K-9 units to assist them in their police duties. Working dogs possess various work-related expertise and are capable of signaling to humans using trained behaviors that help employees attain their goals. Some animals work on movie or television sets. Further, equines can be used for physical and emotional therapy. Animals can also be incorporated into organizations as an ancillary aspect of the organizations. For example, the offices of dentists and doctors often include fish tanks in their patient waiting areas, and previous research has shown that having a fish tank might decrease stress for patients (Buttelmann & Rompke, 2014). In addition, some hotels have dogs that greet customers, which can be a good idea since previous research has shown that petting animals can increase satisfaction and reduce stress (Wells & Perrine, 2011). While these animals are not technically employees, it is important for organizations to watch over these animals and treat them well, especially in tough times. For example, while many governments and employees are currently sheltering in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations still need to take good care of the animals who work alongside them.

Animals Who Are the Focus of Organizations or Employees

Second, some animals in organizations are the focus of the employees and the organization. Examples include organizations that use animals to entertain individuals and that facilitate human-animal interactions such as zoos and aquariums. Another example is employees and professions that focus on the preservation and well-being of animals such as wildlife biologists, veterinarians, animal groomers, and animal control employees. These specific types of professions and employees, while representing a relatively small subset of workers and organizations, have helped management scholars build theory and explore important organizational relationships. For example, previous research has studied zookeepers to better understand workplace “callings” (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Additional research has used animal shelter workers to understand workplace emotions and sensemaking amid organizational chaos (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017).

Currently, many organizations that focus on creating human-animal interactions (e.g., zoo, aquarium) or that provide animal service (e.g., pet sitters, groomers) are likely suffering considerably due to the COVID-19 pandemic because of “shelter in place” orders and social distancing measures. And, unfortunately, some veterinarians are being put in an emotionally tough situation of helping at-risk pet owners develop contingency scenarios for pets in case the owner passes away. Also, given that the virus could be found in zoo animals (Dolan, 2020), and that some pets (e.g., cats) are particularly susceptible to it (Shi et al., in press), employees who work with animals and pet owners who use animal services may be concerned with the possibility of cross-species transmission of the disease, either receiving it from or spreading it to animals. One positive aspect is that organizations and employees who focus on the preservation and well-being of wild animals are receiving a unique opportunity to better understand the impact of human actions on wildlife behaviors due to the unprecedented changes in human movement.

Companion Animals Taken into the Workplace

Third, some animals are domestic companions brought into the workplace by employees or customers. Many organizations are becoming more pet-friendly, and companion animals are often brought into workplaces by employees and customers. Taking animals into the workplace has been defined as a legitimate right written in the formal policies in some organizations (von Begen & Bressler, 2015). By accommodating pets, organizations can help facilitate positive effects for employees and customers, since many individuals have a pet they consider to be part of their family (Cohen, 2002). And some research has found that having a dog around increases the number of positive emotions a group feels and increases the number of prosocial behaviors exhibited by members of the group (Colarelli et al., 2017). Organizations such as Amazon also have dog water fountains (Wilkin et al., 2016) and other accommodations for the pets that employees bring into the workplace. As COVID-19 pushes employees to work from home, many employees are working alongside their pets for the first time. This presents a unique, natural experiment to better understand how working alongside animals affects employee work behavior

and attitudes and to better understand the pros and cons of working alongside companion animals.

Employees' Companion Animals that Stay at Home

Fourth, some animals are employees' domestic companions that remain at home. Prior research has found that pets and other animals provide important well-being outcomes for a variety of individuals, including children, the elderly, and even prisoners (Wells, 2009). As mentioned above, many individuals have companion animals, and many of these individuals with companion animals consider their pets to be family members. As the number of employees with pets increases and as pets take a more central role in the lives of employees, there is an increased need to consider how having a stay-at-home pet might affect an employee's work-related outcomes. This line of research should likely be able to draw upon the prior work-family literature. Also, it is likely, due to social distancing measures, that companion animals are even more important now for individual employees, particularly those who live alone. Previous research has shown that pets can help increase the mental health of their human owners (e.g., O'Haire, 2010). Thus, these companion animals have the potential to help individuals cope with the loneliness and anxiety that may come from not being about to go into the office to work, as well as the uncertainty and worry that comes with thinking about COVID-19. However, the human-pet connection may be weakened due to the unprecedented pandemic. As the unemployment rate is rising, employees may face economic burdens and find it hard to afford the financial cost of caring for their pets (Vincent et al., 2020).

Opportunities for Theory Building

To understand the intersection between animals and organizations, we propose several possible theoretical lenses for future research. Attachment theory and resource theories help explain how animals at work will bring beneficial effects to employees. Attachment theory could help us understand how close emotional attachment between an animal worker and a human employee could provide psychological security and advanced performance for the human employee, especially during this time of pandemic. In addition, resource theories such as

resource accumulation theory (Sieber, 1974) and conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2001) will be appropriate in further explaining employees' personal gains from working with animals or utilizing pet-friendly policies.

Signaling theory (Spence, 1973) and person-environment fit theory (Edwards et al., 1998) help explain the positive impact of organizational policies regarding pets. The pet-friendly policies such as paid leave for pets and the implementation of bringing pets to work serve as salient signals that help employees perceive the organization as being supportive of pet owners' needs. It will also signal that those within the organization are pro-animal or generally tolerant of animals. Likewise, person-environment fit theory will also be useful for exploring the beneficial effects of organizational policies regarding pets. With the persistence of pet-friendly policies, employees with the needs of pet caring may report a higher level of needs-supply fit, which has been seen as a critical predictor of job satisfaction, job performance, and intention to stay (e.g., Krumm et al., 2013). Lastly, a growing number of qualitative research that uses grounded theory can contribute to our understanding of animals in the workplace. Schabram and Maitlis (2017) used grounded theory to understand employees' different reactions to poor conditions at an animal shelter. Similarly, Bunderson and Thompson (2009) used grounded theory to explore how zookeepers looked at their job as a calling. We believe that scholars could benefit from future qualitative studies as well.

Future Research Directions

Because animals play an important role in many organizations, there are several directions that future research could explore to further our understanding. Currently, little is known about employees who work alongside animals at work. We need to consider how having animal co-workers affects employees and should explore boundary conditions to understand what types of individuals, situations, and occupations benefit most from having animals who work alongside people. In addition, future research could explore the benefits for humans working for an organization that utilizes animals and treats them well, along with the downsides of being in an animal organization that neglects its animals. And scholars would also benefit

from more research that examines how pet-friendly policies allow organizations to recruit better employees.

Importantly, little previous research has looked at some of the potential downsides of animal-friendly policies. As noted earlier, the pandemics such as COVID-19 pandemic present a compelling opportunity to better understand the consequences of employees working alongside their companion animal; having your pet with you while you work from home could increase positive affect and well-being but could also potentially be distracting. Another potential downside is that some employees' companion animals might not be compatible with other employees' companion animals. For example, because Google has explicitly stated that it is a dog-friendly company (employees are welcome to bring their dogs into work), cat owners might not feel as welcome. Further, if employees have less traditional companion animals (e.g., snake, lizard) and bring their pet to work, it might frighten other employees or make them uncomfortable. And employees might feel left out if they are required to avoid certain areas of the office due to an allergy or a fear of dogs or cats. Some animals may also be a distraction to employees or customers, while others may inadvertently cause damage to the workplace. Future research should better explore these downsides and expand on how organizations might attenuate them.

In summary, pets and other animals continue to have a large impact on organizations and employees. We hope that more research in this area will lead to more understanding, and that more understanding will allow organizations to better appreciate and benefit from animals in the workplace.

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