As you walk into your favorite bookstore, you see Max, the bookstore’s resident cat. He walks past, aloofly ignoring you, as he always does. How does Max influence your perception of the bookstore and its staff?

Researchers such as Rose Perrine of Eastern Kentucky University and I have examined these very issues. Research suggests that we form impressions of others based on their environmental contexts. People express themselves through their environments, so it is easy to make assumptions about the characteristics of others simply by observing their homes, workspaces and neighborhoods. For example, the offices of college faculty members containing art objects, plants or fish are perceived by students to be more comfortable and inviting than offices without these items. The faculty members themselves are rated as more friendly, less rushed and having more in common with the visitor when these items are present. While these impressions may or may not prove to be true, studies find that we are surprisingly accurate at guessing another person’s age, gender, social status, income and even personality just by examining that person’s environment.

So what influence would the presence of a pet have?

To answer this question, Perrine and I recruited businesses in Lexington and Richmond that allowed pets in their workplaces to participate in a study. Employees at 31 companies having a dog or cat on site completed an anonymous, confidential survey about their perceptions of the workplace animals.

The results revealed that the majority of pets at work belonged to the business owners and stayed at work only during business hours. Likewise, the owners had more contact with the workplace pets than other employees. Although most employees were very favorable toward pets in the workplace, those who brought their own pets to work were most favorable.

Most employees in the study believed that the workplace pets reduced their stress levels and positively influenced their health, job satisfaction and organizational issues such as productivity and employee morale. They also claimed that pets made the work environment more comfortable, provided a pleasant diversion from work, provided companionship and entertained customers. Some even said the pet was good for business because it created a positive impression of the company.

But again, the perceived benefits were greater among those who brought their pets to work than among those who did not bring their pets or those who did not own pets. The stress-reducing effect of bringing one’s dog to work was confirmed recently by Professor Randolph Barker of Virginia Commonwealth University. Barker studied
employees at Replacements Ltd. in North Carolina, where sometimes there are as many as 30 dogs on one day. Barker found that for most employees, stress levels rose throughout the day by as much as 70 percent. However, the stress levels of employees who brought their dogs to work fell about 11 percent.

But what is the downside? When Lexington and Richmond employees were asked about the drawbacks of pets in the workplace, most participants said there were none. However, the drawbacks most commonly cited were nuisance issues such as barking. A few participants had allergies that were aggravated by the pets or claimed that the pets were a distraction, while some commented on fur on the furniture and uncleanliness. Others said pets made the office appear unprofessional. There was also a concern among a very few that perhaps some customers might dislike or be afraid of the pet, which might cause them to take their business elsewhere.

Ultimately, the results of the Lexington and Richmond study suggested that employees in companies with workplace pets generally like and perceive benefits to having the pets at work — particularly those who brought their own pets to work. However, it is important to remember that to be eligible for the study, organizations were required to already have at least one workplace pet. Organizations without pets — perhaps some that had already tried to keep a workplace pet but had found it unsuccessful — were not included.

Now imagine that the bookstore’s resident pet is not a cat but a dog named Razor? Do you think the breed or size of an animal would influence your perception of the bookstore? A follow-up study was conducted with EKU students examining a picture of an office with a dog or cat of various breeds. The six most popular dog breeds and four types of cats were chosen. Surprisingly, the students' perceptions of the offices varied only very minimally depending on the breed of animal. The only distinction involved black, short-haired cats. Although most breeds of cats and dogs were perceived to improve moods and increase social interaction, the short-haired, black cat was not.

“Perhaps superstitions linking black cats with bad luck played a role in this finding,” said Perrine.

In conclusion, some workplaces can benefit from the addition of a pet — unless, unfortunately, it is a short-haired black cat.

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