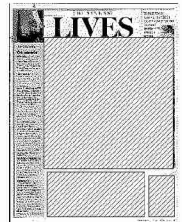


TRUE BLUE: Rachel Hitchcock is reluctant to tell supervisors that she needs to get home to take care of her dog, Beasley.

Pet benefits

Firms start to recognize four-legged family members



BY LISA FICKENSCHER

LUCKY MARLEY. THREE DAYS A WEEK, the 12-year-old, charcoal-colored standard poodle enjoys a 30-minute outing with her walker. The other two weekdays, she romps with pals at the Ritzy Canine Carriage House on East 40th Street. And when her owner travels, Marley moves in with her pet-sitter in a Fifth Avenue brownstone overlooking Central Park.

For Marley, it all adds up to the perfect life. For her owner, advertising executive Cindy Scott, it adds up to bills of more than \$200 a week.

No wonder that Ms. Scott was among the first to sign up when she learned that her employer, TBWA\Chiat\Day, had arranged for a discount with a local dog-walking service.

“Given the amount of money I spend on this dog—even her haircuts cost more than mine—every little saving helps,” says Ms. Scott, TBWA’s director of marketing strategy.

In recognition of how important animal companions are to many

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employees, a growing number of companies are adding pet-related perks to their menu of benefits.

About 1% of firms nationwide foot the bill for care arrangements when workers travel, versus virtually none just a few years ago, according to the Society for Human Resource Management.

Helping workers cope with the costs of pet care is becoming more prevalent in New York. American Express, DoubleClick and Viacom are among the nearly 60 large companies that offer reduced-rate veterinary coverage from VPI Pet Insurance. In 2000, only a handful of firms had

THE CALL OF THE NOT-SO-WILD

AFTER YEARS OF PLEADING, my 10-year-old son, Ryan, finally got his wish last year when my husband and I adopted a 4-year-old West Highland Terrier.

Having grown up with cats, I was dubious about having a dog, but **Snowball and I have bonded** in a way I never imagined. My canine-loving mother-in-law was also shocked by my conversion.

My boss might also have been surprised.

When Snowball got a nasty ear infection recently, our veterinarian had only one available opening—on a Wednesday afternoon. That meant I would need to work from home.

I don’t hesitate to tell my editor when my son is sick, but my *dog*? I felt like one of those overzealous pet owners who carry photos of their furry friends in their wallets, right next to the pictures of their significant others.

In the end, I worked from home, Snowball made a full recovery—and I’ve decided that I am one of those **sappy pet people** after all.

—LISA FICKENSCHER



Snowball and the writer.

such arrangements.

Some firms, including TBWA, News Corp., Pixar and PeopleSoft, have negotiated discounts with dog-walking services.

Furry dependents

"WE ANTICIPATE that in the future, employers will pay a portion of the cost [of pet care]," says Paul Mann, chief executive of Fetch, which offers services in 34 states. "Pets have become like kids."

Companies' newfound awareness of pets' importance to employees and their families is good news for those juggling the demands of work and pet parenthood.

Most working pet owners, though, get little help.

Rachel Hitchcock, a Manhattan-based fundraiser for the University of Pennsylvania, rushes home from work each evening to feed and play with her 3-year-old pug, Beasley. He waits for Ms. Hitchcock by the door in their Washington Heights apartment, where he spends the entire day— with the exception of a half hour with his walker from A Lucky Dog.

When Ms. Hitchcock has to travel to Philadelphia for the day and knows she will get home late, she worries about Beasley.

"I'll lean on our senior managers to say what time they think our meeting will end, though I try not to tell them why I'm asking," she says.

Most small firms don't have formal policies but are often supportive of pet owners' needs.

Deborah, a psychologist at a clinic in Manhattan who requested anonymity because of the nature of her work, found that out a year ago,

that she can spend more quality time with Marley.

"Everyone knows that she is the dog that runs my life," Ms. Scott says. "But occasionally you do get

the person who says, 'Get a life.'"

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LARGE FIRMS
now offer reduced-rate coverage for veterinary care

when her 12-year-old Akita-shepherd, Targhee, needed surgery for a tumor. She had to take a week off with short notice to give him the required round-the-clock care.

"My boss is a dog lover, so she could empathize," Deborah says.

Staggered schedules

TARGHEE IS A LUCKY POOCH in another way: Deborah and her husband, also a psychologist, coordinate their schedules so that Targhee never spends more than seven hours alone. In addition, he gets a midday stroll in the neighborhood with his walker, from Fetch.

As a result of their dog obligations, the couple rarely enjoy a night out during the week.

"We'd love to go out to dinner after work," Deborah says. "Our social activities are definitely limited."

A fortunate few have the flexibility to bring their pets to the office. Jon Paul Buchmeyer, who owns public relations firm Tentpole NY, does so at least once a month. His 4-year-old bichon frise, Frida, trots freely around the small Chelsea space, greeting his colleagues.

"Frida brightens everyone's day," Mr. Buchmeyer says.

Ms. Scott was able to do the same with Marley before she was transferred to Manhattan from Los Angeles 18 months ago. Employees there are allowed to bring well-behaved dogs into the office.

But Ms. Scott now manages to work from home most Fridays so