

Is Your Work Going to the Dogs? Or are You Taking Your Dog to Work?

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She has a “soft” look. People mention this when meeting my yellow lab mix named Sita. Her gorgeous amber eyes look right at you with a soulful expression. The fact I own this gentle spirit is no accident. I received her from Circle Tail in southern Ohio. The director, Marlys Staley, does a heroic job in training assistance dogs and partnering them with the right person. She is careful to match the owner and his/her lifestyle with the dog. I work as a therapist in a private practice with young children. Sita was actually considered for a couple of other owners, but Marlys wanted a gentle person for Sita. I am a marshmallow so Sita and I bonded immediately.

I was concerned what would happen at Northeast Ohio Behavioral Health where I work. I talked at length to the executive director there before I went to Circle Tail. Dr. Robin Tener is a dog lover herself and was supportive. She contacted the entire staff about Sita and kept everyone informed.

The key words are EDUCATION and COMMUNICATION. Sita was immediately accepted by my colleagues and the “do not pet while in vest” rule was carefully followed. Since she and I have 10 hour days, I do take her out of vest part of the day and allow her to be petted. A couple of people keep treats in their desk for her, but never give them to her without my permission. I constantly watch Sita's weight. They also understand she needs to obey a command such as picking up something, shaking a paw or shutting a drawer before getting a reward. Sita quickly became a therapeutic assistant in the office to help people feel better. It truly is in her nature. I work with abused, neglected, disabled and foster children who have unimaginable things done to them. I will never forget the day I had to break terrible news to a child. The only father he ever knew (foster) had died suddenly. Tears welled in the eyes of his adoptive parents and me as he hugged Sita and sobbed for 15 minutes. Sita was absolutely still, allowed the tears to fall in her fur and knew exactly what to do for him. Just be there.

Sita has an innate sense when people are upset. A client was sobbing uncontrollably while Sita was apparently asleep. She stood up, pranced over to the tissue box, pulled out a tissue with her teeth and gave it to the client with her mouth. She had seen me do this so many times she figured she would do it for me! We both started laughing as the client petted her and said “Sita, you made my day!”

Not everything has gone smoothly. I can't counsel anyone who is allergic to dogs. We have certain rooms at the practice Sita is not allowed in. I also had one person tell my director she was not an assistance dog, but a pet, because I am not deaf. I do very well with my hearing aids and people fail to realize how severe my loss is. My director defended me and told the complainer Sita is a hearing dog

and I shouldn't be criticized for overcoming my disability!!

I also have to protect Sita. Some of my children are autistic and fail to understand dogs have feelings too. I've had children throw things at her and had one teenager kick her. Sita is so gentle it startles her and upsets me. I have a cubby hole under my desk and she goes under there. I then sit between the client and Sita. The thoughtless clients aren't allowed to interact with her. Interestingly, the offenders often behave better after that. The teen that kicked her cried two weeks later, because Sita had a bandaged foot where she had torn a toenail. This was a breakthrough on feelings for the teen. Sita forgave her and the teen now pets her under my watchful eye.

I teach part time at a community college. My students are educated from the first class and told about assistance dogs and their training. I observed a student one day whispering to Sita (I couldn't hear but saw her lips moving). I asked her if she wanted to ruin \$10,000 worth of training. It never happened again.

Persons allergic to dogs always need to be accommodated. Students with dog allergies are assigned another instructor. We have an office for faculty, and one of my coworkers suffering from allergies asked me not to bring Sita there. She files my reports for me and I do my work at home. We are good friends, talked it out and made it work.

Again, Sita's long days have to be considered. The office staff consists of true dog lovers. I take Sita in between classes and they give her treats. She is allowed out of vest and petted and spoiled by everyone from the dean on down. She is then placed back in vest, trots off to another class with me and quietly sleeps in her “place” (blanket) throughout the class.

In summary, the five following items are key to success with your assistance dog in the workplace:

- If one is considering a dog – communicate at the workplace first
- Educate your supervisor and coworkers about assistance dogs
- Be considerate of other persons with allergies and work around these issues
- Remember to protect your dog from any potential harm
- Be sensitive and give your dog breaks throughout the day – this is a live creature not a machine

I have been very fortunate. Sita is a gem and I have supportive coworkers. With the proper education and communication, both the owner and the dog are more productive in the workplace. Best of all, Sita loves to go with me to work. Ultimately my colleagues and I are better persons for having her there.