Is the presence of a cat/dog beneficial for a creative task performance?

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Introduction: The introduction of dogs into the workplace is a noteworthy topic in Ergonomics because office dogs not only provide an enjoyable and relaxing atmosphere, but they also improve workers' performances. In fact, a few companies in Japan allow employees to bring their companion animal dogs into the workplace. However, there is little research to support this finding in the literature. Ogawa and Sakamoto (2003) conducted an experiment to assess differences on the performance of simple repetitive and creative tasks when break periods with free time, a friendly companion animal dog, and a robotic pet were given. They concluded that, in creative tasks, playing with a companion animal dog during the break period might enhance performance with less anger/stress and higher levels of concentration. Furthermore, Ogawa (2006) conducted additional experiments with three kinds of recreational activities: playing with a companion animal dog, playing with a robotic pet, and browsing through photo magazines in between the given performance tasks: a simple data input task, a simple addition task, and a creative task. The results indicated that the level and type of performance task determined whether or not work performance could be improved with the introduction of a companion animal. In a real office, Ogawa (2006) conducted an experiment in which ten (10) office workers were asked to play with a well-trained dog during their lunch break. The results indicated that compared to a typical lunch break, playing with the dog improved their mood of 'vigor' and reduced 'fatigue' and 'confusion.' Another interesting finding was reported by Takeshima and Ogawa (2011). They conducted an experiment to assess whether or not introducing a companion animal dog into the workplace could evoke workers’ social facilitation-inhibition. The results suggested that for complex tasks, a companion animal dog could produce inhibition effects; however, for more complex and difficult tasks, the presence of a familiar dog might produce facilitation effects. Therefore, these findings suggest that the presence of a dog can change mood and performance.

There seems to be no scientific studies of cats reported in the workplace. This is due to the fact that cat behavior is unpredictable and often difficult to cope with. In this study, an attempt was made to clarify the benefits and contributions of having a cat in the workplace. The objectives of this research are to assess whether workers’ creative performances can be improved by the presence of a cat, whether workers’ stress can be relieved by the presence of a cat, and to compare the effect of the presence of a cat with a dog.

Method: The experiments were carried out in a simulated office (W4.8m x D5.7m x H2.5m) with three kinds of work conditions: working alone, presence of a cat, and presence of a dog. Nine (9) female students participated in this experiment. Each participant was required to sit on a chair and perform a creative task. The creative task required each participant to duplicate a silhouette with seven geometrical puzzle pieces.
Ten (10) minutes were allotted to complete the task. The task was repeated three times. The performance was measured in terms of the number of pieces each participant completed. Also, each participant's mood state was measured by POMS (Profile of Mood States) when she entered the room, immediately before the creative task started, and after the task was completed. The cat or dog was placed in the room and allowed to roam freely.

Results and Discussions: Within the limitation of the experiments, the results of the creative performance task indicated that five out of the nine participants improved their performance by the presence of both the cat and the dog. An interesting finding is that the same participants improved their performance for both animals. However, their mood of 'vigor' was found to be significantly better only when the cat was present.

Keywords: workplace, companion animal, a creative task, and Profile of Mood States

References:

