

Working with animals could result in more compassion

National University of Singapore study suggests this can help employees work better with one another

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People who work with animals gain an unintended benefit – developing greater compassion, a local study has found.

The study from the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School suggests that this greater compassion may lead employees to work better with colleagues.

Published in the *Personnel Psychology* journal this month, the study was led by Associate Professor Sam Yam Kai Chi, who heads NUS Business School's management and organisation department.

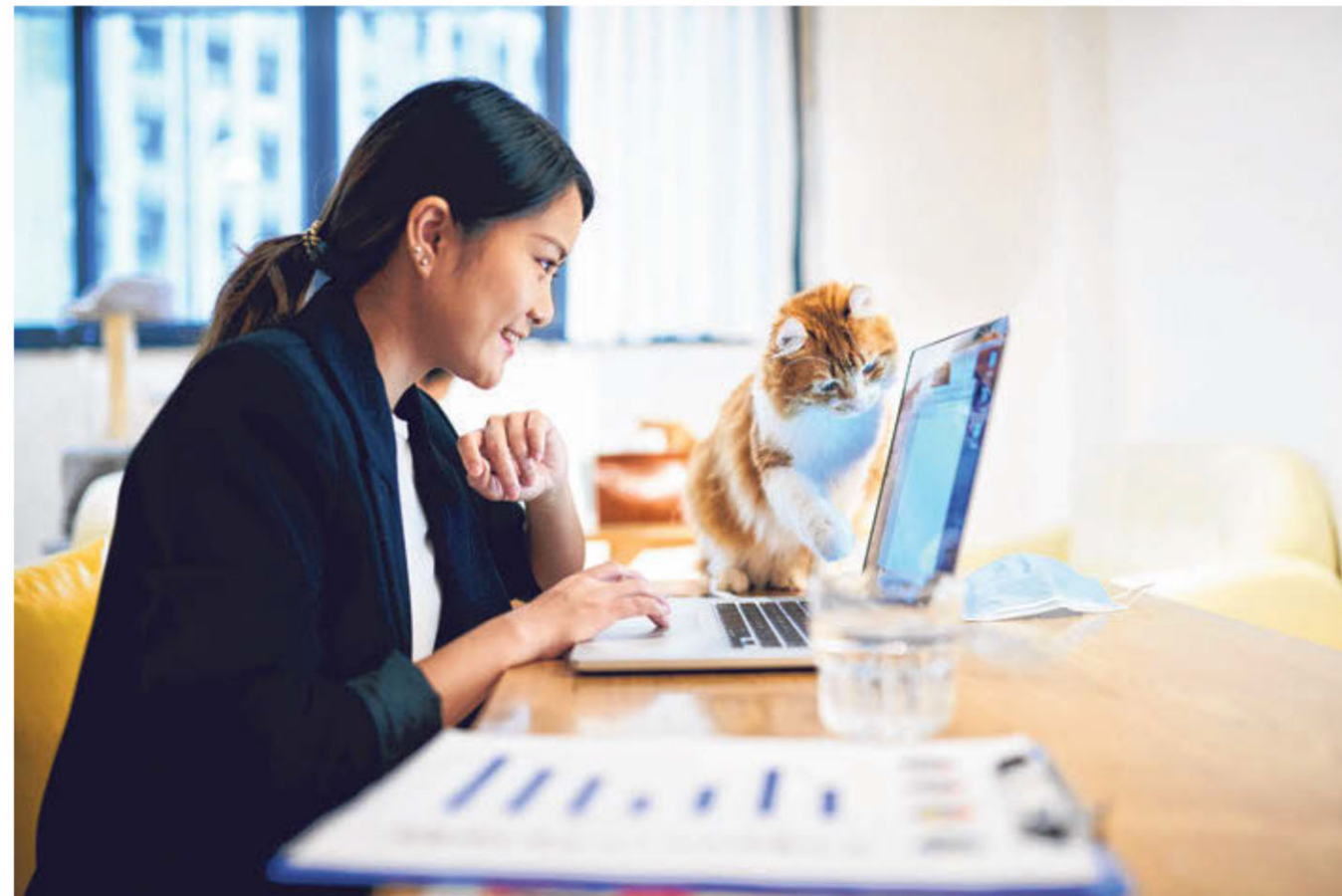
Prof Yam and his team carried out three studies: the first involved 71 zookeepers at the Singapore Zoo and looked at their emotions and pro-social behaviour towards others over two weeks in 2020.

For example, participants were asked to indicate to what extent did they experience feelings such as "I felt moved" or "I felt soft-hearted" following their interactions with animals at work.

In a press statement, NUS said the study found that the employees reported a higher level of compassion when they had greater interaction with animals. The more they perceived the animals to be able to feel and think, the stronger the impact of animal interaction on their compassion and behaviour towards others.

Says Prof Yam: "Compassion means being aware of others' suffering and having a desire to help. It is hard to spot your colleagues' struggles because humans are afraid to show their vulnerability and are surprisingly good at hiding their suffering.

"In contrast, employees who



NUS Business School Associate Professor Sam Yam Kai Chi (above), who led the study, says employees who work with animals know to look out for signs of discomfort, which can make them more pro-social towards their colleagues. PHOTOS: ISTOCKPHOTO, SAM YAM KAI CHI

work with animals are trained to constantly look out for animals' non-verbal signs of discomfort. Interestingly, this animal-induced compassion spills over to make them more pro-social towards their colleagues, such as going the extra mile to help others."

The second study, conducted last year, involved 121 workers in Hong Kong from different organisations who work with animals in providing services or entertain-

ment.

Researchers found that those tasked to write about a recent incident of working closely with animals to achieve work goals felt significantly more compassionate than the control group, who wrote about their general goals at work.

The third study, also conducted last year, surveyed 178 employees in the United States on their animal interaction and compassion levels. This study found that when

there were higher levels of working with animals, the employees developed greater compassion and pro-social behaviour too.

Prof Yam suggests that organisations can consider introducing animals to the workplace, such as in "compassion training workshops" or allowing employees to take their pets to work.

He tells *The Straits Times* that companies could have designated areas for pets, so employees who

do not enjoy the presence of animals can avoid them.

Adds the study's co-author, research assistant Carisa Lam: "While the presence of animals is unconventional in many workplaces, we believe that with the right structure and rules in place to tackle practical considerations, working with animals can be a novel way to cultivate compassion in employees."

Prof Yam notes that the study

did not focus on sectors such as the veterinary industry as vets may, for example, have to decide on more "traumatic" actions such as whether to euthanise an animal.

He adds: "But we are confident to say that across most white-collar jobs in office settings, having the presence of animals could produce positive effects in the form of compassion."

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