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COMMENTARY

Why potential is not performance: Psychological bonds as a missing link

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Hernandez and colleagues (2025) argue that nonhuman animals often perform work, and thus industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists should include animals in the I-O psychology domain. They are not alone in this call for inclusion of animals. Scholars across multiple management domains have also urged greater attention to animals in organizational life—for example, in strategy (Smart, 2022) and entrepreneurship (Thomsen et al., 2024). This growing interest also aligns with questions raised by veterinary scholars, who are looking to adjacent disciplines for theory that can advance understanding of animal labor (e.g., Arluke et al., 2022).

The I-O psychology field has much to offer animal-labor scholarship. With deep expertise in psychological bonds; individual knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs); and job performance, I-O psychologists are uniquely positioned to contribute theory that explains animal KSAOs and job performance.

This commentary contends that this expertise addresses a missing link in animal-labor research. It identifies and addresses the missing link with the I-O psychology concept of psychological bonds. Next, it presents a continuum of psychological bonds (Klein et al., 2012) and illustrates the framework with examples from animal work. These examples show how the type of psychological bond influences the extent to which animal KSAOs are activated. Finally, the commentary discusses the strategic usefulness of different bond types and explores implications for human and multispecies scholarship and practice.

A missing link: activation of animal KSAOs

This commentary identifies a missing link in animal-labor scholarship that stems from a common assumption: Animals bring unique and desirable KSAOs to the workplace, and those KSAOs will be reliably and fully expressed. Indeed, whether it is scent detection, emotional attunement, or invasive weed removal (Arluke et al., 2022), the mere presence of an animal with a targeted KSAO is often treated as sufficient to produce a desired outcome—such as finding a missing person, soothing a distressed child, or clearing weeds. The scholarship tends to conflate integration of animals into workplaces with consistent and full activation of the targeted KSAO—as if inclusion and achievement of the vital outcome are the same. Yet as I-O psychologists know all too well, the mere presence of a body—human or animal—with a particular KSAO can yield gains, losses, or no effect on the vital outcome (Ployhart, 2021).

Simply put, a missing link in animal-labor scholarship is a mechanism that differentially activates KSAOs. This commentary suggests animal-labor scholars can address this gap with a continuum of psychological bonds (Klein et al., 2012). This continuum differentiates bonds by

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psychological involvement. For example, commitment bonds have high psychological involvement, whereas instrumental and acquiescence bonds are characterized by lower psychological involvement. These variations in involvement explain why different types of bonds activate targeted KSAOs to varying degrees.

To illustrate this, consider the following examples involving dogs and elephants.

Psychological bond illustrations

Search-and-rescue dogs

Consider a search-and-rescue dog whose targeted KSAO is scent detection (Avilas-Rosa et al., 2024). Across all bond types, the dog remains a search-and-rescue coworker, but the nature of its psychological bond—with both the handler and the work—shapes if and to what extent the critical skill is activated. For example, a dog that is committed to their work and handler proactively initiates searches, persists without immediate rewards, and adapts to complex situations (Aviles-Rosa et al., 2024). This high-involvement bond fully activates the critical skill, enabling discretionary effort, essential for successful rescues in unpredictable, high-stakes settings.

In contrast, a dog that does work only in exchange for reward is characteristic of instrumental bonds. Instrumental bonds help the dog focus in chaotic settings by signaling when the dog is to engage. This can help the dog avoid overwhelm in chaotic settings such as airports and megaevents. Along related lines, a dog exhibiting behavior consistent with an acquiescence bond waits passively for commands. The dog shows little initiative in scent tracking, leaving its scent detection KSAO largely inactivated and reducing rescue effectiveness.

Patrol elephants

Consider an elephant on wildlife antipoaching patrols, with targeted KSAOs such as scent detection and spatial memory (Kuiper et al., 2021). Like the search-and-rescue dog, the elephant's role as a coworker involves both attachment to handlers and engagement with its environment. When exhibiting a commitment bond, the elephant proactively initiates patrols, adapts routes based on experience, and persistently investigates scent cues, fully activating its critical skills to enhance patrol effectiveness.

An instrumental bond supports reliable patrol behavior with consistent reinforcement, helping the elephant focus despite challenges, though KSAO activation and job performance will decline if rewards falter. Conversely, an acquiescence bond results in the elephant following commands with minimal initiative, which limits critical skill activation and reduces the likelihood of poacher detection. This multispecies perspective underscores how varying bond types shape animal contributions across different work contexts.

These dog and elephant examples show how psychological bonds influence if—and to what extent—KSAOs are activated and show when each bond type is most useful. They also highlight the variability in how psychological bonds shape animal performance, prompting a closer look at the conditions in which each bond type proves most useful.

Importantly, no psychological bond type is inherently superior; each can be advantageous or dysfunctional depending on context. Simply put, commitment bonds enable discretionary effort for complex tasks, instrumental bonds support focus in structured or chaotic settings, and acquiescence bonds promote reliability where obedience is needed. Recognizing when each bond is most useful can improve animal work design and management.

Extending the framework beyond dogs and elephants

Although the search-and-rescue dog and patrol elephant offer clear illustrations of how psychological bonds influence KSAO activation, this framework applies broadly across diverse species and roles (see Kandel et al., 2025, and Quan et al., 2024, for examples). From livestock

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managing grazing patterns to marine mammals involved in research tasks, the nature of animals' bonds with their handlers, tasks, and environments shapes their contributions in multifaceted ways. Realizing this multispecies applicability is essential to advancing scholarship and practice on animal labor.

Why this matters

This commentary highlights only one of the many ways I-O psychology could support scholarship on nonhuman workers. Far from being peripheral, such efforts position the field for relevance in a world where work increasingly spans interactions between humans, animals, and intelligent systems. Whether through frameworks for performance, theories of motivation and fit, or tools for work design, I-O psychologists are well-equipped to illuminate how labor functions—and how potential becomes performance—across diverse actors.

Perhaps, decades from now, including animals in our domain will be seen as a first step into a multispecies world of work shaped by humans, animals, and intelligent systems. Because sometimes, expanding the domain clarifies the core.

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