

Career Research Informational Interview & Report

The Field of Dog Training

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Career Research Project: Comprehensive Report

Dominant beliefs surrounding dog training are that it is a “one and done” situation, wherein your dog learns the information and never forgets it. This is incorrect, however, as dog training is a lifelong commitment to upholding the information your dog understands. The need for dog training in our society is for trainers to facilitate the method and foundations for dog owners to utilize to not only train behaviors, but also to strengthen their bond as a unit together. In this report I will present the overall outlook for a career in dog training, a review of my results gathered from an informational interview with a professional in this industry and identify both the skills I currently embody and those I need to acquire to be successful in my career.

Career Field Research: Future Outlook for Dog Trainers

As long as the general public continues to buy and own dogs, there will also always be a need for dog trainers. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, people sought companionship in dogs and puppies, but the lockdown environment was not suited to proper socialization and has thus led to a phenomenon called “COVID Puppies” that require extensive training. While the variety of information available to dog owners online is not useless, it only scratches the surface of a dog’s mental state and thus a trainer who acts as a guiding hand will always outweigh what the internet can provide in behavior modification. This is further corroborated by the National K-9 Learning Center who says, “A knowledgeable dog trainer can assist by assessing the specifics of the individual dog and situation and then provide specific options best suited to the individual dog and family,” (National K-9 Learning Center, 2023)

As reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the job outlook for animal care and service workers “is projected to grow 15 percent from 2023 to 2033, much faster than the

average for all occupations,” (*Animal Care and Service Workers*, 2024). This projected outlook reflects the increased demand seen in the years following the 2020 lockdown. What this does not take into consideration is the competition, as dog training follows two main camps for methodology, Positive Reinforcement (R+) and Balanced dog training. Because of this it is difficult to make your branding stand out from the rest when everyone is using one of two training methods. This is where an understanding of the inner workings of the dog world comes into play, as the main currency in this industry is connections with others.

Informational Interview Results: Keep Your Head Up & Establish Your Network

Shea Hughes-Gorman is a balanced dog trainer operating in Bellingham, WA who focuses on behavior modification and preparing dogs for obedience trials. He was raised in the industry due to his parents breeding and showing mini-Dachshunds, meaning he has 17 years of connections and experience at his disposal. He has been running his own business, Pawsitive Dog Training, as of 2023 after previous trainers he worked under closed their operations. Shea provided both general information and resources (such as books) and other people he would be willing to get me in contact with to broaden my network.

While I had a list of questions, many were answered naturally as the conversation progressed and I left the interview confident in my ability to succeed and energized at finding such an insightful connection in Shea and his expertise. His knowledge of the community within the dog industry is vast, and he had two important pieces of information, 1: People will test you and are not friendly from the get-go, you have to prove yourself to them to ensure you are willing to put in the effort. 2: Manage your expectations, you will likely make a lot of mistakes and fail often in the beginning, if you can persevere only then will you succeed. Shea

recommended any form of in-person certification program, such as Starmark, to really hone my skills as a trainer and push my branding above others by proving I had undertaken hands-on education.

While I was initially interested in the business side of things, the conversation with Shea leaned into the community and things the average person would not be able to pick up on, such as the culture sounding mean on the surface but able to understand that it is in good faith to help you improve, even if it is abrasive. This was especially important to hear from something openly LGBTQ+, as seeing that a community with a lot of differing opinions, is still a place I could be successful and open about my identity. Shea was blunt and upfront about the difficulties of the industry but offered to be a helping hand in getting my foot in the door and invited me to an obedience trial in Washington to talk with him further and “more in his element.”

Required Skills: The Cold Hard Truth

The biggest set of skills that are required, which I do currently have, is related to communication between people and dogs. This is precisely why I am majoring in Communication Studies to not only further my skillset but also to offer as another step-up in my perception to the public as a trainer due to having my degree (most trainers do not have one). Another important skill is patience, both with the training process with a dog and with their owner(s). The process is not linear in any situation, and people come with a variety of situations that lead them to seeking training help. The best course of action is to accept where they are and work at the best pace possible for their mental state and their dogs'. I pride myself on being able to undertake this process and not rush to the end-goal simply to get paid, but to actually enhance the relationship and understanding between dog and owner.

While I have experience with the previous skills, I am lacking in other areas required for success. Namely, my connections and lack of a certification. I am hopeful that my connection through Shea can open doors for others in the future, and it is not a process I want to try and brute force by any means. I also do not have any certification in dog training, due to both time and monetary constraints, but it is a goal, and, in the meantime, I plan to meet and (ideally) work under master trainers until I have the means to complete the 3-month certification through Starmark. I also struggle with not having thick skin, and this I believe is my weakest area. I need to make an effort to improve on this before making any huge decisions. The community is not butterflies and rainbows, and I have to prove I can handle the culture before any acceptance into the industry.

Conclusion

Due to the nature of the dog industry, information is safely guarded unless you are within the culture, which is also a difficult task in and of itself. While I left with more work I needed to do because of Shea's information, I now have a clearer picture of my plan for career success. I feel this interview has been nothing but beneficial and has opened the door with my first connection in, hopefully, a series of many in the future. It is one thing to have the idea and dream in your head, it is another to talk with a professional who has already reached where you wish to be and receive mountains of information previously unknown to you. Without this interview I would have likely floundered after graduating with my degree, lacking the information I needed to become the trainer I wish to be, and to that I will always be thankful for Shea and his kindness in being my first major connection.

Works Cited

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