



Photo courtesy of the National Dog Groomers Association of America



Careers for creature lovers

Training, grooming, sheltering, and other jobs in animal care

by Henry T. Kasper

Children often say they want to be a veterinarian when they grow up. They love pets and are fascinated with horses and wildlife, and veterinary work is the only animal career they know. But being a vet can lose its appeal when they discover that it involves surgery and treating sick animals.

Fortunately, there are many other career options if you like animals. Do you like teaching and working with people as well as pets? If so, you might want to be an animal trainer. Do you have an interest in rescuing animals? You might like to work in an animal shelter, wildlife refuge, or zoo. Or maybe you'd like to make animals comfortable and neat by starting a grooming business.

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Just thinking about animal work might make you smile. Like any career field, however, working with animals isn't always ideal. Many animal-centered jobs are dirty or physically demanding—sometimes both. Shelter workers, for example, must clean the animals' cages; dolphin trainers may need to spend hours in the water and be on call during their off-duty hours. And all animal jobs can be dangerous. Even the friendliest animal is unpredictable by nature. At some point, most people who work with animals are bitten, scratched, or kicked.

But many animal workers have a passion for what they do. Keep reading to explore some of those passions, including training animals, working in an animal shelter, and starting a pet-care business. Begin to assess your animal-career interests by learning about some animal-centered occupations and the education that they may require. Next, find out about pay and future job prospects in these careers. Finally, uncover some additional resources for exploring creature careers.

Animal trainers

Animal trainers teach animals how to get along with humans. Some trainers teach pets to obey commands and avoid problem behaviors, such as barking or biting. Other trainers teach animals to perform tricks. And some trainers teach animals to help their owners, as when a horse is trained to carry a rider or a service dog learns to use its eyes or ears for persons with disabilities.

Training would be simple if animals spoke our language, but they don't. Instead, trainers find other ways to communicate. They start by getting an animal used to human contact. The method they use depends on the animal involved, but every technique involves repetition.

Most training relies on conditioning: rewarding an animal when it performs a desired behavior. The trainer chooses a reward, a stimulus that the trainer gives an animal the moment it does something right. For example, the trainer might give a fish to a dolphin when it jumps, a biscuit to a dog when it sits, or an apple to a horse when it halts on command.

The process of training happens in small steps, often requiring months or years of work. Animals can be difficult to train. Some are stubborn, aggressive, submissive, or fearful. Each has its own attitudes and instinctual behaviors. Successful training requires patience and persistence.

In addition to their teaching duties, many trainers supervise other aspects of animal care. They might prepare an animal's food or oversee its diet. They might clean the animal's surroundings or the animal itself. Trainers often work with veterinarians by observing and describing potentially worrisome symptoms. And they communicate closely with animal owners or handlers.

The most common types of trainers are dog trainers, horse trainers, and marine mammal trainers.

Dog trainers

Without training, most dogs are hard to live with. And without the help of professional trainers, many dog owners don't know how to manage their dogs.

Dog obedience training can prevent behavioral problems and solve existing ones. Trainers teach tricks, family manners, show-ring exercises, and various skills. Some trainers teach specialized skills to search-and-rescue dogs, sled-and-carting dogs, hunting dogs, or service dogs for people with disabilities.

Most trainers say that training should be fun for the dog. Each session should be punctuated with games, praise, and petting. The dog should look forward to each session, just as it looks forward to daily exercise. And for companion dogs, every learned behavior should be useful at home. For example, a well-mannered dog sits, stays, or lies down on command; knows when to get in or out of the car; stands still when being groomed or examined by a veterinarian; walks on a leash without pulling; and comes when called.

As with all training, dog training focuses on rewarding the dog for good behavior. Often, trainers also make bad behavior impossible by controlling the dog's access to certain areas or by teaching the dog an alternative action, such as sitting when it meets a stranger to keep it from jumping up.

Dog trainers also teach the owner and the other people who live or work with the dog. Trainers must convince people to stop their bad habits, such as feeding the dog from the table, and explain the reasons behind dog behavior.

Often, dog trainers work for themselves. Others work for an obedience school, kennel, pet store, or humane society. Those who train specialty dogs work for specific types of institutions, such as police departments or disability advocacy organizations.

Getting ready. Nearly all dog trainers start by train-

ing their own dogs. Many gain professional experience by taking courses and attending workshops at vocational schools or community colleges, and some complete degrees or vocational certificates. Courses address canine behavior and health, learning theory of animals, obedience instruction, problem-solving methods, and safety. Schools also teach basic business skills.

Judging the quality of schools and dog training courses can be hard. Ask veterinarians, animal shelters, and people in dog clubs and professional dog-trainer associations for help in choosing a good educational program. Some professional associations, including those listed in the final section of this article, offer certification exams to dog trainers or offer membership to

Agility courses help dogs learn to respond to human commands.

trainers who have the required experience and education. Although formal training and certification are not always necessary, they often help trainers gain credibility.

Dog trainers also learn on the job. They work with more experienced trainers, sometimes in formal internship programs. Some participate in workshops offered by their employers.

Horse trainers

Horse trainers, also called equine trainers, teach horses to accept and respond to riders and to perform other kinds of work. Some trainers break in young horses, teaching them to tolerate a saddle and bridle and to respond to commands. Other trainers focus on correct-



Photo courtesy of U.S. Customs and Border Protection

To provide adequate exercise for the animals, racehorse trainers usually walk their horses several times every day.

ing problem behaviors or helping horses to recover from injury, trauma, or past training mistakes. Still other trainers teach specialized skills, such as racing or show jumping.

To break in a horse, trainers slowly expose the horse to people and riding equipment. Trainers try to counteract horses' natural fears and their tendency to startle, or "spook."

After the horse accepts a saddle and rider, the trainer teaches the horse to respond to voice, leg, and rein commands. Like other types of trainers, horse trainers use positive reinforcement to encourage desired behaviors. Horse trainers also use a horse's natural instincts to teach it. For example, a horse in nature avoids snakes and fast objects, so a trainer might get a horse to back up on command by rapidly flicking a rope in front of a horse's legs.

For racehorse trainers, the workday starts early. Exercise sessions often begin at 5:30 a.m.—and that's after the trainer oversees a grooming session and inspects the horses for bruises or injuries. Another session later in the day might focus on improving a horse's gait or some other skill. In the evening, the horses might be walked or taken swimming.

Horse trainers teach people as well as horses. Racehorse trainers instruct jockeys on how to handle each horse. Show-horse trainers teach owners how to manage their horses, and many trainers are also riding instructors.

Horse trainers are also managers. They develop and oversee each horse's training plan, and they supervise grooms who exercise the horses according to that plan. Trainers set specific fitness goals and keep detailed records. They meet with veterinarians, nutritionists, and stable managers.

Most trainers expect to fall off horses sometimes or to be bitten, kicked, or stomped on. Safety gear and careful observation lessen the danger.

Getting ready. Horse trainers need experience with horses and expert riding skills. Many have worked or



Photo courtesy of U.S. Department of Agriculture

volunteered in stables: cleaning stalls; feeding, washing, and brushing horses; and performing other basic horse care. Trainers usually start their professional careers as grooms, trainer assistants, or apprentice trainers. In these jobs, they do stable chores, but they may also help to train and exercise the horses. Experienced grooms or assistants might ride six to eight horses each day, exercising them according to trainer instructions.

At least 20 colleges and universities offer 2-year, 4-year, or graduate degrees in horse management or equine husbandry. And more trainers are getting these degrees. Coursework includes horse training skills, but it usually also prepares students for several other careers, including stable management and breeding, horse facilities management, racetrack management, equine business, and feed and equipment sales.

Marine mammal trainers

Marine mammal trainers teach dolphins, whales, seals, sea lions, and walrus. Like other trainers, they use positive reinforcement, rewarding an animal for performing a task on command. With marine mammals, the command is often a whistle or gesture, and the reward is a fish.

Trainers working in natural aquatic habitats, aquariums, and zoos teach animals a number of behaviors. These behaviors often include performing for the public and obeying commands that make it easier for staff to monitor animal health and provide treatment. For example, trainers might teach a walrus to open its mouth for dental exams. At most aquariums, marine mammal trainers work as part of a 4- or 5-person team. Depending on the aquatic facility, trainers might also participate in research projects.

Although it can be rewarding to interact with wild creatures, it's not always easy. Marine mammal trainers tend to the animals' medical and nutritional needs every day. At the Dolphin Research Center in Grassy Key, Florida, for example, dolphin trainers spend hours in a sterile kitchen, where they make up food buckets of fish, vitamins, and medication.

Marine mammal trainers at aquariums work indoors, but those who work in outdoor habitats endure every type of weather. That could mean carrying 50-pound buckets of fish in a downpour. And because they work with wild animals that don't have owners to care for them, marine mammal trainers might also need to be on call more than other types of trainers. They contact the aquarium regularly to make sure there are no emergencies.

Trainers might spend about half their workday interacting with the animals and the other

half maintaining a proper aquatic environment. Most trainers check the water several times a day and add chemicals to maintain proper pH levels. Many trainers also dive down to scrub the underwater marine habitat. But at some aquariums, a separate crew does this work.

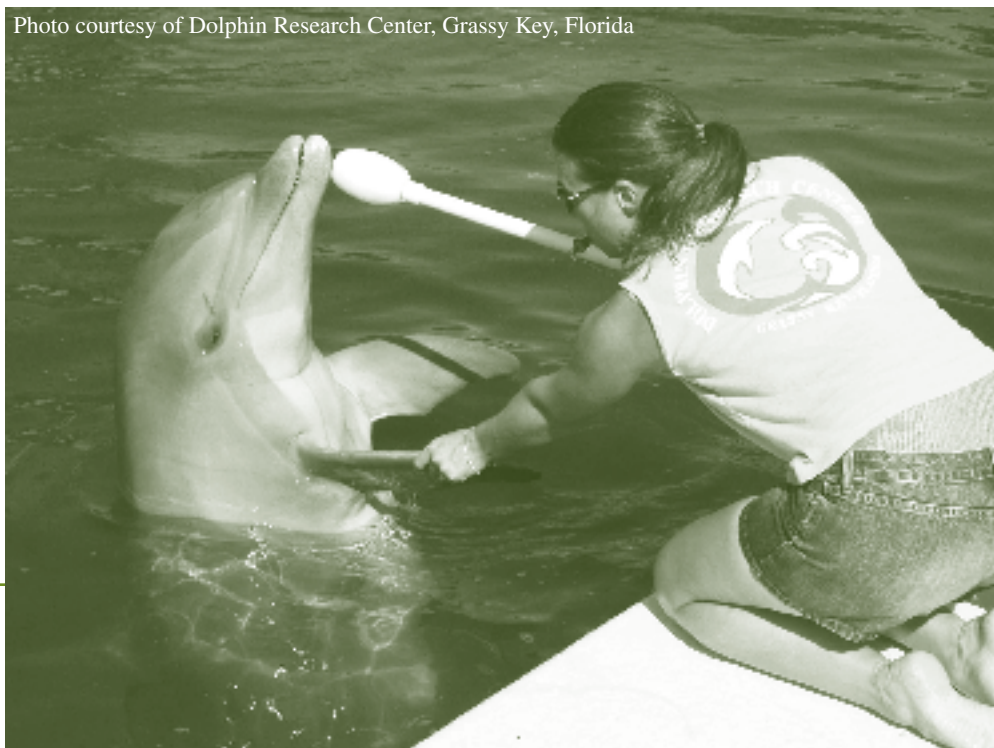
Additionally, trainers keep records on the animals, describing food intake and behavioral changes. They look for signs of sickness, take blood, and give routine checkups.

Educating the public is also integral to the job. Trainers plan and perform in shows with the animals, explaining animal behavior and answering questions while they entertain. Trainers also give interviews, seminars, and tours.

Mammal training provides valuable mental and physical stimulation for the animal, which is important for their long-term health and well-being. As a result of animal training and health management, captive sea creatures today often live longer than their counterparts in the wild.

Getting ready. Many, if not most, marine mammal trainers have an associate or bachelor's degree. Most aquariums and zoos require a bachelor's degree in zoology, biology, psychology, or marine biology. Courses include animal biology and behavior, marine ecology,

Photo courtesy of Dolphin Research Center, Grassy Key, Florida



Marine mammal training includes teaching behaviors that aid staff in caring for the animals' health.

water chemistry, nutrition, and veterinary medicine.

Some trainers have a 2-year degree in animal health or a related subject. And a few trainers get their jobs through volunteer experience, contacts, and coursework not leading to a degree. But given the competition for marine mammal jobs, people who have a degree are much more likely to find work, and those with a graduate degree have an advantage.

In addition to education, marine mammal trainers need to be strong swimmers because they spend considerable time in the water with the animals. Experience working with animals is also essential. Most trainers have volunteered or been employed at aquariums, zoos, research facilities, shelters, or veterinary clinics. Public speaking experience also helps trainers to interact with aquarium visitors.

Shelter workers

Animal enthusiasts are often drawn to work in animal shelters and rescue facilities that house, feed, and place stray pets. Many shelter workers begin as volunteers. They play with and walk animals. And they help the paid staff by getting animals from cages and occasionally conducting home visits of prospective owners.

Shelter workers and volunteers deal with stressful situations, including animal abuse, euthanasia, and disease. When considering a rescue career, jobseekers should be aware of these stresses. But they should also consider the satisfaction of making many pets safe and the fun and camaraderie of working with other animal enthusiasts.

Some shelter workers focus on administration. Directors of shelters manage and raise funds. They earn more than other shelter workers and usually have a college degree and experience.

Other occupations focus on direct animal care. These include adoption representative, animal control officer, and kennel attendant.

Adoption representative

Adoption representatives match would-be pet owners with the right pet. They interview prospective pet owners and might visit and evaluate pet owners' homes. Adoption representatives also teach prospective owners about different animal breeds, training concerns, and medical issues.

Representatives introduce animals to prospective owners. Before an adoption, shelter workers observe interactions between the animal and the would-be owner. Adoption representatives might take a dog or a cat from its cage to a fenced-in playground to showcase its personality. Finally, adoption representatives maintain adoption records and follow up with new owners to address any problems.

Adoption representatives also manage and train volunteers. Like many workers in nonprofits, they help with administrative and other tasks when needed.

Getting ready. Most adoption representatives need at least a high school diploma, and some have more education. Successful representatives also have good customer service skills, an understanding of animal welfare issues, and the abilities to work as part of a team and to communicate well.

Animal control officer

These officers investigate allegations of animal abuse and neglect and handle pet-related disputes. They issue citations for violations of leash laws and animal welfare regulations. Officers also inspect private kennels. And they protect the public by collecting loose or dangerous animals and bringing them to shelters.

This work often requires ingenuity and tact, along with physical agility for climbing under and over obstacles to rescue frightened strays. Animal control officers also sometimes must subdue or euthanize animals that are hurt or abandoned.

Getting ready. Animal control workers usually need at least a high school diploma and experience with animals. They receive training in law enforcement and the safe and humane handling of animals.

Kennel attendant

Kennel attendants clean cages and enclosures; feed, groom, and observe animals; and take them for walks. The job can be dirty and physically demanding. But it also provides an opportunity to help and bond with animals.

One of the most difficult parts of kennel work is euthanizing animals that are not adopted or claimed. Kennel attendants and other rescue workers take comfort in helping animals and in seeing that some of the pets are adopted or reunited with their owners.

Getting ready. There are usually no formal require-

Photo courtesy of the National Dog Groomers Association of America



Pet groomers need knowledge of style standards for a variety of breeds.

ments for kennel workers in animal shelters. Some humane society associations offer training workshops and certification.

Pet-care business owner

Owning a pet-care business is a popular way to have an animal career. Those who are successful are rewarded with independence and the chance to do work they enjoy.

Business owners usually begin by learning a pet-related skill. They then gain experience by working for someone else. Later, they create a plan and strike out on their own. Two common pet-care businesses involve pet grooming and pet sitting.

Pet groomers

Many pet groomers work for someone else in a pet shop, salon, or kennel. Some start their own grooming businesses after gaining experience.

Groomers wash, brush, and trim pets' hair and nails. Most of the animals they groom are dogs, but they might also groom cats. Groomers observe the health of animals and report any unusual symptoms to the owner. They maintain equipment, cleaning and sanitizing it to prevent the spread of disease, and ensure that their work environment is clean and safe for the animals.

Sometimes, grooming an animal correctly is complicated, such as when preparing an animal for a show or creating an elaborate style. Groomers use different types of brushes, clippers, and scissors for different types of pets and for the various parts of pets' hair and fur. These sessions require patience from the groomer, pet, and owner alike, as they may last 2 hours or more.

Groomers who prepare dogs and cats for shows must know and follow the standards established for different breeds. An experienced groomer helps a show dog or cat to look perfectly proportioned and helps it to win. Show

groomers often work for themselves, building a reputation and advertising their services.

Another type of grooming business that is gaining popularity is mobile grooming. Mobile groomers work in fully equipped dog salons operating inside vehicles and traveling to pet owners' homes. These groomers offer the same services as they would in a traditional pet salon. But because they travel to the pets, mobile groomers also must pack supplies and plan routes.

Getting ready. Most pet groomers learn their trade by completing an informal apprenticeship, under the guidance of an experienced groomer, for 6 to 10 weeks. Some groomers spend 2 to 18 weeks at one of about 50 State-licensed grooming schools. Groomers can be certified by the National Dog Groomers Association of America if they pass association tests.

Pet sitters

When pet owners are away from home, they need a way to care for their pets. Some turn to friends or professional boarding kennels to provide this service. But increasingly, pet owners keep their animals at home and hire a professional pet sitter.

Pet sitters usually care for many pets at a time. Sitters interview pet owners about their pets' needs and schedules; then, they travel from home to home, feeding, walking, and playing with pets. Sitters also check the animals' health and administer medications.



Although some pet-sitting business owners hire and manage other sitters, many work alone. Owners must market their services and handle administrative tasks, such as billing and scheduling.

According to the American Humane Society, pets do best when they have a familiar environment, diet, and exercise routine and receive personal attention. A pet sitter, by caring for pets in their own environments, can provide this kind of stability. Additionally, home care minimizes exposure to illness from other animals in a kennel. These are some of the reasons that pet sitting businesses are thriving.

Getting ready. No formal training or education is required to become a professional pet sitter. However, pet sitters do need to be reliable, trustworthy, and experienced with animals. The National Association of Professional Pet Sitters offers certification to people who complete courses in business management, animal care, and animal health.

Pay and prospects

For most animal-care occupations, earnings and job prospects vary. Pay and prospects depend on factors such as job type, industry, education level, and experience.

Pay

Earnings of animal workers range from high to low. Generally, occupations that require higher levels of education or experience pay more than those that require less.

Animal trainers. Animal trainers had median earnings of \$11.92 an hour, or about \$24,800 annually for full-time work, in 2005, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). These data are medians, so half of all trainers earned more than that amount, and half earned less. The highest paid 10 percent earned more than \$22.07 an hour, and the lowest paid 10 percent earned less than \$7.37 hourly. These figures do not include the earnings of self-employed workers.

Pet sitters help animals thrive while owners are away by providing attention and routine in the pets' own environment.

Trainers' earnings depend, in part, on the industry in which they work. The highest earners worked in the other personal services industry, which includes pet-care businesses. Median earnings were \$15.91 an hour in 2005. Other industries that paid trainers well included the other amusement and recreation industry, which includes riding stables and paid a median of \$14.73 an hour, and the spectator sports industry, which includes horse- and dog-racing tracks and paid \$14.37 an hour.

BLS doesn't specify earnings data according to the type of animal trained, but most trainers work with dogs, so dog-training salaries are probably nearest the BLS median. Industry sources suggest that dog trainers in urban areas earned higher salaries than those working in small towns.

Horse trainers also have wide-ranging earnings, determined largely by reputation. Trainers who have schooled winning horses earn more. Other factors—such as a trainer's education, certifications, area of expertise, and geographic location—also influence salary. According to many horse trainers, established trainers usually earn between \$20,000 and \$40,000 a year. Most trainers are paid per horse, and many receive a portion of a horse's winnings in addition to their training fees.

Animal trainers who worked for zoos, aquariums, museums, and similar organizations in 2005 earned a median of \$11.47 an hour, or about \$23,858 a year, according to BLS. Many of these workers were marine mammal trainers. Industry sources suggest that marine mammal trainers with some experience usually earn between \$20,000 and \$40,000 annually. Their salaries depended on experience, education, type of employer, and the duties and geographic location of the job.

Shelter workers. According to BLS, animal control workers had median earnings of \$12.87 in 2005.

BLS does not have specific data on kennel workers in shelters. But according to BLS, animal caretakers in social advocacy organizations, which include private shelters, earned a median of \$8.25 an hour in 2005.

BLS does not have data on adoption counselors, but private sources suggest that adoption coordinators at large shelters often earn about \$35,000 annually; managers sometimes earn up to \$50,000.

Business owners. BLS does not have data on earnings for pet-care business owners. But like all business owners, pet-care entrepreneurs face risks and expenses and often struggle to establish a clientele.

Starting a pet-care business requires a plan. Successful owners need to consider startup costs, including the price of equipment, insurance, licenses, and fees. They also need to plan for ongoing costs of supplies, equipment maintenance, and more. There can be hefty marketing and advertising costs as well, particularly when owners are starting out or trying to expand.

Many pet-care businesses, including pet sitting companies and mobile grooming operations, don't require owners to rent office or shop space. But other pet businesses, such as kennels, do.

The most often overlooked expense, however, is you, the business owner. Business owners need to cover their own living expenses as well as the costs of the business. Ask yourself how much you need to take from the business for your household budget. Experts often advise that you should have at least 6 months of living expenses saved before attempting to rely on your business for income. Others say to keep your current job until you are well established with many clients. For a pet groomer to work full-time, for example, he or she needs about 150 to 200 clients to stay booked year-round.

Prospects

Employment opportunities are expected to be excellent in many animal-care occupations. This is due, in large part, to the continued growth of consumer spending on pets. According to the American Pet Product Manufacturers Association, total spending on pets in the United States surged from \$17 billion in 1994 to \$38.4 billion in 2006. And the level of spending increased much faster than did the number of pets. In other words, the average spending per pet has risen dramatically.

As pet owners increasingly consider their pets to be part of the family, the demand for luxury pet services, such as professional grooming and advanced training, has grown. Also contributing to spending increases are rising incomes and more two-income families that have less time to care for pets themselves. These factors mean jobs for those who provide dog training and all types of pet care.

Jobs in animal shelters are also expected to be plentiful because of the need to replace the many workers who are expected to leave the field. The demanding work causes many workers to switch careers, creating opportunities for other workers.

It might be more difficult to find jobs in marine

mammal training. Job growth is slow in aquariums and zoos, and competition for positions is keen because these jobs are popular. Similarly, equine trainers might find it difficult to get entry-level jobs. Although horse trainers are expected to be in demand, few owners will offer their horse to a novice trainer.

Barking up the right tree: Good sources of information

There are many ways to learn about animal jobs. Libraries and career centers offer books and magazines about animal-centered careers. Some libraries also provide lists of volunteer opportunities at animal shelters, humane societies, zoos and aquariums, and horse stables.

One of the resources available at many libraries is the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, available in print and also online at www.bls.gov/oco. The *Handbook* describes the tasks, job outlook, training requirements, and earnings for hundreds of occupations. Animal-related occupations in the *Handbook* include animal care and service workers; farmers, ranchers, agricultural managers; veterinarians; and veterinary technologists and technicians.

In addition, several *Quarterly* articles describe animal-related work, including the following:

- “Farming in the 21st century: A modern business in a modern world” (spring 2005, www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2005/spring/art02.htm) describes ranching;
- “From hobby to career: Transforming your pastime into a profession” (fall 2001, www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2001/fall/art01.htm) discusses dog training and other pet-related careers;
- “Jobs in biotechnology: Applying old sciences to new discoveries” (fall 2002, www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2002/fall/art03.htm) includes information about animal research associates;
- “Veterinary technicians: Nursing animals to health” (fall 2003, www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2003/fall/art03.htm) provides an occupational profile;
- “Wild jobs with wildlife: Jobs in zoos and aquariums” (spring 2001, www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2001/spring/art01.htm) describes the work of zoo keepers, aquarists, and other animal park workers;
- And “You’re a *what?* Dog walker” (summer 2004, www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2004/summer/yawhat.htm) and “You’re a *what?* Farrier” (summer 1999,

www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/1999/summer/yawhat.pdf) give a glimpse of some lesser known animal-centered occupations.

Professional associations are another good source of career information. Several associations provide information and career resources to dog trainers and other pet-care workers. These include the following:

Association of Pet Dog Trainers
150 Executive Center Dr., Box 35
Greenville, SC 29615
Toll-free: 1 (800) PET-DOGS (738-3647)
www.apdt.com

International Association of Canine Professionals
P.O. Box 560156
Montverde, FL 34756
Toll-free: 1 (877) THE-IACP (843-4227)
www.dogpro.org

National Association of Dog Obedience Instructors
P.O. Box 369
729 Grapevine Hwy.
Hurst, TX 76054
www.nadoi.org

National Association of Professional Pet Sitters
15000 Commerce Pkwy., Suite C
Mt. Laurel, NJ 08054
(856) 439-0324
www.petsitters.org

National Dog Groomers Association of America
P.O. Box 101
Clark, PA 16113
(724) 962-2711
www.nationaldoggroomers.com

Information about horse trainers, riding instructors, and other horse professionals is available from the following:

American Riding Instructors Association
28801 Trenton Court
Bonita Springs, FL 34134
(239) 948-3232
www.riding-instructor.com



Many people who work with animals enjoy the freedom and hands-on contact that their jobs allow.

Certified Horsemanship Association
4037 Iron Works Pkwy., Suite 180
Lexington, KY 40511
Toll-free: 1 (800) 399-0138
www.cha-ahse.org

The International Marine Animal Trainers Association offers education and career information to would-be trainers of dolphins, seals, and other marine mammals.
Contact:

The International Marine Animal
Trainers Association
c/o Shedd Aquarium
1200 S. Lake Shore Dr.
Chicago, IL 60605
www.imata.org

Information about careers and volunteer opportunities in animal shelters are available from the following:

Animal Sheltering
c/o Humane Society of the United States
2100 L St. NW.
Washington, DC 20037
(202) 452-1100
www.animalsheltering.org

National Animal Control Association
P.O. Box 480851
Kansas City, MO 64148
(913) 768-1319
www.nacanet.org

Society of Animal Welfare Administrators
2170 S. Parker Rd., #255
Denver, CO 80231
Toll-free: 1 (888) 337-6410
www.sawanetwork.org

The U.S. Small Business Administration offers information and assistance to people trying to start a business, including those that offer pet care. For help, contact:

U.S. Small Business Administration
6302 Fairview Rd., Suite 300
Charlotte, NC 28210
Toll-free: 1 (800) U-ASK-SBA (827-5722)
www.sba.gov

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