

Dog walking an easy job? Think again.

Interview with dog walking entrepreneur Paula Welgraven

By Laure-Anne Viselé, May 2010

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‘Woef-Out’ is a successful dog walking and pet sitting business based in The Hague, the Netherlands. In this article, I speak with founder/manager Paula Welgraven to find out more

about the life of a professional dog walker behind the scenes.

About the interview: I met Paula in the woods while working on a [Canis bonus’ photo-documentary dog walks](#). I greeted her with my usual enthusiasm for everything dog-related, and before I knew it, we were chatting away about the ins and out of dog behaviour. I was immediately struck by her calm, open, well-informed, and professional demeanour. If anyone would proudly represent dog walking in my series of [interviews of](#)

[dog professionals](#), Paula was the one. Paula gladly accepted to be formally interviewed, and you are about to read the result of our conversation.

About dog walking: Dog walking in The Netherlands is only just becoming a respected profession, and many see it as a job for the unskilled. As a wannabe dog walker myself, I was delighted to meet such a good ambassador to the cause. If only all walkers were, like Paula, committed to continuing education and adhering to the high standards set by the Dutch professional association of dog walkers (Branch Vereniging voor Honden Uitlaat Service), the field would professionalise in no time.

Woef-Out as a business

LAURE-ANNE – How did **Woef-Out** start?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – I used to work very unusual hours for the flower market, so my sister asked me to let her dog out every day. I figured if I am doing it for one dog, I might as well do it for more. This was 2006. Six months down the line, I was walking about six dogs. As I had always wanted to run my own business, I wasted no time in exchanging my sports coupé for a van, and having my website designed by a professional. I have made a living out of dog walking since.



LAURE-ANNE – What **other services** do you offer?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – I also offer a pet sitting service for all sorts of pets, not just dogs (reptiles, birds, cats, etc.). This involves my going to people’s homes when they are away, looking after their pet.



LAURE-ANNE – What **set-up** do you have? Many people imagine it’s a question of picking up your hiking shoes and off you go. I imagine there’s a lot more to it than that.

PAULA WELGRAVEN – There is the labelled van, but you also need to think of dog treats, water, blankets, towels, good outdoor clothing with your logo on it, an ID tag for each dog, safe and comfortable transport pens, a first aid kit, etc. You need quite a set-up to fulfil professional standards.



LAURE-ANNE – If money and time were not a factor, what would be your dream **business expansion**?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – If I had tons of time and money, I would love to study physiotherapy for dogs. But it seems you have to have a degree in human physiotherapy first, and I do not have that sort of time. I would also love to look into canine behaviour therapy.

Paula and dogs

LAURE-ANNE – How old were you when you had your **first dog**?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – We have always had dogs in my family, so I have had dogs since birth.



LAURE-ANNE – Do you **have a dog** now?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – I have a five-month-old Jack Russell. He comes along to one of the daily walks, actually.



LAURE-ANNE – **Why dogs**?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – It's not so much dogs as animals in general. I used to be a horse-riding instructor, actually. Oh, and I have two cats.

The dog walking profession

LAURE-ANNE – Is the profession badly affected by the **crisis**? Are the services perceived as a luxury for times of plenty only?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – I am definitely getting less enquiry calls, but it does not affect me directly as I am close to capacity anyway.



LAURE-ANNE – With such a physical profession, how do you deal with being **sick**? Do you have to guarantee a replacement?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – Actually, in the four years that I have been doing this, I have not once been sick! But it states in the contract that I have no official replacement solution should I be unable to walk one day.



LAURE-ANNE – **How old is the profession** here in The Netherlands? In the UK and US, it's been going for about twenty-five years already, and it's getting reasonably settled.

PAULA WELGRAVEN – Professional dog walking has been around in The Netherlands for ten to fifteen years.

The life of a professional dog walker

LAURE-ANNE – **How many walks** do you do per week?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – I do two walks a day, five days a week. I also regularly walk two boerboels separately as they are getting too old to walk with the group.



LAURE-ANNE – Describe a typical day.

PAULA WELGRAVEN – Most of my time is spent doing the milk rounds picking up and dropping off dogs. This is approximately how it pans out every day:

- 8.30am: I leave the house to start the first pick-up round.
- 10am: The morning walk starts.
- 11am: I clean up the dogs a little, and load them in the van to start the drop-off round.
- 12pm: I try to grab a sandwich on the go, then start the afternoon pick-up tour
- 1.30pm: The afternoon walk starts.
- 2.30pm: Again, I tidy up the dogs a little, and then start the drop-off round.
- Around 4pm: I return home.



There are often delays, of course, like dogs who take ages to get back in the van for example.



LAURE-ANNE – What are the **perks** of the job?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – Hiking had always been a hobby of mine, and I am definitely the outdoorsy type, so spending so much time walking outside is a big perk for me.

I also love the freedom it gives you: even if you are running ten minutes late, it's not like the dogs are waiting for you looking at their wristwatch.

The biggest kick of all has to be watching them have a blast, frolicking about with each other. I often play games with the dogs, like this one: I make them form a circle around me and we play 'Simon Says' for a treat. Sometimes, I place a treat on the van's bumper, and they have to take it in turns to get it. They love it. It's like kindergarten sometimes. Because it's not just one dog, I avoid playing games that could cause competition, like a playing with a ball.



LAURE-ANNE – What are the **worst** aspects of the job?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – The driving... I spend about twice as much time driving as I do walking. It's not straight, efficient driving either: you have to constantly get in and out of the van. That's the worst aspect.

LAURE-ANNE – How do you feel on a **rainy day**? Are you really never tempted to cancel your dog walks?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – I actually really love walking in the rain: there is nobody else around so the walks are really quiet and relaxing. I have good rainproof clothing, so I don't mind weather so much. Of course, when it rains, the dogs and the van need cleaning way more often.



LAURE-ANNE – How varied are the routes you walk?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – There is more choice in the winter, like beaches, as a lot of places are off-limits for off leash dogs in the high season. All in all, I have about six different routes to choose from within realistic range of my customers.



LAURE-ANNE –Does the composition of the group groups you walk vary much?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – So far, I have kept nearly 100% of my customers, so the groups are quite stable. This allowed me to compose the groups optimally in terms of individual temperaments, as I can switch a dog between morning and afternoon walk if he fits better with the other group.

Paula's philosophy and vision

LAURE-ANNE – What **personal qualities** would you advice to be **successful in the dog walking business**?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – You need to love dogs, obviously. You also need to have sales skills, as you have to be able to confidently defend the profession to sceptics.



LAURE-ANNE – Do some people **react negatively** to you when you are walking the dogs?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – I get the occasional 'Why do people take a dog if they can't even look after it?', but that's about it. I believe in what I do and the dogs are clearly benefitting, so I can confidently

explain the benefits of professional dog walking to these people.



LAURE-ANNE – If you were a dog, I presume you'd be happy to have you as a dog walker. **What makes your services special?**

PAULA WELGRAVEN – I go beyond the regulations when it comes to the dogs comfort and safety. My van has air conditioning and roof ventilation, for example. On hot days, I also lay fresh wet blankets on the floor. In the winter, I have warm comfortable blankets for them. The transport pens in which I carry them are custom-made by a professional carpenter.



LAURE-ANNE – How important is **cooperation with other local dog walkers**? Is it a very competitive business, or is it rather cooperative?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – As a rule, I do not know that there is so much cooperation, but I definitely have very good contacts with another dog walker in the region. We refer customers to each other, for example.



LAURE-ANNE – What is the proportion of dog walkers that are **member of a professional body** in The Netherlands? How many professional bodies are there?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – HUS Nederland (Branch Vereniging voor Honden Uitlaat Service, <http://www.hus-nederland.nl/>) is the only professional association in The Netherlands that sets standards for the dog walking profession. To be a member (I am), you have to satisfy a number of criteria like:

- a business that is registered with the Chamber of Commerce;
- ID tag with your business contact details on it for each dog;
- a fire extinguisher;
- a certificate in canine first aid, and a first aid kit with you;

- a clearly marked transport vehicle;
- secure transport so the dogs do not have direct access to the outside;
- you must scoop up after the dogs;
- you must have a specialist certificate (from the Martin Gaus academy) which gives you an insight into canine behaviour and own business entrepreneurship; and
- The van must be disinfected at least 1x per week.

As dog walking is becoming a popular profession, it is important to professionalise it to avoid abuses which will affect our reputation.



LAURE-ANNE – How far are we from **well-recognized** standards ruling the profession?

PAULA

WELGRAVEN

– Only a minority of dog walkers are members

Only a minority of dog walkers are members of ... a professional association.

of HUS, and HUS is the only professional association for dog walkers in The Netherlands as far as I know.



LAURE-ANNE – What are the **extreme examples** of unprofessional behaviours from those non-syndicated colleagues?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – You occasionally hear stories of dogs left behind, or the walker not bothering to help a dog struggling to get out of the water. That sort of stories. But you just need to go to the dog walking service start page (<http://honden-uitlaatservice.startpagina.nl/>) to see the explosion of dog walkers in The Netherlands, some are definitely more professional than others.

Qualifications and training

LAURE-ANNE – How do you keep **up-to-date** with the latest developments in **dog behaviour** and **health and safety**?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – I receive a newsletter from the Martin Gaus institute. I also read dog books and magazines and check the internet to look up any question I might have. I am an avid self-learner.



LAURE-ANNE – What **qualifications** did you get to help you in your job?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – I did a few qualifications:

- Canine first aid
- ABA (Algemene Basiskennis Aanrichting): a course for dog handlers
- Martin Gaus’ dog walking business set-up and canine behaviour course
- A dog training certificate (‘africhtingsdiploma’ from Tinley)

I am quite curious about my next one: ‘bewegingsleer’. I think it will be about canine body language.

Safety incidents

LAURE-ANNE – Do dogs in your care frequently **run away**?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – It has only happened a couple of times since I started. Once, at the beginning, one of the dogs refused to get out of a bunker on the dunes. He hadn’t run away, but he just would not come out. Another time, one of the dogs just ran back home. Neither dog was hurt, though. But this eventuality is why it is so important to have clearly marked tags on each dog’s collar.



LAURE-ANNE – Do dogs in your care frequently **cause damage to a third party**?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – Well, aside from the odd burst footballs, I really can’t think of anything, no.



LAURE-ANNE – Are **insurance rates** crippling?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – Actually, I regularly check and, as far as I know, there is no special insurance

for dog walkers right now. It is all covered by the liability insurance of each individual dog’s owner.



LAURE-ANNE – Do dogs in your care frequently **fight with each other**?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – Hardly ever. If I see that a dog does not get on with the rest of the group, I either take him on the other daily walk, or I refer him to another walker. I sometimes get other dogs showing aggression towards dogs in my group. The group sticks together, then, but I have never had a severe incident.



LAURE-ANNE – What are the **health and safety regulations** in place in The Netherlands concerning the dog walking business?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – There are no government regulations applying specifically to professional dog walking. Of course you have to abide to general safety regulations in transporting and walking them.



LAURE-ANNE – Have you ever **gotten injured** by a dog while carrying out your job?

PAULA WELGRAVEN – No, never.



LAURE-ANNE – Would you ever **refuse to walk a particular dog?**

PAULA WELGRAVEN – It has only happened on a couple of these occasions:

- One time, the dog was absolutely petrified of the van and just refused to get on.
- Another customer of mine kept cancelling appointments and delaying payment.
- Right now, I also do not have the transport facilities for giant breeds like St Bernards.

LAURE-ANNE – What is the **maximum number of dogs you can walk at the same time by law?**

PAULA WELGRAVEN – There is no maximum number by government law, but the HUS standard is set at 10 dogs.



In conclusion

Paula followed her dream and built a serious, solid, modern business. But to get to where she is, Paula has kept investing in continuing education, and in equipment for the dogs' comfort. Here's hoping that more and more dog walkers will match Paula's high standards, as the profession gradually transforms from a "McJob", to quote Douglas Coupland, to a respected career.

For more information about Paula's dog walking business (Woef-Out), visit <http://www.woef-out.nl/>