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Toward Clarity and Utility in Work vs. Tasks Distinctions

by Bradley W. Morris, MA

In the service dog community, there are some who seem to think—or at least profess—that there is no distinction between a service dog doing work and a service dog performing tasks. I believe these people fall into two camps: 1) those who are unaware of the implications a contrast might have, and 2) those who would like to see “work” language removed from laws. If there were no distinction to be made, the strength of past calls for “work” to be removed would be surprising, given that such removal would only be for future typographical efficiency. Instead, it would make more sense that such parties might have wanted to excise “work” because they see it as a way to disallow certain types of service dog assistance they wish not to be seen as legitimate.

The distinction between work and tasks in the service dog community has, unfortunately, become entrenched with inaccurate, uninformative, or unhelpful adjectives. The above example is only one of the problems that a muddy distinction between work and tasks has allowed. We have inherited a jargon that lacks the usefulness and clarity that debates on the topic demand. I propose that instead of sharing in these entrenched descriptions merely to follow tradition, we abandon the inherited terms and begin to use language appropriate for drawing a truly useful distinction. I believe this would be much better than either pretending there is no distinction, or relying on an under-reasoned terminology.

Traditional distinctions

As I see it, the distinction between work and tasks is not that tasks are “physical”, or that work is ‘just tasks stringed together’. As to why work is not just tasks stringed together, see my short article, “Not Tasks, but Work or Tasks”. Before we handle additional traditional distinctions, that leaves us with answering the question of why we shouldn’t use the word “physical” to describe tasks, in contrast with work.

Calling tasks “physical” to distinguish them from work merely raises the question of how work is “nonphysical”. Perhaps there is some way in which some kinds of work are nonphysical, in addition to being physical at their mechanical base, but this ignores the great deal of work that is overridingly

physical. When guide dogs maneuver their handlers around unpredictable obstacles, that's work, and I daresay, physical. When a psychiatric service dog decides to interrupt repetitive behavior by insistent nudging, that is physical, and is work. This is not to say that such service dogs in these instances aren't using their brains—they most certainly are. But that is not helpful in distinguishing work from tasks, because every task also requires the dog to use its brain.

If one were to persist in thinking that work is somehow nonphysical, one might think at this point that work might just be something like a dog loving its owner, or somehow "nonphysically" expressing positive emotion toward the owner, thus providing emotional comfort. However helpful this emotional comfort may be to any disabled service dog user, this is not qualifying tasks or work, as expressly stated in the 2010 ADA revisions.

In addition to this traditional distinction between work and tasks where tasks are considered "physical", another phrase merits attention. Tasks have been described by some as "anything that is obvious to the average outside observer". In this putative contrast, "Work includes subtler interactions that an outside observer would not necessarily detect, even when that assistance is being provided right in front of that person."

I'm afraid this distinction is not that helpful, even though it's not quite wrongheaded. It is difficult to say whether the "average outside observer" would detect a guide dog's obstacle avoidance, or a psychiatric service dog's repetitive behavior interruption. Also, the range of possibilities for work is so open-ended that it is not prudent to rely on our imaginations, especially when a more targeted description might do a better job.

Toward clarity and utility

Okay, so if we are to seek better distinctions between work and tasks among service dogs, what are we to find? I think there are two contrasting clusters of adjectives that will do the job much better.

I propose that for tasks, the following descriptions be applied:

- discrete
- on-demand
- one-time
- actively-requested

I believe service dog work merits these descriptions:

- open-ended

- on-call
- ongoing
- passively-available

While I think that no single pair from these sets of descriptions fully captures the nature of the distinction, and there may be exceptions to some, I do believe there is a single best pair. I suggest that referring to tasks as “actively requested” and work as “passively available” is the way forward, with the other description in these sets along in tow, used in more involved conversations about related topics.

But why should we use any of these terms to distinguish between work and tasks? Let's take a look at the contrasting pairs in order to find out.

Discrete vs. open-ended

The first pair of descriptions from each set of descriptions is “discrete” vs. “open-ended”. Service dog tasks are discrete, whereas work is open-ended. A service dog fulfilling a request to fetch a bottle of water from a refrigerator is a task that has a well-defined beginning and end in time and space. The dog receives the request, goes to the fridge, gets the bottle, and delivers that bottle to the handler (and hopefully the refrigerator gets shut!). There is no real question about whether the task has begun or ended.

In contrast, work is open-ended. A diabetic alert dog is not given a command to alert to blood sugar changes, but is in a continual state of going from being ready to alert and alerting. There is no end to the work of alerting to blood sugar changes while the dog is on duty, because it's something the dog must perpetually monitor.

On-demand vs. on-call

The second pair in our contrasting description sets is “on-demand” and “on-call”. Just like with some media content services, where one gets exactly what one orders, tasks are on-demand. When a service dog is asked to retrieve an item on the store shelf, that is an action or response that has been explicitly requested. On the other hand, we could think of work as on-call, like a doctor ready to rush to the hospital if the need arises. A hearing alert dog is on-call to alert to important sounds; the doorbell may not be ringing right now, but the dog is ready to alert when it does ring.

One-time vs. ongoing

The penultimate pair is “one-time” and “ongoing”. A task is a one-time event; the handler asks for it, the handler gets it, roughly in a one-to-one ratio. A leash retrieval request on Monday does not carry

over to Wednesday. Work is ongoing. Just because an autism service dog stopped a young person from bolting on Monday, that does not mean the dog will stop doing its work by Wednesday!

Actively-requested vs. passively-available

Finally, tasks are actively requested, while work is passively available. In concert with everything we've seen above, actively-requested tasks are, well, requested actively. If a psychiatric service dog is asked to check for intruders upon arrival at home, that is a request (task) that was specifically asked for by the handler. If that same service dog is trained to always and automatically stand behind the handler in lines, that is work that is passively available. This passively-available work does not need a request to take place. Similarly, a guide dog's intelligent disobedience, for instance in stopping the handler when the handler says "forward" and there is oncoming traffic, qualifies as passively-available work.

Vagueness in the real world

Although the primary purpose of this article is to draw the distinction between work and tasks, it should be noted that in real life, the distinction is not always clear. For instance, a mobility assistance dog may be asked to "brace", but over time the dog may brace automatically in response to harness pressure. This action looks like a task when the command is given, but when the command is extraneous, the dog's being ready to brace and bracing seem to fall under "work". There is not a fine line here, as the boundary is vague and there is a lot of room for overlap.

There are also different ways different teams might exercise a particular assistive behavior (or the same team at different times). For instance, if the problem is intrusive thoughts and the assistive behavior is tactile or deep pressure stimulation, there are two general ways this might occur. (1) If the person is aware enough during the episode that they need help, they might actively request the assistive behavior. (2) Otherwise, the person might unintentionally give cues to the dog, such as pacing, increased heart rate, increased respiration, etc., and the dog can then independently put the passive availability of its assistive behavior into action. By my distinction, the same action by the dog is a task in the first case, and work in the second. So it's not so much an assistive behavior in general that is work or is a task, but it is particular instances or manners of execution that earn such a label.

Focusing on what matters

We've looked at some of the traditional ways of distinguishing service dog work from tasks, and found them lacking. Even if the real world still presents some vagueness for the clusters of descriptions I've provided, I'm confident they are clearer, but more importantly I hope they prove more helpful—especially "actively-requested tasks" vs. "passively-available work".

Ultimately, I believe it doesn't matter whether helpful behavior is *called* "work" or "tasks". What matters *practically* is that it's behavior that contributes to disability mitigation. Because of this, I don't think service dog handlers should get caught up in the minutiae of whether their dogs are doing work or performing tasks. The distinction only matters *theoretically* when we engage in debates and we make useful generalizations about things like how to train behaviors.

Coming back to the problem I presented at the beginning of this article, I also hope that the clearer way in which I've tried to distinguish work from tasks can make some headway toward resolving issues that have, at times, unnecessarily separated those in the service dog community into wastefully divisive factions. We'd all do much better putting our energy into serving common goals—paramountly, helping those with disabilities lead better lives.

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