

Headphones At Work??

Do They Help or Hurt People Get their Job Accomplished?



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Q. What do you think about the use of headphones at work?

A. While there are many jobs that require headphones, I don't think you are asking about the appropriateness of wearing headphones to perform the duties of the job. Unless there are legal requirements for you to wear headphones, or not to wear headphones, the person who gets to make the final decision is your boss. Many people are quite convinced that they can multitask effectively, and listen to music, books on tape, or something else on headphones while they work. People will play the radio or music through the computer at their desk, through their phones, or iPods. Yet almost all studies suggest multitasking does not increase effectiveness or productivity. Whatever plays over the headphones serves as a distraction from your primary responsibility - your job. Headphones also serve to distance people from what they are surrounded by. Headphones serve as a message not to intrude. They act as a barrier to interaction with people who might feel they are interrupting. If you are on the job, your role is to be available to people you work with, without distraction. This need to be totally connected is new to the workplace. A new generation has grown up electronically connected somehow for most of the day. If they are asked to focus, or pay attention, they remove one ear bud. Separating from this connectedness may be a challenge, and many places of work will require that separation. If you are in a company - perhaps a software company, or a firm whose focus is music, you may find a more accepting culture. This is a situation where you don't want to be the leader. Look around. If you see headphones being used, and you believe you can work without distraction, have a conversation with your manager. Let him or her know there are times you'd like to wear headphones to eliminate noise that may come from your work space. There might also be times when you'd just like background noise via headphones, and want to make sure you don't appear unresponsive to colleagues. Gain approval, and make sure you respond to phone calls, and interruptions, and that no one can hear what you are listening to. There may be tasks where using headphones might seem to work. If you are involved with repetitive work that has no people interaction, for instance. But working with distractions often has a negative result, and this is not how you want your performance impacted. Source: [Boston.com](#)

Read the story at the bottom of this instruction page.

Then with your partner discuss if employees should or should not be permitted to wear headphones in an OFFICE- we are not discussing working in a factory, warehouse or construction zone- where safety is a factor.

Write a summary document and list the pros and cons of permitting employees to use headphones in an OFFICE workplace. Save your file as headphones_Your names(s). Place the file in the class inbox.

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At Work, Do Headphones Really Help?

Workers Say Tuning Out Noise Improves Focus; But Brain Studies Show Music Can Also Distract



By SUE SHELLENBARGER

Marissa Yu works in a busy office, surrounded by 120 co-workers in a mostly open space. Yet when she has a question, needs an update or tries to reach some of her colleagues, she might as well talk to the wall.

"You call their name one, two, three, four times, and they're not responding," says Ms. Yu, director of interiors in Houston for PageSoutherlandPage, an architecture and engineering firm. "You dial their extension and they're not picking up. Pretty soon you're throwing rubber bands across the wall."



Michael Stravato for Wall Street Journal

The Houston office of PageSoutherlandPage, where about three-fourths of employees wear headphones or ear buds.

The culprit: ear buds playing music and noise-canceling headphones. Roughly three-quarters of Ms. Yu's co-workers wear them, and they're increasingly becoming de rigueur ear-wear in offices throughout the country. Many people argue that headphones are good at blocking distractions. And while a few employers ban their use, most tolerate it as a way for employees to regain some privacy in an open-plan office.

Research offers little support for the idea that listening to music improves concentration, says Robert Desimone, director of the McGovern Institute for Brain Research at MIT. In one of several small Taiwanese studies, listening to music with lyrics was linked to lower scores on tests of concentration in a study of 102 college students, published online earlier this year by the journal

Work. In separate research, listening to hip-hop music was linked to a significant reduction in reading-test scores, based on a study of 133 adults published in 2010 in the *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*.

A third study of 89 students ages 19 to 28, led by researchers at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan, found that workers who either loved or hated music being played where they were working scored lowest on tests of attention, compared with workers who didn't have strong feelings about the music or who worked in rooms without music. People naturally pay more attention to music they strongly like or dislike, hurting their ability to focus, the study says.

In the office, listening to music with lyrics while trying to read or write can distract employees by overtaxing verbal-processing regions of the brain, neuroscientists say.



Michael Stravato for Wall Street Journal (4)

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The prefrontal cortex, the brain's control center, must work harder to force itself not to process any strong verbal stimuli, such as catchy lyrics, that compete with the work you're attempting, Dr. Desimone says. The more cognitive work required to screen out unwanted input, the fewer cognitive resources remain for the task at hand. And the longer you try to concentrate amid competing distractions, the worse your performance is likely to be. "Attention takes mental effort, and we can get mentally tired," he says.

Individuals respond differently to music, scientists say. For some, a familiar piece of music without lyrics can serve as a sound-blocker, helping screen out a colleague's loud voice.

Using noise-reducing headphones can be an even stronger aid to concentration. Headphones can screen out as much as three-fourths of office noise, says Steven Orfield, president of Orfield Laboratories Inc., an architectural design, research and testing company in Minneapolis. But when you take them off, "for a couple of minutes, everything is going to sound way too loud for you" while your ears adjust, Mr. Orfield says. "You may be speaking louder" to others.

Noise-canceling headphones, which were developed by Bose Corp. for use by airline pilots more than 20 years ago, are often marketed to air travelers; they work especially well on planes because they help cancel the low-frequency rumble of jet engines. In an office, they may help quiet the higher-frequency sounds of speech and other ordinary activity, so "the user enjoys a controllable, comfortable level of loudness," says David Reynolds, a facility management consultant in Jackson, Miss. This reduces fatigue for some people, he says.

But headphones or ear buds can cause resentment among co-workers. Their use was cited as a major office-etiquette problem in a 2010 survey of 1,400 chief information officers by Robert Half Technology.

Micki Washington, 33, a project manager at PageSoutherlandPage, says she needs music to work but tunes in to instrumentals or Brazilian jazz, with lyrics in a language she can't understand. (Music with English lyrics can be so distracting that "I'll have a tendency to sing along.") She plays louder, faster music in the morning to help her wake up, and softer, classical tunes when she needs to concentrate on a proposal.

"That's how I operate. I have to have some kind of background sound," she says.

Employees at PageSoutherlandPage are free to do "whatever aids productivity," says Kurt Neubek, associate principal. While the company's open-office plan aids collaboration, "everybody needs heads-down time, and putting on headphones is an easy way to do that."

Patrick Ramsey, 24, a software engineer at Name.com, a Denver-based Internet domain-name registry and Web-hosting company, also listens mostly to instrumental music on ear buds, but only when he is writing code. Music interferes when he tries to write email or document summaries, but its "repetitive beat" helps him with the logical, step-by-step process of programming, he says.

He focuses so deeply that he almost jumped out of his skin when his boss, Bill Mushkin, tapped his shoulder recently while he was tuned into his favorite jazz-reggae group, Thievery Corporation.

Mr. Mushkin, Name.com's founder and CEO, says he just wanted to say hi and ask Mr. Ramsey for one of the bananas on his desk. He lets his 30 employees work in whatever way is best for them, he says. "The challenge is giving them what they need to do their jobs without letting the whole place go completely insane."

The trend toward open office design, with low or no partitions and lots of glass walls, can increase distractions and has made headphones more popular. Projected 2012 unit sales of headphones and earphones are up 41% since 2008, the Consumer Electronics Association says, and many of those new purchases will wind up at the office.

Alan Henry once sat at a cubicle on a previous job positioned between a conference-room door and the front door for the entire office, he says. Traffic past his desk was so heavy that he wore noise-canceling headphones, glossy black "Beats by Dr. Dre," nearly 70% of the time. When two co-workers grumbled that Mr. Henry was unapproachable, he explained his code: If they approached him and he removed the headphones from only one ear, he didn't have time to talk. But if he took off the entire headset, that "means I have time, and pull up a chair," says Mr. Henry, 32, of Washington, D.C., a writer for Lifehacker.com, a software and personal productivity site.

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