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Managing Your
SOUNDSCAPES

Managing your soundscapes in the workplace

Part of the *Managing Your Soundscapes* series provided by Akoio





Managing Soundscapes in the Workplace

Managing your workplace soundscapes can change everything! Most people spend over 35 hours a week in their workplace and their work environment has a major impact on how they feel about their lives. Whether you are happy, overwhelmed, stressed, or optimistic, there's a good chance your job (or even your spouse's job) is affecting your play, your relaxation, your rest, and your home. If you're spending a significant amount of time feeling stressed or uncomfortable at work — which adds up to one third of your waking hours — those negative effects will likely spill over into your home life. The good news is that there are things you can do to make your workspaces healthier and happier, which will undoubtedly make life better.

A major component of managing your environment is controlling your soundscape — the different types and levels of sounds or noise that you hear around you.

Your workplace soundscapes can particularly influence the course of your day. [Research has shown](#) that the sounds in our environment can change our mood and overall well-being, which can directly impact our productivity and motivation during work. [A good acoustic environment](#) can bring positive physiological and psychological changes to your body and mind.

Noisy Obstacles to Productivity

When trying to be productive at work, you've probably discovered that removing distractions helps you focus. Controlling noise levels is one way you can minimize distractions that make a big difference when it comes to productivity. Office workers can lose approximately 86 minutes per day [due to noise distractions](#). Ideally, your workspace soundscapes should help you get into a healthy state of mind to accomplish tasks.



High noise levels and loud sounds [decrease efficiency](#) when working, causing your [task accuracy and verbal reasoning](#) to go down. Loudness of noise can determine your quality of work, but so does the type of noise. Soundscapes in the workplace usually include hearing conversations of coworkers in the background. This specific noise can have a disrupting impact on your ability to complete tasks efficiently more than other types of sounds. Other office sounds that can cause annoyance include ringing phones, doors slamming, coughing and sneezing, and music.

[One study](#) found that people's scores on typing, math, and verbal reasoning tests decreased when listeners considered the noise they were hearing to be annoying. [Another study](#) showed office noise can also negatively affect memory and mental arithmetic ability. Even though it may seem like you are perfectly tuning out the sounds that surround you, they are still shaping the efficiency of your work environment.

Workplace Soundscapes and Physical Health

There are dangers of exposing yourself to very loud noises, such as a music concert, monster truck shows, or even the lawn mower. If you work in a place that has constant loud noise, chances are you've been trained on hearing safety. That's great! However, even low-level noises can hurt our productivity in the workplace, including those of us who sit in a cubicle or a home office. Just [the presence of low-level noise](#) in an open-office setting can result in poor task performance — especially tasks that require you to process and understand information. The presence of noise can even lead to a lack of motivation. In fact, your motivation might be so low that you forget to change your comfort or posture while at your desk, which can have lasting negative effects on your physical wellbeing.

Stress & Annoyance from Workplace Soundscapes

Noise can [cause anxiety](#), frustration, anger, and irritability. If you work in an open office setting, you may have even reported frustration from [unwanted noise](#). Certain types of noises in an office setting can disrupt productivity, but can also be [particularly detrimental](#) to overall well-being and stress levels in the workplace.

When it comes to [irritating sounds](#), you probably have an opinion about what sounds are annoying. Your coworkers might have a totally different opinion. Why is that? If you feel the noise around you is avoidable and unnecessary, like conversations or music, you will likely consider it more annoying and problematic. On the other hand, sounds that are not avoidable in your workplace, such as coworkers on calls, probably won't bother you as much. It depends on what you have control over. Becoming distracted from noise is related to how much control and predictability you have over the noise. Plus, if you can clearly hear conversations between your coworkers then you're more likely to get distracted.

Managing Workplace Soundscapes

So, now we know just how distracting and even unhealthy a noisy work environment can be, but what can be done about it?

High noise levels and loud sounds decrease efficiency when working, causing your task accuracy and verbal reasoning to go down.

[Nearly 30% of employees in open office spaces](#) (cubicles, no partitions) get frustrated by the sound environment in the office. Both employees and employers can help optimize their workplace soundscapes. Employers can take action and address noise issues with architecture and design of the office. Changing the acoustics in an office layout can make a significant difference in noise level, and therefore the productivity and morale of employees. For example, ceilings, windows and walls can be treated for better acoustics with sound absorbing panels. These can help by catching the soundwaves of unwanted noise. The beauty of your office does not need to suffer, though. Acoustic panels can be customized to complement the décor of the workplace.

Sound is much easier to control in a closed floor plan, but open spaces are popular for connecting and encouraging synergy. In either case, carefully chosen furniture can be useful for managing noise levels. Furniture can block or dampen sound waves, similar to acoustic panels. Soft furniture is better at absorbing sound than hard furniture. Employers can also [provide dedicated quiet and loud areas](#). Designating areas for employees to quietly work gives them the ability to control their noise levels and avoid negative feelings associated with unwanted office noise. The space dedicated for noise can be used for conversation and collaboration and avoid distracting employees who are trying to focus.

Infusing Positive Sounds into the Workplace

If you're looking to improve your workplace soundscapes, you might consider volunteering to help your office implement some of the ideas above.

There are some practical options that you can use to manage the soundscapes in



your own workspace, regardless of the larger office environment. Be sure to listen to devices at safe levels to protect your hearing!

Headphones. Noise-canceling headphones can be useful for removing unwanted noise and introducing positive sounds at the same time. Headphones can block the volume and clarity of conversations in your area, which decreases the likelihood of annoyance and distraction. Remember to keep the volume at a safe level when listening to sounds with headphones.

Broadband Noises (White, Pink, Brown Noise). Although there is a lot of emphasis on removing unwanted noises from your environment, introducing low level noise through a noise generator can mask distracting sounds. [Listening to broadband noise](#) (white noise, pink noise, brown noise) can positively influence your performance and improve workplace productivity. Personal desktop noise generators are simple, effective ways to introduce helpful noise into a space. You can also listen to the broadband noise via headphones.


Music. Listening to music while working can [help with stress management](#), mood, and productivity. The type of music you choose to listen to can vary depending on your personal preferences. If you need an idea of where to start, music with 50-80 beats per minute tends to help with creative tasks. But any enjoyable music may help you complete those boring and repetitive tasks faster.

Nature Sounds. [Listening to nature sounds](#) can reduce tension and anxiety in stressful

situations. Nature sounds specifically have many positive mental and physical benefits with helping to lift moods and boost performance levels.

Desktop Speakers. If you work in a private or semi-private area (personal office, partitioned cubicle), you may have the option to enrich your acoustic environment with desktop speakers. Personal speakers are great for listening to enjoyable music, broadband noise or nature sounds. Just make sure you're not upsetting the soundscapes of your coworkers.

Conclusion

There are many benefits to managing your workplace soundscapes. A good acoustic environment can improve morale and productivity while also reducing stress. If you're an employer, consider making design decisions to minimize noisy distractions in your office. Employees can use personal devices such as headphones and/or desktop speakers to enrich their personal workplace soundscapes. Collaboration between employers and employees when managing workplace noise can positively affect happiness and productivity. In the end, it's important to remember your soundscape has a significant influence over you, your mood, and your work. And, since happiness at work affects overall happiness, managing workplace soundscapes can lead to living better — for everyone. 

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