

Headphones at work help block distractions but could send the wrong signal

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As companies in Singapore push employees back into the office and re-emphasise face time, a small but telling behaviour has become increasingly noticeable: employees working with their headphones on.

The assumption is that headphones help people focus and get work done. Yet in workplaces where visibility still equates with engagement, that assumption is not universally shared.

Our recent research – a collaboration between Singapore Management University, Bilkent University, and the University of Florida – suggests that something as mundane as listening to music at work can shape how your colleagues see you and consequently, how they might respond to you, even if those perceptions may be inaccurate.

In practice, colleagues are constantly forming impressions based on what they observe, and those impressions can influence day-to-day interactions and informal evaluations. More broadly, research on workplace perception shows that when performance is not directly observable, people rely on visible cues to infer engagement and contribution.

For years, companies have encouraged employees to optimise their productivity. We are told to block out distractions, to focus deeply, and to use whatever tools help us perform at our best. Music has become one of the most common of these tools. But work does not happen in isolation. Offices are social environments in which colleagues are constantly observing one another to gauge approachability and openness to collaboration.

Listening to music is not as neutral as it seems. When someone sees you wearing headphones, they rarely know what you are actually doing – whether you are in a call, listening to music, or working independently. That uncertainty is what leads people to form quick judgments about your intent. In our research, these judgments tend to fall into two broad categories: either that you are using music to focus, or that you are using it to pass time.

Such interpretations typically happen quickly and often unconsciously, but they shape how others respond to you. If colleagues interpret headphone use or music listening as a sign of leisure rather than focus, they tend to see the person as less engaged, less serious or less committed towards their work.

Across multiple studies, including experimental and causal field designs with working adults, employees who were seen as “tuned out” received less support from colleagues and were more likely to experience subtle forms of incivility, such as being ignored,

Headphones at work help block distractions but could send the wrong signal

You may find them helpful, but colleagues could judge you poorly for wearing them.



The assumption is that working with headphones on helps people focus and get work done. But recent research shows that suggests that something as mundane as listening to music at work can shape how your colleagues see you and consequently, how they might respond to you. PHOTO: UNSPLASH

excluded, or treated curtly. What is particularly striking is that these reactions occur even when holding constant actual engagement.

COPING WITH NOISY OFFICES

It may be unfair to view headphone use as a sign of disengagement. In many workplaces, the conditions of

work have changed in ways that make such behaviour not only understandable, but in some cases necessary.

Over the past two decades, offices have become more open, collaborative, and dynamic. Traditional cubicles have given way to open-plan layouts, and organisations have placed increasing emphasis on interaction, teamwork, and

constant communication. These changes certainly have benefits. But they also make it harder to find uninterrupted time for focused work.

Many tasks still require concentration, reflection, and sustained attention, whether that is analysing complex data, drafting reports, or simply working through a backlog of e-mails. In such environments, headphones

function as a form of self-defence – a way to create temporary boundaries in spaces that lack them.

THE NEED FOR DEEP FOCUS

This reveals a tension at the heart of modern work. On the one hand, organisations encourage collaboration, accessibility, and visibility. On the other hand, they

expect employees to produce high-quality work that often requires deep focus. As physical barriers in the workplace have come down, employees have improvised and constructed new ones.

The rise of headphones is a response to the competing demands of modern work. And unless organisations provide alternative ways for employees to focus, such as quiet spaces or clearer norms around interruptions, this behaviour is likely to persist.

Neither will the social consequences disappear. Even when headphone use is motivated by a need for focus, it can still be read as disengagement. The challenge is not to eliminate such behaviour, but to address the underlying issues.

For employees, this creates an uncomfortable reality. In principle, you should be judged on your output. In practice, you are also judged on the signals you send. Managing those signals becomes part of one's appraisal on professional competence, whether we like it or not.

Simple adjustments can help. Make intent visible – for example, by signalling you are on headphones to focus. Small, informal gestures can support this, such as a quick message on a team chat, a calendar block marked “focus time”, or a light-hearted “focus mode” note at one's desk. How headphone use is interpreted, however, depends less on a single moment and more on the broader pattern of behaviour others observe over time.

For organisations, the implications for workplace collaboration and communication are deeper. Instead of relying on visible cues, supervisors should clarify expectations around availability and proactively check assumptions before drawing conclusions about performance and commitment.

More importantly, organisations can design environments that better support focused work – whether through quiet spaces or designated “no interruption” periods. Ultimately, the deeper shift must be towards genuinely outcome-based evaluation rather than proxy signals of busyness or presence.

Listening to music at work may seem trivial. But it reveals a broader truth about today's workplace. As offices become more open and collaborative, the need for focus has not diminished. It has simply taken new forms that are not always understood as intended.

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