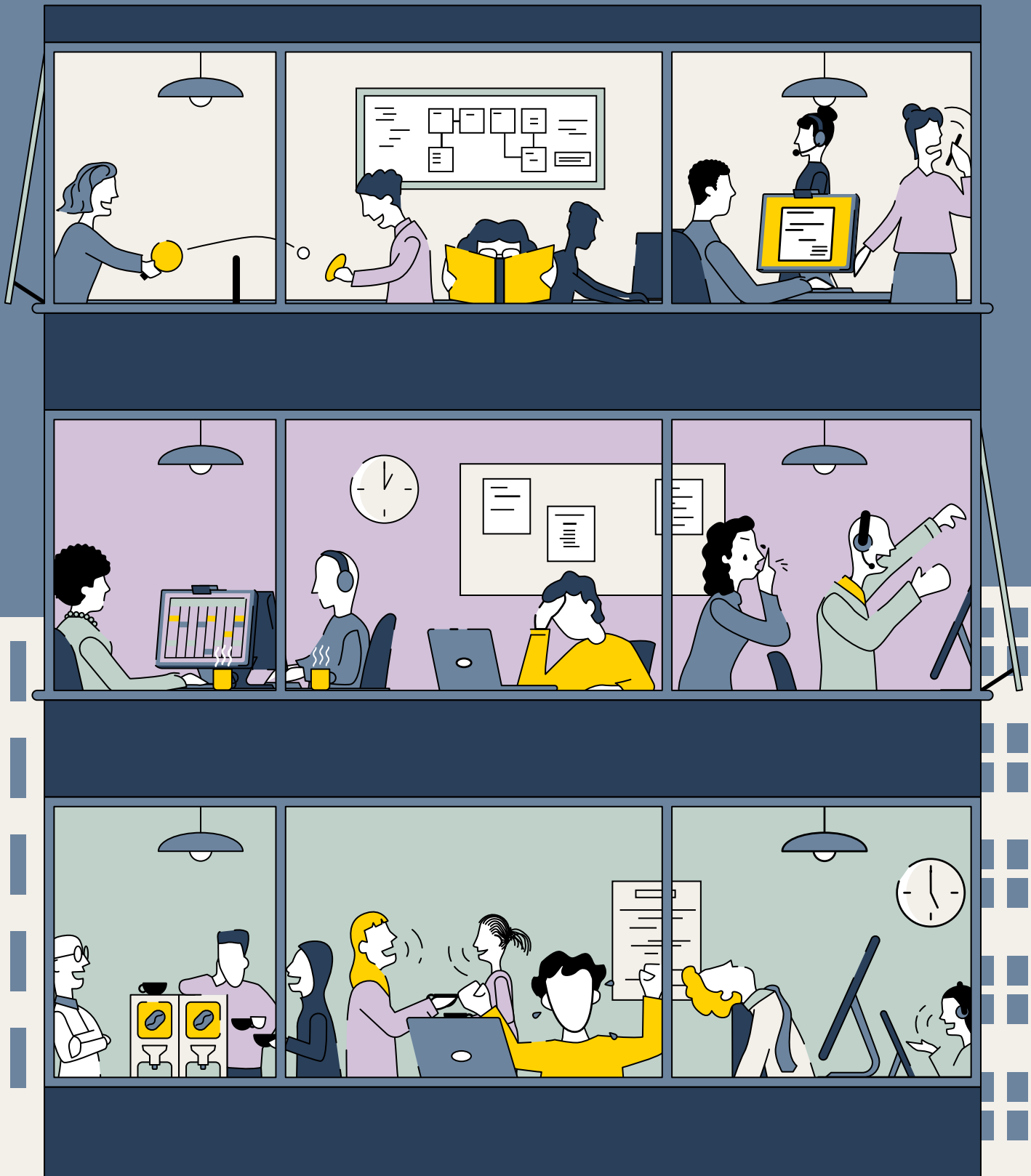


# Making the workplace sound better

The impact of noise on wellbeing and productivity



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INTRODUCTION

# The impact of noise on wellbeing and productivity



**When companies mandated return-to-offices after the pandemic, many redesigned offices to hybrid work by downscaling desk spaces<sup>1</sup>. As most employees only come into the office a few days a week, the use of the office space has consequently changed<sup>2</sup>. Yet how that's changed and increased noise levels remain overlooked. As employees converge on the office sporadically, the shift to online meetings has unexpectedly invaded open-plan spaces, with meetings happening simultaneously around us as we try to focus on work. In this new era of our workspace, it's increasingly important to consider noise and sounds.**

Noise is a constant work companion for knowledge workers, whether we're in deep concentration or mid-collaborative brainstorm. From the traditional office to our home workspaces, it echoes around us, inadvertently impacting our productivity and wellbeing along the way. But why should we pay attention to this background companion?

It's not a new insight that noise can have negative consequences. The significance of noise extends beyond mere annoyance. Recognized by the World Health Organization as an environmental risk, noise carries the weight of both immediate and long-term effects on our cognitive, emotional, and physical health<sup>3</sup>. The type of sound, its intensity, and our personal sensitivity to it can profoundly shape our workday, yet the detrimental effects of noise and poor audio quality often go unnoticed by employers.

In recent years, the conversation around wellbeing and work-life balance has gained momentum. It's time for sound environments to enter the chat.

So, in this report, we delve into the pervasive influence of sound, explore how it affects us, assess the coping strategies we employ, and pitch the proactive steps companies can take to improve employee wellbeing.

This report isn't just about revealing the impact of noise and sound that most of us can recognize; it's about uncovering the real impact of noise on our mental state and productivity during work hours. We're also zooming in on the positive changes that rethinking how sound and noise can be mitigated or avoided brings. With the insights in this report comes concrete solutions on how companies can improve wellbeing for employees and enhance their ability to work uninterrupted by sound and noise.

We surveyed 2,000 knowledge workers across the United States, Germany, United Kingdom and France, asking them about productivity, wellbeing, performance, and the impacts of sound.

<sup>1</sup>Time, Companies are finally designing offices for the new work reality, May 22, 2023

<sup>2</sup>Jabra Mind the Gap Global Report 2024

<sup>3</sup>Oscar acoustics, Understanding the impact of working in a noisy office, Mar 30, 2023

# The struggle against office noise

To kick things off, we first wanted to understand how noise and loud environments are perceived before diving into the consequences. For many knowledge workers – often working in open-office spaces – noise isn't a new issue. So, to assess the implications it can have, we asked employees what they do to cope in a noisy work environment.



THE STRUGGLE AGAINST OFFICE NOISE

# 1. The cost of noise in the workplace

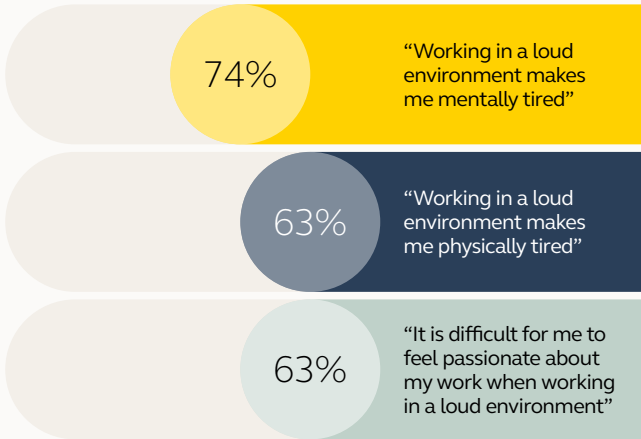
In many workplaces, it can be difficult to avoid noise completely, whether knowledge workers work from the office, home or a third location. Different places serve up different noise levels, but the impact is subjective. For some employees, it might be more of a headache than for others.

Yet, while most companies are aware of this, they still underestimate the importance of considering noise and sound in the workplace. With many companies continuing flexible working arrangements, companies have less control over their employees' work environments, making it more difficult for employers to account for a noisy environment and mitigate its impact. Meanwhile, companies demanding return-to-office might experience that noise becomes a bigger issue for their workforce. By understanding the scale of the noise issue and the potential costs of it, businesses can act against it.

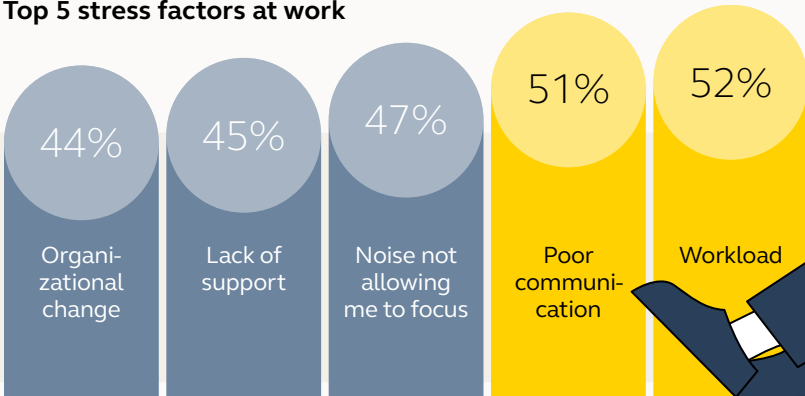
To figure this out, we asked knowledge workers how impacted they feel by a range of factors at work. Not accounting for where they work, whether in the office or from home, noise was considered the third highest stress factor, with almost half of those surveyed saying it stresses them out.

With noise being the third most stressful factor at work, we asked how different environments impact employees, and found that this stress not only leads to fatigue but also significantly drains their energy and dampens their work passion. This should be a critical concern to employers, as they can actively consider solutions that can reduce or manage noise impact on the employees. We'll explore these later in the report.

Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement



Top 5 stress factors at work



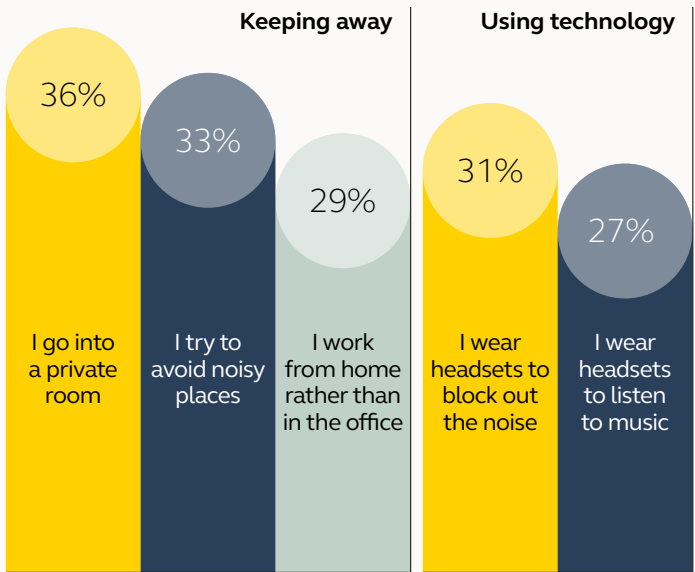
THE STRUGGLE AGAINST OFFICE NOISE

# 2. Strategies to escape the noise

Not only is noise making employees feel stressed, but also mentally and physically tired, so we looked at what they do to combat it. From finding somewhere quieter to blocking noise out, employees use escape strategies that help them cope with noise or elude it altogether. These methods are often quite creative, with 9% pretending they are in a meeting and 10% claiming to go to the toilet to limit noise or distractions in their workplace. But, luckily, the most used escape strategies aren't about expanding the number of toilets, but much simpler and easier for employers to accommodate.

These escape strategies suggest that to get the work done, employees lack the space or tools needed for a better sound environment that allows them to focus. 1 in 3 try to spend as little time as possible in noisy places, but headsets are also a popular choice to block out noise. Ultimately, companies can gain a lot by considering how their employees use their workspaces and tools. By finding out how knowledge workers in a hybrid work era use the office spaces and the technology they have available, it is easier for companies to consider what changes to implement to reduce noise impact.

If you need to concentrate, how do you limit noise or distractions in your workplace?



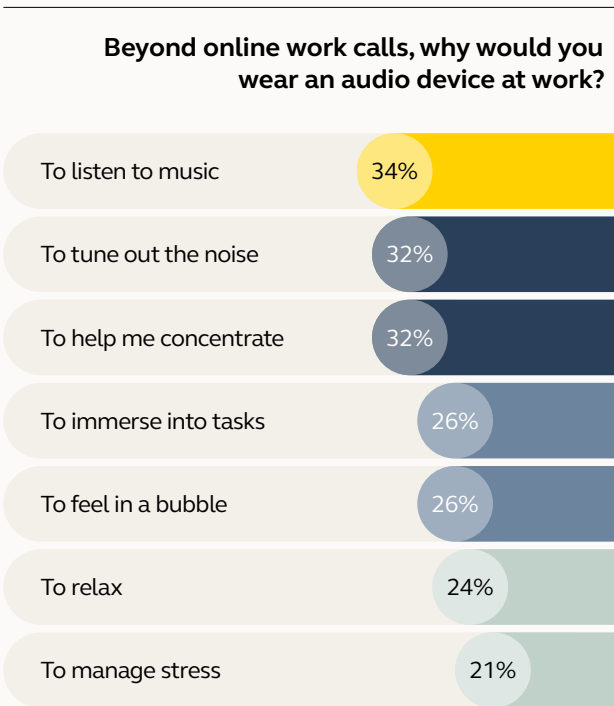
THE STRUGGLE AGAINST OFFICE NOISE

# 3. The role of technology in noise mitigation

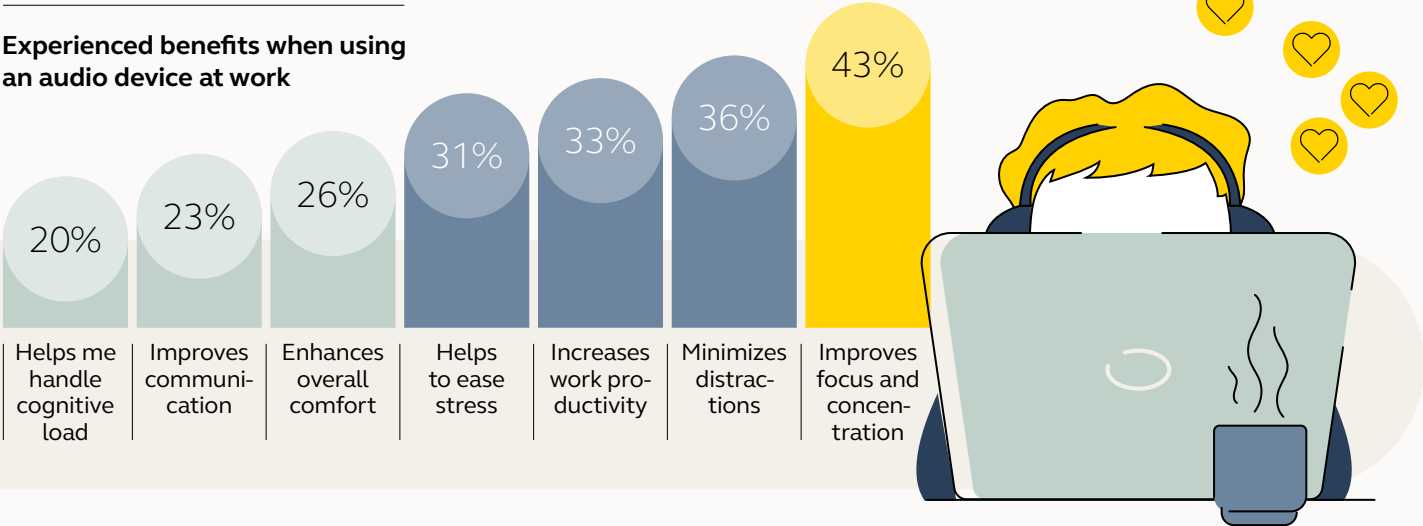
Noise is proven to significantly disturb knowledge workers, prompting them to seek ways to avoid it. But what can companies do to help their employees limit distractions instead of simply swerving away from them?

Our research has revealed that noise significantly disrupts knowledge workers, leading them to actively seek ways to minimize distractions in their work environment. One of the most preferred methods for mitigating surrounding noise is by using headsets to block it out or replace it with more conducive sounds. But how are headsets used?

Often, a headset at work is used for online meetings and calls, but headsets can serve other purposes too. They are also utilized to enhance focus and productivity, with nearly half of the surveyed knowledge workers reporting positive effects on their work performance and stress levels when wearing a headset. This indicates that it's not just important to consider minimizing noise in the workplace, but it's also important to consider what helps employees to increase their focus and ability to perform their work. And our research shows, that wearing an audio device can play a crucial role in creating a conducive work environment for employees.



**Experienced benefits when using an audio device at work**



# How noise can deflate workplace productivity

As part of our research, we explored the relationship between sound and productivity. Studies have shown that when the noise level goes up our productivity and ability to focus tends to go down<sup>1</sup>. As we've shifted back into the office spaces after working from home during the pandemic, changing a quieter workspace with a noisier and busier environment, this has posed challenges to productivity. And we know that the feeling of being productive is important to knowledge workers. 90% finds it important to get things done at work and 86% expresses that feeling a sense of achievement is a top priority, however managing time and distractions are top improvement points at work. This led us to explore the impact of noise on productivity.



<sup>1</sup>Fast Company, New research explains why returning to the office will be a struggle for ours brains, May 9, 2023



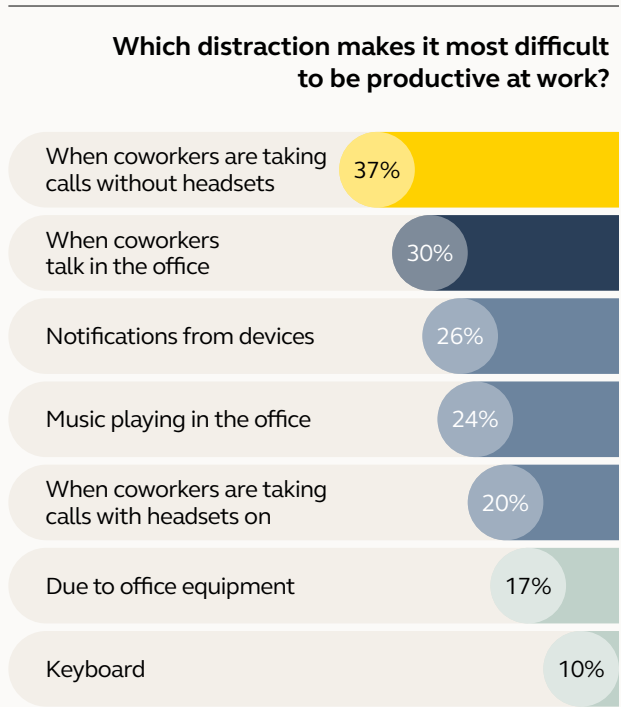
HOW NOISE CAN DEFLATE WORKPLACE PRODUCTIVITY

# 1. The cost of distraction

When employees feel disturbed by noise and experience fatigue, it can result in less productive work. However, since noise comes in many forms, different noises and distractions require different solutions to limit them. We looked at which disturbances make it most difficult for knowledge workers to be productive.

Surprisingly, it's not heavy-handed keyboard clattering or whirring printers creating the most harmful office noise - it's actually talkative colleagues. With most offices housing several individuals in a shared space, this can be a challenging issue to resolve.

But companies can help their workers tune out unwanted noise by providing technology or designated spaces that reduce noise from others. In fact, our research shows that more than half find it easy to work when coworkers are taking calls wearing headsets around them. Not only can audio devices help individuals to block out noise and increase focus, but it also helps mitigate the noise generated from when other colleagues are on calls.



HOW NOISE CAN DEFLATE WORKPLACE PRODUCTIVITY

# 2. The quality of audio technology also matters

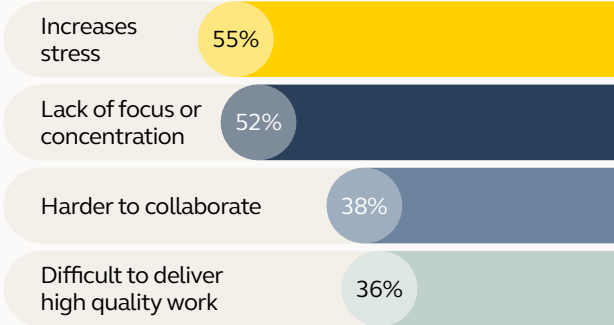
But how about all the time we spend in meetings? Using audio technology to make sure we can participate in calls? Well, we need to consider those sounds too. If we look at the headsets used for work, we know that not all employees are using a professional headset. But not all headsets are created equal or capable of serving professional work needs. Which is why we delved into the role of audio technology and the critical nature of sound quality in the workplace.

With 2 in 3 meetings now taking place online, using a headset at work has become much more normal<sup>1</sup>. This trend is reflected in the expectations for knowledge workers to wear a headset, with 7 out of 10 stating that it's expected to wear any headset, and a similar number indicating that professional headsets are expected in the workplace. When we surveyed knowledge workers in 2022, only 30% of office workers reported using a headset regularly, compared with 61% and 68% of hybrid and remote workers, respectively<sup>2</sup>. While these numbers have likely improved in recent years, the failure to use a headset or professional audio device specifically designed for work may also contribute to the negative impact of noise and sound.

When we know how detrimental noise and sound can be, the type of headset used for online meetings is not irrelevant. Whether it's microphones with poor voice pickup, headsets unable to cancel out

background noise or scratchy sound, headsets with poor audio quality can affect employees just as much as surrounding workspace noise. More than half of knowledge workers find it impacts them negatively leading to increased stress, decreased focus, and heightened fatigue. Let's explore how companies can solve this.

**How does poor audio quality during calls or video meetings negatively impact your wellbeing?**



**Workplace expectations for behavior during online calls**



<sup>1</sup>Jabra Hybrid Ways of Working 2023 Global Report <sup>2</sup>Jabra Hybrid Ways of Working 2022 Global Report

HOW NOISE CAN DEFLATE WORKPLACE PRODUCTIVITY

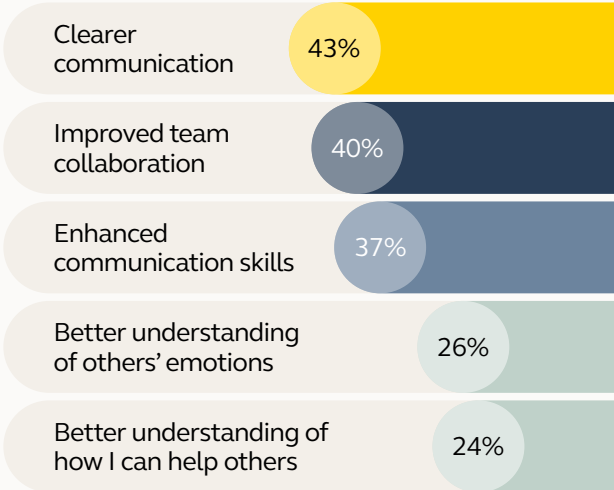
# 3. Improving productivity and meetings with technology

We've just learned that poor audio quality can have serious negative impacts. So, what can companies do about it?

It's about recognizing the significance of audio technology for both online meeting quality and employees' work wellbeing. With hybrid work, many companies rely on technology for collaborating from different places. And whether it's a speakerphone or a headset, this research shows that poor audio quality has consequences for the employees and the company as it prevents their employees from doing their job. Given the amount of time workers spend wearing headsets and the impact of poor audio quality, companies can benefit from consider its need for collaboration technology and what such an investment can benefit.

The findings in the research indicates that knowledge workers experience better collaboration and benefits from higher quality technology. Therefore, we can see that ensuring better quality audio technology makes a difference to knowledge workers' productivity.

How do you believe higher quality meeting audio can impact your interpersonal skills in the workplace?



# The sound of wellbeing in the workplace

At the end of the day, it's important that everyone feels good at work. This sentiment is echoed by the growing emphasis on wellbeing among employees. Our latest research on generations at work revealed that flexibility and work-life balance are key benefits employees value<sup>1</sup>. This shift in priorities has been a response to the burnout crisis, hustle culture and the pandemic, where wellbeing grew in importance. Research has consistently shown that wellbeing is essential for productivity, and a Deloitte study found that 57% of employees are seriously considering quitting for a job that better supports their wellbeing<sup>2</sup>. Investing and prioritizing is key for organizations to keep their employees and support them in their daily work, as we found that to 90% of knowledge workers maintaining good mental health at work is a top priority. So, how do surrounding sounds and taking care of one's wellbeing go together?



<sup>1</sup>Jabra Mind the Gap Global Report 2024

<sup>2</sup>Deloitte, The C-suite's role in well-being, June 22, 2022.

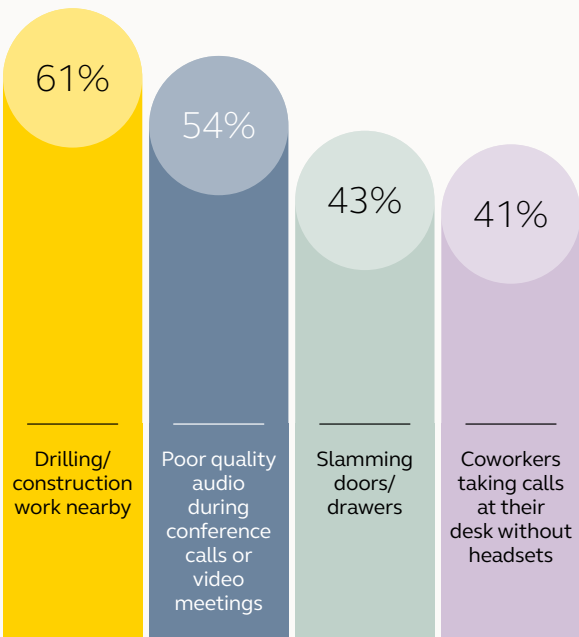
THE SOUND OF WELLBEING IN THE WORKPLACE

# 1. Mental health in the workplace: the noise factor

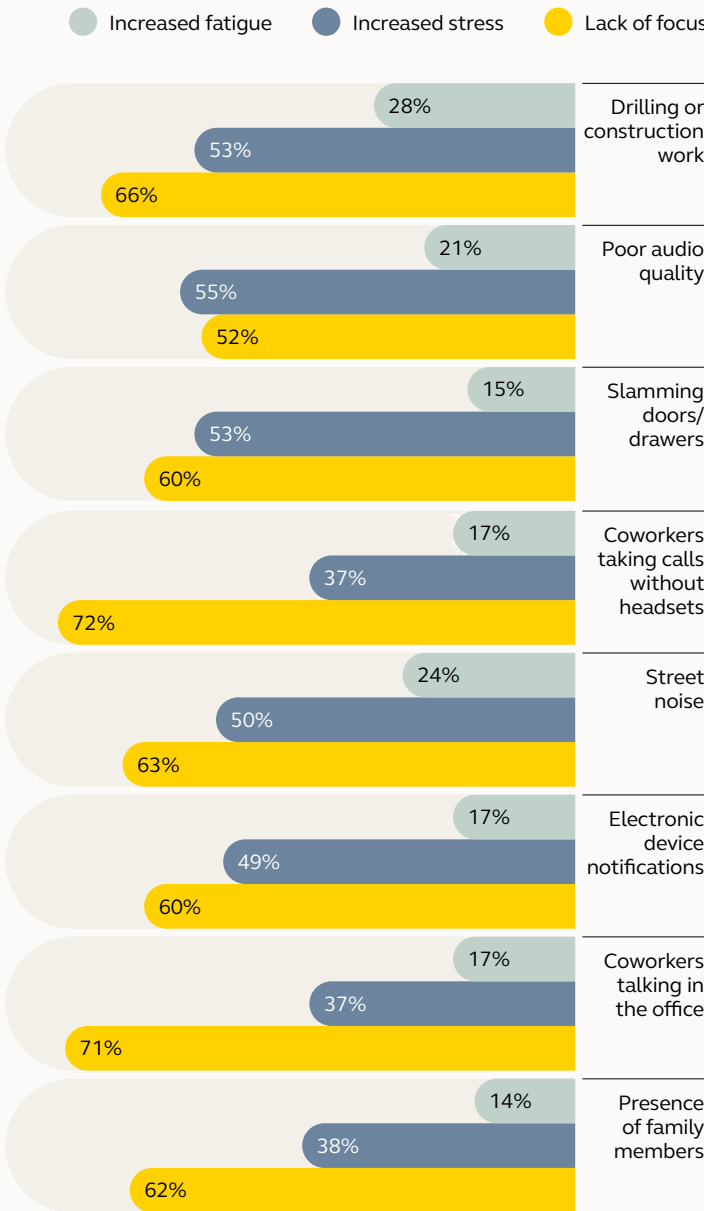
By now, we know that noise and poor-quality audio can massively impact employees' productivity and wellbeing. But what are the actual consequences of noise for employees' mental wellbeing?

Noise has negative consequences for most of the knowledge workers we surveyed. Our data reveals that working in a loud environment actively works against the wellbeing of employees, as they report that several noise factors make them exhausted, stressed, less focused, and less motivated. As such, loud environments create negative consequences for individuals and the company they work for, when noise limits employees' ability to deliver at work.

**Top 4 types of sound/noise with negative impact on mental wellbeing at work**



**How does different types of sound/noise negatively impact your wellbeing?**



THE SOUND OF WELLBEING IN THE WORKPLACE

# 2. The benefits of a sound-supportive environment

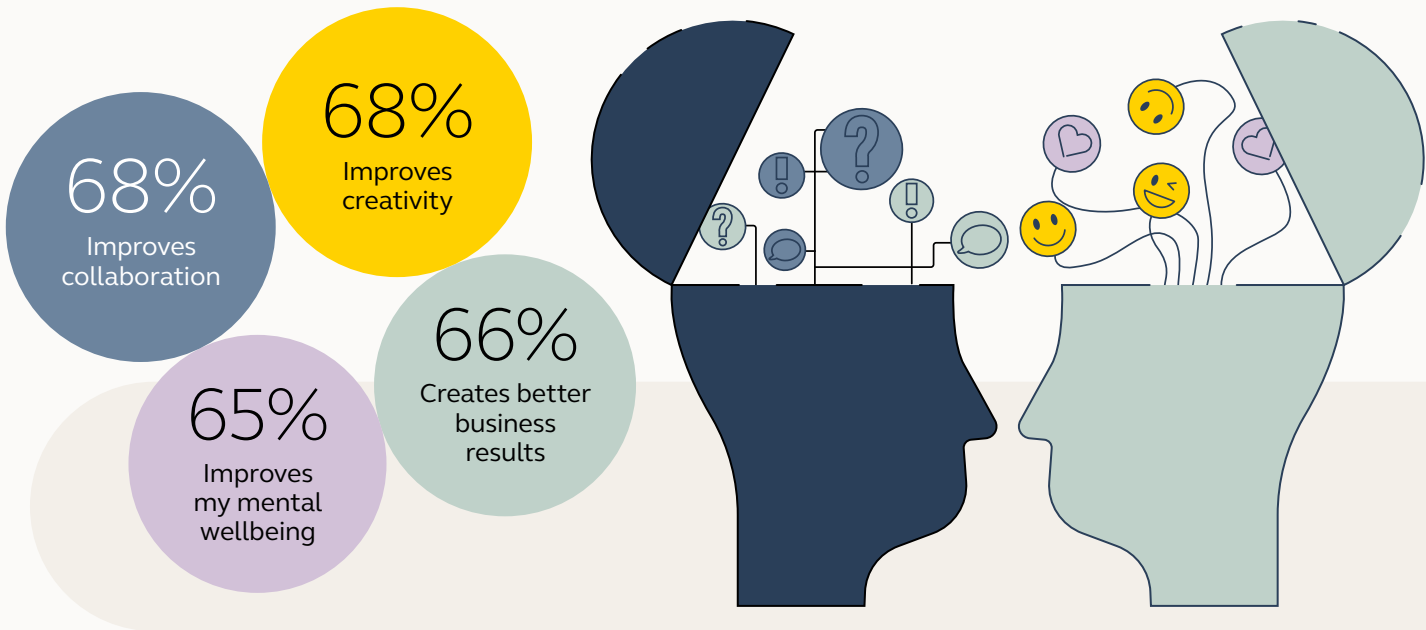
So now we know a noisy environment has negative impacts, let's consider what the optimal setup would be for most employees. Companies must acknowledge that every workplace comprises individuals with different needs and tolerance levels. And with an increasing neurodiverse workforce, it makes it even more crucial for companies to consider different needs in all elements of workplace design<sup>1</sup>.

That means it's essential for them to create an environment that supports the best possible conditions for each individual to perform their job effectively. Some may prioritize fresh air while others thrive with music in the background. Additionally, there might be some individuals who require complete silence around them. How can employers accommodate the wellbeing of every single employee?

It's important to understand the kind of work environments that suit employees best. While everyone is unique, employers can create a more inclusive workplace by acknowledging that individuals experience office noise differently.

When we asked knowledge workers about their preferred work sound conditions, most favored a moderately balanced environment. However, sound preferences can vary widely. For example, few people thrive in a noisy environment, yet this is a significant risk with the open office designs. Meanwhile, the majority can feel comfortable in a moderately silent environment with some/ minimal sounds and music.

Perceived benefits of an inclusive, neurodiverse workplace



<sup>1</sup>Fortune, Neurodivergent employees aren't disclosing their conditions at work because they worry it will hurt their career, May 15, 2024

# THE SOUND OF WELLBEING IN THE WORKPLACE

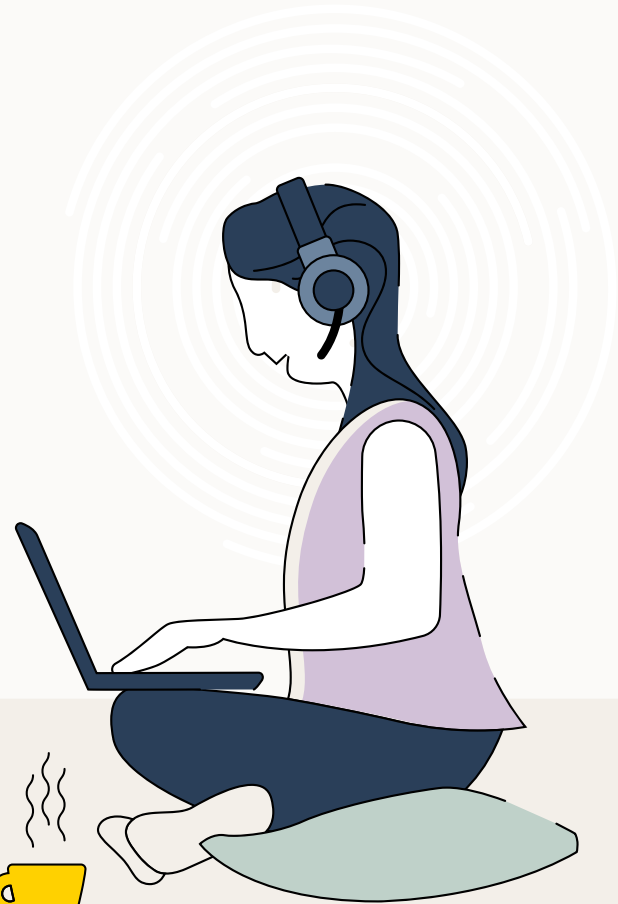
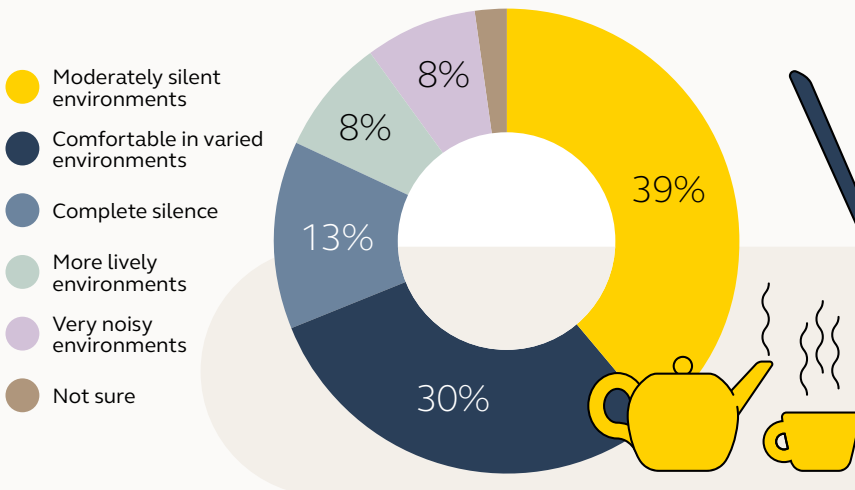
The neurodiversity of a workforce is especially an important consideration here, too, which is why we also set out to understand what awareness knowledge workers had of neurodiversity in the workplace. This refers to the recognition and acceptance of natural variations in cognitive functioning and styles among employees. This concept was familiar to many surveyed but completely new to 41%. Overall, having different cognitive ways of thinking was recognized as a potential benefit to companies, as long as the fact that individuals have very different needs from their workplace environment was considered.

It's nothing new to design for tolerable noise circumstances in office buildings. But why does it remain important for companies to consider different noise tolerances and accommodate diverse sound environments? Quite simply because employees experience a series of benefits from working in their optimal environments. It has a notable impact on both wellbeing and ability to perform, and workplaces are shown to impact and shape our sense of self<sup>1</sup>. In what they consider their optimal sound environment, knowledge workers see significant improvement in their wellbeing such as decreased stress, better mood, and overall improved wellbeing. This isn't just about comfort; it's about enabling workers to perform at their best. By prioritizing a good noise-level environment, employers can foster a more productive and content workforce, which is essential for both individual success and broader organizational performance.

## What are the primary benefits you experience when you are in your preferred sound environment?



## What are your optimal sound conditions at work?



<sup>1</sup>How your physical surroundings shape your work life, Harvard Business Review, April 11, 2023.

THE SOUND OF WELLBEING IN THE WORKPLACE

# 3. Designing for better employee wellbeing

So how can companies accommodate the sound needs of knowledge workers? There are some concrete solutions that can improve the workplace environment and create the best sound environment for everyone.

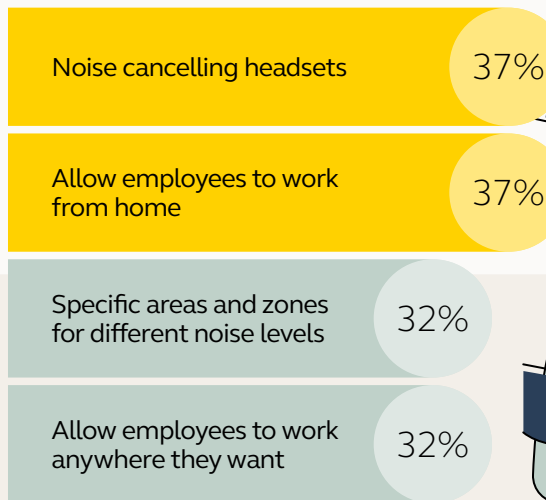
Tailoring office design to accommodate different noise tolerances is one approach. Creating zones in the office that cater to various activities and their associated noise levels allow workers to choose spaces that suit their need for quiet or ambient sound. This concept of quiet zones, collaboration zones, and the like is a popular suggestion among knowledge workers and already adopted by companies as for example LinkedIn<sup>1</sup>.

Another popular strategy among knowledge workers is allowing employees to work from home. This option is highly valued by knowledge workers as it gives them more control over their work life and the ability to improve their wellbeing by creating their personal best-performing environment.

And we know from previous research that having the autonomy and flexibility to choose a workplace has positive effects on not only employees' wellbeing at work but also likelihood in choosing a job<sup>2</sup>.

Lastly, noise-cancelling headsets are seen as a vital tool by many knowledge workers. This study confirms that headsets are not only used to block out distractions but also to enhance focus and productivity. Providing high quality noise-cancelling headsets is a top solution that workers believe can mitigate the negative effects of noise in the workplace.

**In your opinion, how can your workplace better address the impact of disruptive sounds on your mental wellbeing?**



<sup>1</sup>LinkedIn's new 'postures matrix' is shaping how its new headquarters handles hybrid work, Fast Company, July 7, 2022.

<sup>2</sup>Jabra Mind the Gap Global Report 2024



# Conclusive thoughts



**It's now clear that the soundscapes of our work environments hold significant sway over our productivity and wellbeing. The data speaks volumes: noise is not just a nuisance; it's a critical workplace factor that demands attention.**

The future of work is not just about where we work, but how the environment, we work in, affects our work. Employers who listen to the needs of knowledge workers and invest in employee wellbeing will be the frontrunners in an increasingly competitive landscape. By implementing changes such as acoustically diverse work zones, flexible work policies, and access to high-quality audio equipment, companies can create spaces where concentration and collaboration harmoniously coexist.

Moreover, as flexible work continues to blur the lines between office and home, the responsibility of employers to ensure a conducive work environment extends beyond the physical office. Providing resources and guidance for setting up an optimal home office space can be just as impactful and business critical for the company.

Looking forward, as AI continues to evolve and virtual agents become ubiquitous, the increasing use of voice interfaces will lead to a significant rise in headset adoption. Consequently, with the inevitable surge in ambient noise levels in offices, it is crucial for organizations to prioritize employee wellbeing by implementing effective noise management strategies. Addressing this emerging challenge will be essential to maintaining productivity and fostering a conducive work environment.

In embracing these changes, companies not only enhance the immediate work experience but also invest in the long-term health and satisfaction of their employees. A sound-supportive workplace is not a luxury; it's a strategic asset that can lead to a more engaged, efficient, and loyal workforce. Investing in technology or workways that enable workers to better cope with sound can be a game-changer to not only companies but their employees too. But in order to capture the benefits of a better sounding work environment in the future of work, leaders must incorporate these key findings and suggested solutions into their organizations and the daily work lives of their employees.

## Methodology

This survey was conducted online within the United States, United Kingdom, France and Germany by Team Lewis on behalf of Jabra from March 27, 2024 – April 5, 2024, among 2,000 knowledge workers (500 per country). Knowledge workers are defined as full- or part-time employees who mostly work in front of a computer and have online meetings at least a few times per month. This online survey is not based on a probability sample and therefore no estimate of theoretical sampling error can be calculated. The survey includes respondents from the following generations: Gen Z (ages 18-27), Millennials (28-43), Gen X (44-59), and Baby Boomers (60-65).

## Find out more

If you have any questions about Jabra products, please contact your Jabra representative or visit [Jabra.com](https://www.jabra.com)

### WHO WE ARE

Hej. (That's 'hi' in Danish.) We're Jabra and we've been engineering technology that makes life look and sound better for over 150 years. And you? Well, you might be running a million-dollar account from your kitchen (or café, or school run, or just about anywhere really). Or running a project via video, beaming yourself from a Toronto armchair to a Tokyo boardroom. Whatever you've got going on, we've got you. With advanced, intelligent video technology. And an incredible sound quality that makes your voice and your music sound better than ever. All designed to bring life and work wonderfully in tune.

**Jabra. Technology for life's new rhythm.**