

# Soundtrack To Success: The Role of Music In Enhancing Workplace Productivity

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Picture this: you're sitting at your desk, staring at a seemingly never-ending stack of tasks. The silence in the office is deafening, and your motivation is plummeting faster than a lead balloon. But then, a familiar tune starts playing softly in the background. Suddenly, your mood lifts, your focus sharpens, and you find yourself humming along as you tackle your work with renewed energy. It's the magic of music at work.

Music has long been recognized as a powerful tool for boosting our mood, enhancing productivity, and creating a more engaging work environment. From the gym to restaurants, music has been used to shape atmospheres and brand images. So it's no surprise that white-collar workplaces are harnessing the power of music too. More and more companies are carefully selecting background music to play throughout the working day, with the goal of increasing productivity and making the office a more enjoyable place to be.



In the past, headphones were a common sight in the office, allowing employees to create their own personal soundtracks. But now, companies are taking it a step further by curating playlists specifically designed to enhance the work experience. Some even enlist the help of professionals like Rob Wood, the founder and creative director of Music Concierge, a company

that specializes in curating playlists for businesses. This growing trend is not only driven by the desire to improve productivity but also by the need to re-engage employees returning to work in a post-pandemic world.

However, playing music in the workplace is not without its risks. An offensive lyric or an inappropriate song choice can lead to distractions, annoyance, or even legal trouble. In fact, a recent ruling by a US federal appeals court stated that playing explicit music in the workplace could be considered discrimination and harassment. So, it's essential for companies to strike the right balance and choose music that is enjoyable and appropriate for all employees.

## **THE MOST POPULAR MUSIC IN OFFICES**

To get a sense of the music that is sound tracking office work today, we delved into the data from Spotify, one of the most popular music streaming platforms. We analyzed 60 public playlists, containing over 10,000 songs, created by users specifically for office listening.

Surprisingly, a handful of artists emerged as the favorites across these playlists. Ed Sheeran, the chart-topping singer-songwriter, appeared on almost two-thirds of the sampled playlists. The Weeknd and Justin Bieber also featured prominently, each appearing on over half of the playlists.

When it comes to specific songs, the most playlisted tracks were all pop hits from the past two decades. The Weeknd's "Blinding Lights" (released in 2019) and Natasha Bedingfield's 2004 single "Unwritten" topped the list, accumulating a staggering 4 billion plays on the platform.

## **WHY POP MUSIC PREVAILS**

You might be wondering why pop music reigns supreme in office playlists. Is it simply a lack of imagination on the part of playlist creators? According to Nicola Dibben, a professor of music at the University of Sheffield, familiar songs and genres are better suited for background listening.

"Pop music is something we hear a lot of, we're all really expert listeners if we've been listening to the radio over our lives," she explains. "Your brain has learned the conventions of the style. Therefore, it's something we can follow more easily, making it less disruptive to other things that we're doing."

In contrast, more experimental and unpredictable genres require more cognitive processing power, making them harder to habituate to and allowing them to draw more attention away from work. So, while pop music may not be the most groundbreaking or avant-garde choice, it does provide a familiar and less distracting background for employees.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF GREAT OFFICE MUSIC**

Choosing the right music for the office goes beyond selecting a specific genre. Research shows that various characteristics of a song can impact worker happiness and productivity. For example, music that is linear and consistent, without dominant vocals or changing rhythm patterns, is best for concentration. These characteristics prevent the music from grabbing employees' attention and disrupting their focus.

However, this doesn't mean that office playlists should be dull or monotonous. Rhythm and energy can still be present, as long as the music isn't too overwhelming or complex. So, there's room for variety and upbeat tunes that can keep employees engaged without causing distractions.

Another important factor is the emotional impact of the music. Happy and cheerful tunes have been found to boost performance, focus, and even encourage more cooperative behavior among employees. This is because listening to happy music releases hormones like dopamine and oxytocin in the brain, creating a positive and motivating atmosphere.

On the other hand, songs in minor keys, which tend to have a gloomier mood, can increase stress levels and narrow attention spans. Wordy music, such as hip-hop, can overload the verbal-processing regions of the brain, making it harder to concentrate on tasks<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, explicit lyrics can be particularly contentious in the workplace and may cause discomfort or offend employees.

## **CREATING SPACES WITH MUSIC**

Choosing the right music for the office goes beyond creating a generic playlist. It's about understanding the specific needs and energy levels throughout the day and tailoring the music accordingly. For example, if employees tend to feel sluggish after lunch, the music can be designed to pick them up and boost their energy at those specific intervals.

At IA Interior Architects, an interior design firm, the power of music is utilized to create intentional experiences in the workplace. For instance, they were challenged by a technology company to encourage its staff to take the stairs instead of the elevator. To achieve this, IA designed a playlist with 4/4 rhythms that matched the rhythmic movements of climbing stairs. The result? A staircase party and a gathering spot that employees enjoyed, all thanks to the intentional use of music.

## **HOW TO CHOOSE OFFICE MUSIC**

Now that you understand the benefits and considerations of office music, you might be wondering how to choose the right playlist for your workplace. Here are some factors to consider:

### **1. AUTONOMY AND INCLUSIVITY**

Giving employees some control over the music they listen to can lead to higher job satisfaction and performance. Allowing them to have a say in the music selection fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment within the team<sup>1</sup>. Rather than force-feeding employees someone else's taste, create opportunities for collaboration and input.

For example, you can have a shared speaker where anyone can queue up tracks or even organize a weekly "song wars" session. During song wars, employees can anonymously submit songs on a chosen theme, sparking discussions and creating a sense of camaraderie.

## 2. CONSIDER LICENSING REQUIREMENTS

Before implementing music in the workplace, it's important to ensure compliance with music licensing regulations. Any business or organization that plays or performs music needs a music license. This includes commercial premises, workplaces, and even music played through radios, TVs, computers, or smart speakers. In the UK, businesses can obtain a license from music industry body PPL PRS, with fees calculated based on usage.

## 3. EMPLOYEE PREFERENCES AND DIVERSITY

When curating playlists, take into account the diverse preferences of your employees. Consider different genres, artists, and eras to create a well-rounded selection that appeals to a wide range of tastes. This inclusivity can foster a positive and engaging work environment where everyone feels represented and respected.

## 4. ADAPTABILITY AND FLEXIBILITY

Remember that the music preferences of employees may change over time. Be open to evolving your playlist and adapting it to the shifting tastes and needs of your workforce. Regularly seek feedback and suggestions from employees to ensure that the music remains fresh and enjoyable for everyone.

## 5. BALANCE AND VARIETY

Strive to strike a balance between familiarity and novelty in your playlist. While familiar songs can provide a sense of comfort and ease, introducing new and exciting tracks can help prevent monotony and keep employees engaged. Consider creating theme-based playlists, such as "Throwback Thursdays" or "Feel-Good Fridays," to add variety and create a sense of anticipation and fun in the office.

## 6. TEST AND ITERATE

Don't be afraid to experiment with different types of music and observe the impact on employee productivity and mood. Conduct surveys or gather feedback to gauge the effectiveness of the music in your workplace. Use this information to refine and optimize your playlist over time.

## **CONCLUSION**

Music has a remarkable impact on our emotions, focus, and overall well-being. In the workplace, the right music can enhance productivity, boost mood, and create a more engaging environment. By carefully curating playlists that cater to employees' preferences, considering the characteristics of great office music, and embracing inclusivity, companies can harness the power of music to create a positive and productive work experience.

So, the next time you find yourself in need of a little motivation or a mood boost at work, why not plug in your headphones or turn up the office playlist? After all, a few hours of Ed Sheeran or your favorite pop hits might just be the perfect soundtrack to a productive day.