

My co-worker is lazy, noisy and a pain: How do I tune her out?

Question: "I am an administrative assistant with a busy schedule working for a senior director. My problem is our receptionist, who works right outside my office. She talks on the phone constantly, does personal work and has student assistants coming and going 20 hours per week. I am so frazzled listening to her and then hearing her tell everyone who will listen how overworked she is. I don't supervise her, but her work is minimal at best. She is barely literate, and no one will bring it to her boss's attention when she makes mistakes — or neglects to meet their requests. But — surprise, surprise — she's a great receptionist. It bothers me because when raises are given, they're all across the board with no incentives! And I have to listen to it all day long. What can I do?"
— Judi

Comments

Are you no one also? Why can't you speak to her supervisor in a non confrontation way about some of the problems that are occurring about her or speak to the receptionist directly about what is bothering about her behavior, if you have not already done so. I have found that addressing the problem directly does two things, it lowers my blood pressure and in many cases makes the party you are having problems with aware of a situation they may not have been aware of in the first place.

Posted by: | December 21, 2007 at 09:46 AM

Judy,

You have do your job efficiently without letting her job distract you from your job. Pay attention to your job instead of hers (been there, done that), where I used to work it was like that or worse. But, I made a goal not to be as lazy, noisy or a pain as my co-workers. Believe, management pay attention to those qualities, when it's time to get a raise or reference, those quality will surface.
Good Luck!

Posted by: Mary | December 21, 2007 at 01:20 PM

Generally, receptionists tend to be people who are comfortable (and hopefully enjoy) talking, so I don't think that's the real problem here. I assume that it is the context of the comments and chatter that is getting to you. I see that the general problem is that you believe she does not pull her fair share, not that talking keeps you from working.

As you pointed out, she doesn't report to you. It may help to imagine that her boss may not use the same

appraisal valuations you use, and her boss may be satisfied with her performance. To put it another way, if you and this other person serve the organization in two different capacities, resist the urge to hold her to your performance level. Complaining to your boss with a comparison of apples to oranges would probably back-fire on you.

Posted by: RC | December 21, 2007 at 02:53 PM

I had a similar problem - too much noise, chatter, etc., coming from a cube next door. I borrowed an unused headset from one of our sales reps and wore it while I was working. It looked like it was part of my work attire, and while it didn't cut out all the noise, it made it less bothersome. One day my boss asked me about the headset, and my response was that it helps me stay focused on my work when there are distractions from adjoining areas. That made him stop and think about what I was "hearing" and it wasn't long and things quieted down. If your boss "doesn't get it" - you still have the head-set to help you out.

Posted by: Kathy Jorgensen | December 21, 2007 at 03:07 PM

I agree with some of the other comments . . . have you tried to discuss the noise level with this employee? Maybe just bringing it to her attention that she is talking too loud might let her know that she is disturbing you. I also think that maybe you might be feeling overwhelmed with your own responsibilities and resent that this person is able to get help from student helpers. Have you asked for assistance from student helpers? As an administrative assistant your compensation is greater than that of a receptionist and your role is totally different as well. If after talking to this person about the noise level nothing improves, you should discuss this with your manager and ask if you can be moved to another office away from her.

Posted by: Sandy | December 21, 2007 at 03:58 PM

I have worked in offices in which others had identical complaints about people, but those people did not bother me. I think the reason is that I come from a large family (7 boys, 1 girl) and from an early age I was constantly around a lot of constant chatter. Without realizing it, I developed the ability to just tune out all outside noise other than what I am working on or listening to. So I guess that is a long way of saying, can't you just ignore it?

Posted by: Mark | December 21, 2007 at 06:25 PM

I agree with the first comment, it's best to worry about yourself and not what others are doing. If she doesn't report to you then she's not your responsibility, learn to tune her out and just focus on your job.

Posted by: M | December 21, 2007 at 07:46 PM

Privately compliment her on her job well done, ask for help with your problem focusing by seeing if she can keep the reception area a little quieter for awhile. If she's offended, apologize and repeat that it's really your problem. Regardless of her response, thank her the next morning for listening to you. I have a similar situation though I am the manager. I must constantly evaluate whether the reception area outside my office is a performance issue for them or an adaptability issue for me. Ask your peers how they stay focused. It took me several months to find that balance. I am sure you can find a friendly solution. Most of these issues come down

to basic relationship building. It's worth the effort!

Posted by: | December 22, 2007 at 06:41 PM

As you said you are not her supervisor so how can you judge her work load or performance? As an Admin Asst for a senior director your required performance may not and probably is not the same requirements as the receptionist. If her "poor performance" is directly affecting you in that she has done tasks for you and they have not been correct or to your standards then you must speak to her and/or her supervisor. If she is not doing work for you and obviously her supervisor has no problem with her work performance there is not much you can do on that front.

If the noise level in the reception area is out of hand because of goofing off, then discuss it with the receptionist - politely and discretely. If that doesn't work discuss it with your supervisor or hers if appropriate. If it is noise due to the course of business (a receptionist is required to be on the phone and speak with visitors) still discuss it to see if there is anything she can do to keep it toned down but be warned you may need to figure out what you need to do to deal with it. Speaking as someone who works in a large front office where there is constant traffic and distractions, you need to learn what works for you to keep these distractions at bay (perhaps a small radio to provide a sort of white noise to block out everything else). I am aware of everything and things that are going on in my office but unless it involves me or needs my attention once I realize it has nothing to do with me I continue my work.

Posted by: | December 26, 2007 at 01:02 PM

I think the only thing you can legitimately address is the noise issue. The rest of the things you mention (laziness, whether you think she deserves a raise, etc.) are really not your concern, since you're not her supervisor. There are people like this in every office; eventually, most of them are "found out." Although it might irritate you to see how she behaves, you should just try to ignore it.

If she truly is too noisy, you should address that issue. Talk to her in a straightforward way, leaving personalities out of it. In these days of shared office space, it's a legitimate problem.

Posted by: Lisa | December 26, 2007 at 02:19 PM

I like Kathy J's answer about the headset - Very creative!

Posted by: | December 28, 2007 at 01:42 PM

You sound resentful that this person will get a raise yet you yourself state that she's a great receptionist; therefore, she is doing the job that she is supposed to do. Receptionist is usually at the bottom of the ladder in office support, yet the receptionist gives the first impression, over the phone and in person, of your business. A great receptionist does not have to possess your administrative assistant skills; what she needs is great phone skills and great people skills. Unless what the receptionist does or does not do, directly affects your job, you should just "butt out". I like the idea of headphones, a small radio, or streaming music from the internet. If this is not feasible, maybe there should be a meeting with the appropriate people to address the issue of noise in the office, without going into individual personalities. Another thing to consider: I once worked in an office where the President's executive assistant was very loud, spent hours on the phone, and appeared to goof off. The

President liked her personally (not romantically) and allowed the behavior because her actual work output was excellent, and he didn't give her enough work to keep her fully occupied. You are much better off paying attention to your own job rather than being upset with the receptionist.

Posted by: Anon | December 28, 2007 at 02:55 PM

I agree with Anon 100%!! You do sound a tad resentful. I think the underlying issue is that you have a difficult time focusing with anyone talking - not just the receptionist.

I work in a shared space, tend to talk loud (always have) and I am 150% ADHD! If I am busy, I focus - period. I try to make myself aware of when I am having an ADHD moment, and reel myself in!

You teach yourself to do YOUR job. If you are overwhelmed, ask her for assistance. Simple enough! This way you can assess her skills & abilities - not her chattering. A receptionist is the first impression, and if she is impressionable and doing her job to her supervisor's expectations, well then she IS doing her job. You don't know because you aren't sitting there WITH her.

Not to sound mean, but just do YOUR job and learn to FOCUS on YOUR responsibilities. Focus on the task(s) at hand. You have more important responsibilities to worry about than her ... and her chatter!

Posted by: Anon2 | January 02, 2008 at 10:05 AM

It sounds like you may not even like this girl, which is understandable. I've been there myself, on both sides. In one situation, I was the noisy one and my coworker kept slamming her door shut and she'd stop at my desk and rub one of her fingers in her ear back and forth with a goofy look on her face to tell me that she didn't like all the noise. That used to bug the heck out of me. And then on the flip side when I had an even noisier coworker, I talked to my supervisor about it, (he was not her supervisor,) but he sympathized with me and allowed me to move my desk and wear headphones, and I finally got my own office with my own door. Now I'm by myself and much happier by how much quieter it is. I get so much more work done. When you don't like someone you work with, just about everything they do is going to bother you. But there are small things you can do to make your workplace happier for yourself. I never told my coworker that I couldn't stand her, I just wore headphones and told her I was really busy if she tried to talk to me. She retired after about a year.

Posted by: | January 02, 2008 at 01:41 PM

I would speak to her direct supervisor or an HR rep. unfortunately, not everyone can zone out constant noise and remain focused. The interruptions sound as a daily annoyance and no one should have to work in those conditions. I was in a similar situation and thankfully was able to be moved. Due to our working in a quiet office, the coworkers constant phone conversations were easily heard and were hugely distracting and many times absolutely difficult to bear. Her phone calls were constant w/ her friends, kids, school, husband, the dogs, you name it, it was discussed. This is highly inconsiderate and inappropriate on the coworkers part. Bring it to the attention of HR or have them drop by and witness your experience. Tolerating this work ethic is not an option.

Posted by: distressed over these comments | January 03, 2008 at 09:42 PM

When I've experienced a noisy neighbor, I brought in a clock radio for my desk and set it to a station that I like,

then set the volume low enough so only I can hear it and so it won't bother others. It works like white-noise and I'm no longer annoyed by the noisy neighbor. My blood-pressure went down quite a bit! :)

Posted by: Betty (Sr. Admin) | January 11, 2008 at 01:54 PM

I serve the role of receptionist and Executive Assistant. We have a very loud director whose office is very close to the open area I sit in. One day when I could no longer stand it, I quietly walked over and gently closed her door while she was talking on the phone. Later she came out and explained that she's deaf in one ear and although she felt hurt, she understood my action. We both agreed that it was OK if she forgets to close her door, I could close it quietly. Now she just slams the door after she starts talking on the phone(-:

Posted by: Lshar | January 11, 2008 at 02:31 PM