

Music in the Workplace: Motivator or Distractor?

The explosion of iPods, satellite radio and Internet music stations makes it easy for employees to create their own personal soundscape at work.

A few years ago, Bayer Material Sciences lifted its 35-year ban on music in its control rooms, according to *Occupational Hazard* magazine. The company's previous policy was based on the belief that music would be a distraction, but it cited recent research that says music, within limits, can actually stimulate productivity.

You'll find plenty of studies on the productivity benefits. One says cows give more milk when serenaded. Another found that college students solve math problems more easily when listening to classical music ("the Mozart effect"). And a University of Illinois study concluded "listening to music may increase the output of employees in all types of work," a 6.3% increase as compared with a no-music control group.

But tell that to the guy whose cubicle neighbor is jamming to his favorite Whitesnake playlist.



Like many things, music can be a force for good or bad in the workplace, depending on how the tool is used and the setting. Some employers, however, see these ubiquitous music machines as PDDs--portable distraction devices that can kill productivity and even trigger legal risks.

Why legal? Liability could arise if an employee streams in offensive material, such as Howard Stern's uncensored radio show, or plays no-holds-barred rap music.

If you do nothing, you risk complaints from other employees who might not share their colleagues' musical tastes or, worse yet, are offended by vulgar radio hosts or racist lyrics. Employees could claim a hostile work environment because you failed to put limits on such background sound. (It's the oral equivalent of someone being offended by seeing porn on a co-worker's computer screen.)

What's HR's role: Set a music policy BEFORE you encounter problems. That way, your directive won't appear to be retaliation against one troublemaker. Consider three different tactics on a policy:

- The easiest policy is to prohibit all aural media sources in the workplace or for certain jobs.
- Another option is to focus on the issue as a "noise policy," rather than a music policy, by requiring employees to keep the volume down on their speaking as well as on all forms of media.
- Another way to deal with the issue is to outlaw any offensive media content, and clarify that HR and supervisors have the right to make those determinations.

In most cases, common sense will rule. But HR needs to have the policy backing to crack down on employees who turn the distraction dial to 11.

Has music become an issue in your workplace? If so, how have you managed it?