

Music in the workplace can disrupt harmony



Listening to music while working has become fairly common in many workplaces. Some surveys have shown that this practice may actually improve employees' job satisfaction and productivity.

There are, however, important legal and practical consequences you must consider if you do allow employees to listen to music in the workplace, lest you start hearing the not-so-sweet sounds of employee complaints ... or even lawsuits. One company in California came under legal fire because of the hostile work environment created by one of its employee's taste in music.

Case in point: A black assembly technician repeatedly complained to his supervisors that he felt racially harassed by a co-worker who played loud rap music and sang along to lyrics that included racial slurs, including the "N-word." When the employer allegedly did nothing to address the complaints and subsequently fired the black employee, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) filed a racial harassment and retaliation lawsuit on the employee's behalf. The employer settled the case for \$168,000. (*EEOC v. Novellus Systems, Inc.*)

Note: If your company allows employees to openly listen to music, as a manager you must be prepared to handle an employee's objection to a co-worker's musical choices.

Above all, employees must understand that listening to music at work is a privilege rather than a right—a privilege that can and will be taken away if abused. Employees may openly play music *only if* all those in the immediate area agree and if productivity and job performance are not negatively affected. Otherwise, music must be kept at a low volume; or headphones or earbuds must be used.

If an employee complains about offensive music, it's imperative that you take corrective measures promptly.

Now hear this!

Prohibit employees from wearing headphones or earbuds in potentially hazardous areas (e.g., construction sites). Make sure music is not played so loudly in your department or an employee's office that messages over the PA system cannot be heard.