



Effect of Office Environments on the Productivity of Knowledge Workers

In his book, *Management Challenges of the 21st Century*, Peter Drucker stated, “The most important, and indeed truly unique contribution of management in the 20th century was the fifty-fold increase in the productivity of the manual worker in manufacturing”. He went on to say, “The most important contribution management needs to make in the 21st century is similarly to increase the productivity of knowledge work and the knowledge worker”. If the revered management thinker Peter Drucker states that the most important issue facing management in the 21st century is increasing the productivity of knowledge workers, then shouldn’t more attention be paid to the working conditions of these critical employees?

Our Resources

Personnel are the largest single expenditure for most companies. These same personnel create all of the intellectual property (IP) for all companies. If the future growth of companies is tied to the intellectual property its employees create, then it is clear that every effort practical should be made to increase the productivity of these essential assets of the company. Sadly, this is normally not the case.

Most companies would not tolerate its manufacturing organization running its production lines at only 34% efficiency. They would immediately look for root causes and resolve them. Few manufacturing organizations can remain in business at such low levels of achievement.

A Problem for Productivity

Alex Dorman, in his book *Healing at the Speed of Sound*, states “Noise is our most pervasive pollutant and is second only to air pollution as an environmental cause of ill health.” Research from Cornell University found that even low-level noise in an open office could increase stress hormones and lower task motivation. Dorman also says, “Noise has a dramatic effect on productivity. Stress cause by noise can even lead to burnout.”

In a recent presentation at TED, sound expert Julian Treasure stated, “We (humans) have a very small amount of bandwidth for processing auditory input, which is why noise like this -- (Office noise) -- is extremely damaging for productivity. If you have to work in an open-plan office, your productivity is greatly reduced...You are one third as productive in open-plan offices as in quiet rooms.”

The modern open office plan was developed to foster the building of teams and increase camaraderie. Along with these intentions came high levels of noise, lack of privacy and constant distractions, both human and electronic. Decades of research shows that open office plans are generally associated with greater employee stress and up to a 66% reduction in the productivity of knowledge workers.



FORESTVIEWCOMPANY

IMPROVING INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

Improve Productivity

If we are confined to the open office plan, some improvements can reduce its impact on our employees, our key resource, and regain some of the lost productivity.

1. Choose background music carefully,

If the goal is to help your team improve their focus, then classical music is the Baroque style, such as Vivaldi and Bach, will help. This style of music has a tempo normally in the 50 to 90 beats per minute range and without words to distract.

2. Foster a positive view of ear buds and noise-canceling headphones,

While some discourage the use of ear buds and headphones because they reduce the camaraderie of teams, team building does not need to occur every moment of the workday. The employee has tasks to perform that are best accomplished in quiet isolation. Since a quiet office is not the norm, we must artificially create one using modern technology.

3. Provide, and encourage use of, teleconferencing rooms,

Let us face it, we are in a global working environment with colleagues, customers, and suppliers located around the world. Because of this, meetings usually involve teleconferences. While telephony technology makes modern business possible, the distractions caused by workers participating in conference calls from their desks can be detrimental to the productivity of surrounding employees.

In the pre-teleconference generations, face-to-face meetings took place in enclosed “meeting rooms” to keep the information confidential and to reduce distractions. I suggest the creation of small rooms that are just big enough for a wall mounted desk, a chair and a telephone designed for a single meeting participant.

4. A “Do Not Disturb” policy to create blocks of undisturbed time,

It is important to productivity to have blocks of uninterrupted time. If we can implement some of the previous suggestions, then we have eliminated much of the sound-generated distractions. Since cubicles do not have doors to close, it is very easy for employees to “drop-in” for a conversation, which in turn breaks the train of concentration.

Create a simple “Do Not Disturb” policy for employees to use short periods during their choice of times during the day. During these periods, other employees shall not intrude on them so they can focus on their tasks.

Productivity improvement is a key to improving the effectiveness of most organizations. The improvement in the productivity of knowledge workers is a significant challenge in the 21st century. It also offers one of the biggest returns on investment due to the costs associated



FORESTVIEWCOMPANY 
IMPROVING INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

with most knowledge workers and their contribution to the intellectual property of the organization. Instituting some changes in the culture or accepted behavior can improve productivity, lower stress, and increase profitability with very little investment.

©2015 by Doug Ringer. All Rights Reserved.

Doug Ringer is a product development and marketing expert and the author of “The Product Rocket: Launching New Products to Out-of-this-World Success.” Doug has held global roles in marketing, R&D, and manufacturing at General Electric, Ericsson, Schneider Electric, and Honeywell. Follow his work at www.dougringer.com and Twitter.