Leveraging quiet: The power of choosing your workspace

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The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an enduring shift toward remote work, promoting employees' autonomy to choose their work environment (Rudolph et al., 2021). Although research has investigated this shift, one underexplored topic is employees' ability to effectively choose their workspace to leverage the benefits of a quiet work environment. Existing research on the impact of quiet/noise focuses primarily on traditional office settings (Colenberg et al., 2021), potentially limiting the generalizability of these findings. Additionally, various types of work may benefit from different work settings. For example, focused work thrives in a quiet setting, whereas collaborative tasks may benefit from both quiet and loud periods. Thus, it is imperative to investigate how a quiet work environment can support, or hinder, employees across various types of work, particularly in a work from home setting where individuals have significant autonomy over their workspace. By addressing both the advantages and challenges of a quiet work environment, we seek to provide insights into how individuals and organizations can effectively leverage silence in the modern workplace.

Quiet work environment and work from home

Asselineau et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of intentionally designing work environments to promote various forms of silence. Work from home enables employees to deliberately shape their work environment, giving them autonomy to control interactions, minimize distractions, and manage noise levels (Wang et al., 2021). This autonomy allows employees to promote both voluntary and imposed types of individual silence. For instance, creating a dedicated quiet workspace, using noise-canceling headphones, or adjusting device settings to limit unnecessary notifications (Margariti et al., 2021) automatically promote some level of silence, allowing individuals to intentionally select their moments of silence throughout the workday.

Remote collaborations may include intentional periods of imposed and collective silence, contributing to a shared atmosphere of concentration. For instance, teams can conduct silent brainstorming sessions where employees contribute ideas in writing. These deliberate quiet moments, designated for deep thinking or reflection, alleviate cognitive overload and promote inclusive discussions (Asselineau et al.). Moreover, teams may engage in shared mindfulness practices during virtual meetings or implement strategic quiet breaks where participants voluntarily mute their microphones. These practices incorporate voluntary and collective silence as integral components of collaborative efforts.

Quiet work environment and types of work

Finding an environment that supports productivity is crucial for employees managing a range of duties. Individuals working across various locations choose their work environment based on the

type of work they plan to accomplish. Nash et al. (2021) characterize four types of work: focus work, collaboration work, socialization work, and articulation work. Focus work demands full attention, collaboration work entails communication with colleagues or clients, socialization work revolves around networking, and articulation work aids in accomplishing other tasks through planning and coordination.

Given the diverse nature of work, each type of work may benefit from a tailored environment. For example, Nash et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of a quiet work environment for focus work, where minimal noise and a distraction-free setting can enhance concentration (Asselineau et al.). So, public settings may not be ideal when completing focus work, whereas a home environment could provide a quiet and predictable space to promote concentration.

In the context of effective collaboration, employees need an environment that promotes open communication, knowledge sharing, and some degree of concentration (Swart et al., 2022). Thus, work settings that allow control over noise levels are ideal for collaborative efforts. Although a certain level of quietness may enhance collaboration, socialization work may not be as easily impacted by noise. The interactive nature of socialization often thrives in settings with ambient noise (Sander et al., 2021), fostering interpersonal interactions.

Last, articulation work encompasses informal coordination practices, including aligning, integrating, negotiating, and connecting with others (Aroles et al., 2023). Some aspects of this work exhibit remarkable adaptability to noise, enabling execution even in loud settings. For example, negotiation of project timelines may not always require a quiet environment, as coordination often involves communication to align goals and deadlines. However, tasks involving strategic planning or problem solving may greatly benefit from moments of silence, facilitating deep concentration. Recognizing the distinct environmental needs of various types of work enables employees to maximize their effectiveness and productivity.

Benefits and challenges of a quiet work environment for different types of work

A quiet work environment, as highlighted by Asselineau et al., offers numerous benefits. These include minimizing external distractions that contribute to stress and burnout, promoting mindfulness, and boosting moods, among other advantages. Yet, it is also important to recognize potential challenges associated with a quiet work environment that might emerge in the work from home setting. Next, we explore some of these benefits and challenges for each type of work.

Focus work

A quiet environment is vital for focus work, enhancing concentration and task efficiency by eliminating background noise and interruptions often encountered in traditional office settings (Sander et al., 2021). Working from home offers a quiet space that enhances analytical thinking and independent learning, both essential for focus work. The flexibility to schedule tasks during peak productivity hours (Angelici & Profeta, 2024) also helps maximize the benefits of silence. Furthermore, the absence of constant external stimuli reduces cognitive load, leading to decreased burnout and stress (Diestel et al., 2013). Silence also serves a restorative purpose, enabling mental recharge and breaks, which are essential for sustaining productivity.

While working from home, individuals may also face challenges associated with a quiet work environment. For instance, individuals may have limited access to resources or lack of immediate support that could aid in their focus work. Without external input, individuals may struggle to generate new ideas or find innovative solutions. Additionally, working in a quiet work environment for extended periods might contribute to feelings of isolation and loneliness. This can lead to a decline in motivation and mental well-being (Rudolph et al., 2021), making it difficult to maintain focus during work hours.

Collaboration work

A quiet work environment is pivotal for effective collaboration as it promotes clearer verbal communication, reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings. This clarity enables individuals to carefully consider their contributions, resulting in more meaningful and well-articulated discussions (Asselineau et al.). Moreover, controlling the frequency of communication with colleagues, along with the ability to schedule interactions without disturbing focused work, can further enhance collaboration. Leveraging technology for notetaking and recording meetings also improves information retention and streamlines communication processes. Furthermore, a quiet environment reduces sensory overload and promotes mindfulness, which supports focused attention and mental clarity (Chiesa et al., 2011). Consequently, individuals become more receptive to colleagues' perspectives, a vital aspect of effective collaboration.

However, the absence of spontaneous interactions can hinder collaboration and the exchange of ideas. This can exacerbate challenges associated with a lack of trust among team members, particularly for newly formed teams, which in turn can impede effective communication. Furthermore, individuals may feel more hesitant to provide feedback or constructive criticism to colleagues, fearing potential disruption of the quiet atmosphere, which could delay opportunities for growth.

Socialization work

Socialization work presents unique challenges in a work from home setting, requiring individuals to be proactive in seeking social interactions. Despite the inherent noise in many social gatherings, a quiet environment can help foster meaningful conversations. The restorative function of a quiet environment enables employees to engage in socialization with a refreshed mindset, facilitating trust building and alleviating stressors associated with socializing. Furthermore, a quiet setting allows individuals to regulate their emotions effectively, fostering stronger relationships. For instance, a quiet environment can help manage negative feelings, which might also be instrumental for building social connections (Marinetti et al., 2011).

However, when individuals spend long hours in a quiet work environment without face-to-face interactions, they may have fewer opportunities to build relationships. This lack of networking can impede career development and professional growth, as informal learning opportunities and knowledge sharing often occur through casual conversations and collaborative efforts.

Articulation work

A quiet work environment can also enhance different aspects of articulation work, including problem solving, integration, facilitation, and negotiation efforts. In the work from home setting, the absence of background noise and interruptions allows employees to concentrate, fostering reflection crucial for effective problem solving. This uninterrupted reflection helps employees in adapting their strategies to changing circumstances, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of their articulation efforts. Furthermore, a quiet work environment facilitates strategic alignment and benefits negotiation processes. With fewer distractions, employees can focus fully on integrating project objectives with organizational goals. Similarly, a quiet setting reduces stress levels, which empowers employees to approach negotiations with confidence. By carefully considering their positions and communicating effectively, employees gain greater autonomy over their work processes, fostering productive discussions and ultimately contributing to successful negotiation outcomes.

However, in a quiet work environment, individuals may find it challenging to coordinate tasks effectively, leading to confusion or duplication of efforts. Without spontaneous interaction, individuals may also miss out on timely feedback from colleagues, making it difficult for them to gauge progress, which is an important aspect of articulation work. This lack of feedback can further contribute to feelings of uncertainty and inhibit individuals' ability to effectively articulate their contributions.

Conclusion

Although a quiet work environment offers unique advantages for focus, collaboration, socialization, and articulation work, it also presents some challenges. Working from home allows employees to capitalize on the advantages of a quiet work environment, fostering increased productivity, efficiency, and more meaningful interactions. Yet, employees and organizations should understand that it is also essential to find ways to promote spontaneous interactions and reduce feelings of isolation. Thus, we believe that a hybrid work environment, where employees can choose to work from home or in the office based on their types of work, is best for maximizing the benefits of a quiet work environment. This aligns with the evolving dynamics of the modern workplace, emphasizing flexibility and autonomy to meet individual and organizational needs. Moving forward, more research is needed to fully understand *how* to optimize work settings based on individuals' types of work to optimize the benefits of a quiet work environment.

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