

Summary of research findings:

An exploratory study of music-listening practices in workplace settings

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This study aimed to further understanding of self-directed music listening practices in workplace settings using a survey methodology. The population sample was recruited by invitation email, after targeting a selection of workplaces within HSE occupational categories identified as prone to work-related stress and depression, producing 339 responses. The proportions of respondents by occupation, age and gender differ by less than 4% from proportions in the 2001 census for England, providing a good level of representation, although the potential for bias due to self-selection remains (respondents were all volunteers).

1. The study provides data on the extent and type of music listening in occupations associated with high levels of stress. The survey reveals a high incidence of music listening in these workplaces: 77% of people sampled listened to music at work, and listened on average for 31% of their working week. Whether people listen to music at work does not differ significantly by age, gender, occupation, type of workplace (e.g. shared or private room/ at home, etc), or the degree to which people report finding their job stressful. While all job categories explored here are defined as “highly stressed”, there were significant differences in stress levels according to occupation (between (a) corporate managers, teaching and research professionals versus (b) administrative occupations and business and public service associate professionals). The lack of significant interactions of stress with any listening practices or other demographics indicates that respondents who reported finding their job more stressful were neither more nor less likely to listen to music at work. This is important since it indicates not only the wide-spread character of music listening at work, but potential for music listening to be used as a therapeutic intervention in a wide range of workplace settings; even those occupations and settings which might have been considered unsuitable such as protective services, health or teaching, turn out to offer opportunities for music-listening.
2. The results indicate how music is incorporated into daily life in different occupational settings and how it is mediated by technology. Radio and CDs are the most commonly used formats, with computer and internet formats common for office-based workers. However, the amount of time spent listening to music differs by occupation and office environment: those people working in computer-based office environments listen to significantly more music than people in other environments. The functions of music also differ for those in office environments versus other settings: people in office environments report that music improves focus, blocks out unwanted noise, and helps creative flow significantly more than other groups. Use of headphones increases the effectiveness of these functions, and people in office environments who use headphones are significantly more likely to report using music to block noise. Indeed, headphone usage is most common in shared work spaces. There are significant differences in the activities that people are engaged in while listening, with driving, routine tasks, word processing, taking a break, and using the internet most frequently cited. Music is rarely present while talking to colleagues or other people, and indeed this was the reason most commonly cited for choosing not to listen to music.
3. Clear evidence of self-reported functions of music were obtained: improvements to the valence and arousal levels of mood were most commonly reported, followed by masking of unwanted noise. Previous work in industrial settings has focused on productivity and has found evidence that music can help pace work, yet here, where repetitive tasks are less common, pacing of work is mentioned least often. This indicates that future studies could explore music’s influence on attention and mood, and the contribution of these to subjective well-being.
4. The study provides an overview of the relationship between music listening and well-being, enabling design of a field study. The results indicate that individualised, self-directed music listening is

experienced as beneficial for a range of reasons, and that headphone use amplifies music's positive effects. However, music listening is perceived as detrimental, or even impossible, in aspects of work requiring spoken interaction with others, or attention to auditory cues. For this reason a follow-up longitudinal field experiment and interview study has been designed which will explore the introduction of music listening into rest breaks within a workplace. This follow-up study focuses on computer-based office environments only, since the survey revealed marked differences between workers in these and other settings. This follow-up study adopts the preferred listening format for this group (computer-based radio and CD formats) which will also enable use of a computerised system to monitor details of listening. This will allow design of individualised semi-structured interviews which will draw on this data. An additional advantage of a computer-based format is that it allows (licensed) music sharing which the survey revealed can enhance interpersonal relationships by providing a 'discussion point'.

In sum, this has provided data on listening practices enabling future studies to test specific hypotheses, and providing a background for qualitative exploration of self-directed music listening experiences in workplaces.