

Earphone on Employee

I have a newly hired law clerk. He is a law student. He wears earphones all the time. I assume he is listening to music. I don't like it. Am I just too old to employ people under 25? Am I wrong to expect complete concentration on work?

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Yes. For many 25 year olds working w headphones on increases their focus by blocking out distractions. I way past that age and I wear headphones all the time as well cause I listen to podcasts all the time.

Neil Tyra

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What if he is listening to something that facilitates his complete concentration on work?

Michael Wright

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I mean it's your business. If you don't like it, tell him not to do it.

Seth Crosland

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No earphones during compensable time.

But then, maybe I'm also too old.

David Masters, Colorado

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You are wrong in assuming that listening tom something via earphones = lack of complete concentration on work.

It is extremely common for people to be unable to concentrate in typical silence of an office. It can often lead to any sound being a huge distraction.

But listening to music allows them to retain concentration from all those other distractions and for some people to actually be able to concentrate even more.

Listening to music, for me, cuts down the time it takes me to read a typical disability file by over 50% and my briefing time down almost 2/3rds

Erin M. Schmidt, Ohio

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One of the things I loved the most about leaving a larger firm for my current two-man firm is that I can have my iPod playing on speakers in my office, and no one can come in and complain. Oh, and I am way over 25.

Timothy A. Gutknecht, Illinois

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A lot of folks think they need the dual stimulation in order to be most effective. Numerous studies suggest they're wrong.

If it bothers you, discuss it with him. But if he's just doing mundane tasks then you might let it slide then and suggest it's an issue when doing substantive tasks.

Roger Traversa, Pennsylvania

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I've shared in the past that I suffer from pretty severe ADD. And, for me, the most powerful distractions are always auditory. I'll hear a noise and think "what was that?" I'm disciplined enough that I can stay on task and keep working. But, the momentary interruptions have a measurable impact on my ability to concentrate and work quickly.

I have always been able to work faster and better if I can listen to music at a volume that blocks out distractions. My workspace is a 6' x 6' three-sided room. I put a fan behind me to create white noise, and I play music loud enough that my wife can be standing 10' behind me and I can't hear her speaking. Or, I'll put on noise-canceling headphones and play the music loudly enough that I can't hear my fingers typing on the keyboard.

Either way, it takes about 68-70 decibels of volume to effectively block out distractions. (I have a decibel meter app on my phone.)

If that sounds like a lot of trouble, please realize that I get a LOT more done and make a LOT more money when I work this way. Working without music is not even an option I would consider.

Some people listen to music because they enjoy it. Others, like me, listen because it's a necessity. And, for the record, there are studies that show music is approximately as effective as ADD medication. If you're considering putting your foot down, you might want to ask why he's listening BEFORE you do it. If it's ADD, you might consider the music as a reasonable accommodation for a medical condition.

Dave Hiersekorn, California

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Being wrong is pretty subjective; depends entirely on who you ask. How about yourself? Do you work better if a client stays right on top of the case to make sure he is getting his money's worth? Do you dock your law clerk for the time he spends in the bathroom? I suppose he could have work on his mind while occupying a stall, but less likely. Seems like I recall a movie about a boss with similar concerns about a clerk named Bob Crachit.

Duke Drouillard, Nebraska

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Bottom line -- your office, your rules. I often use headphones with white noise or classical music when I really need to focus and am in a noisy environment.

Perhaps the question is why does it bother you? Is it because it looks or seems unprofessional or like the employee is giving you less than his full attention and effort? As well, why does he use them and what is he listening to? If you've decided you don't want them in the office then the what and why on his end doesn't really matter.

Kristin Haugen, Minnesota

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You can do what you want in your office. If it were mine I'd look at the quality, timeliness, and reliability of his work.

Jacob M. Small, Virginia

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It's not professional. Go work somewhere else. Really there is no way I want clients to see that. Maybe some places that work that way. Not my office. Yes, I am old. I pay you to work. Not to listen to something else why you work.

Rinky S. Parwani, Florida

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I am with Jacob, if his work is on time, quality, and what you need, then does it matter?

Does he have it so loud that he can't hear you when you seek his attention? Then it is a problem.

I am 47 and I know I work better with music playing, always have. Even my 67-year-old former boss accepted because I did my job.

Matthew S. Johnston, Maryland

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My clients never see my assistant so I don't care if she listens to Hendrix, Zeppelin or Hamilton so long as she gets the work done well and on time.

Marc Matheny, Indiana

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I would suggest to him that the headphones keep him from knowing what is happening in the office.

I realize that eavesdropping is frowned upon, but it is not eavesdropping. One does not stand outside an office listening to conversations. If a conversation is confidential, the participant closes the office door.

Keeping attuned to office buzz is how a law clerk or secretary keeps abreast of what is going on. Most young lawyers I knew did so. You expect your law clerk to do the same.

Richard P. Schmitt, Maryland

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But what if your assistant is listening to Justin Bieber? Are not there some minimum standards?

James S. Tyre, California

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James brings up a good point, music is okay so long as it meets some standards. Beiber=bad, metal=good and 80's hair bands gets a raise, and Joe Satriani=gets a job and a raise.

Matthew S. Johnston

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Why not tell him that he can listen to his headphones but you get to choose what he listens to. ;)

Stop worrying about the labor and focus on the baby. Results are what counts.

Cory H. Hurwitz, California

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The question is not whether you have the right to regulate his wearing headphones; the question is, is it wise to interfere? I think it unwise to interfere. If someone interfered with my process in that way, I would not remain long in that employer's service. I listen to music often while I work, commonly of an ambient character, and it improves my focus. I am almost 55.

L. Maxwell Taylor

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My clerk uses headphones then again so do I but my headphones don't shut out the world. His does. It makes it a pain to reach him but that's what the intercom is for. He's 34. I'm old enough to have helped filed the patent for dirt

John Davidson, Pennsylvania

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Music can facilitate concentration, or distract. Which is it in this case?  
Look at quality and quantity of work accomplished.

With regard to having an issue, look at alternative methods. Is it difficult to gain his attention? Could you send him an email instead?

Is it a concern with appearances? Can the workplace be less visible to clients?

Is it an assumption that music slows work that bothers you? Remember that not everyone works the same. Focus on results not methods.

Darrell G. Stewart, Texas

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So, what is he doing for you? I think that matters a lot.

If he is up there at reception, or otherwise meant to interact with people, then he shouldn't be wearing earphones. Not at all. Part of his job is to be available and respond to clients who come in or coworkers. If that is the case, part of his job is responding to "distractions" so you don't have to. Wearing headphones is a big signal to not talk to him, and not the one you want to give.

If he has one or two big projects, he's in back, that's all he's working on, and you want him to be completely concentrated on it, then maybe the headphones facilitate that.

Either way, if he's singing along, nix the headphones.

Cynthia V. Hall, Florida

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When I had the front desk, no music. When I worked in essentially a lead-lined room, I did. I am right now. If I were transcribing from a tape, music would be off. If I were transcribing from text (written, edited, etc.), it would actually occupy that part of my mind that otherwise wanders. I type faster and more accurately.

But I'm Special.

CJ Stevens

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I always have some kind of background noise - usually music, but TV works too. It's funny - I'll have the TV on, and someone will ask what I'm watching, but I'll have no idea because I've completely tuned it out. I have had that habit at every job I've ever had since I graduated college 20+ years ago. Sometimes I'd wear head/earphones, but often it was a 20+ radio on low volume so only I could hear. Nowadays it's likely to be streaming radio over the computer.

On the other hand, if it's completely silent, I'll get sleepy. I'm so used to noise that I can't handle silence. Even now I have a podcast on. I try to be respectful, and keep the volume low, but it's still on. It also helps block out the conversations at my office, since my office is right by the staff sign-in sheets, and people stand by them and chat all day.

Greg Zbylut

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"He wears earphones all the time. I assume he is listening to music. I don't like it. Am I just too old to employ people under 25?"

"I don't like it."

So what? Are you the employer or master of all time, space, and dimension?

Are you paying this person to be a marionette or to get specific tasks accomplished?

I used to be of the I-am-Boss-hear-me-roar school of thought but then I worked for one of those a-holes. He would come in to my closed-door office and interrupt my work to ask why I hadn't taken my tie off after I came back from lunch. (AND, we were on a locked-down floor that the public could not get to. (I think he was feeling impotent as head of his household and so he looked to the office to as a place to bully his way into a better mood. (I guess I should be glad he didn't notice my shoes were off, too.)))

Now, if he has earbuds in and you have to take extra measures to get his attention, then they need to go. Or, just throw stuff at him when you want his attention and I suggest that each time the object is pointier and heavier. Or, tell everyone that they can go home early, or order in lunch, if they can hear your voice.

James M. McMullan, Alabama

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All that matters is the output of this clerk. If you find it compromises the output, let him know and make it stop. Otherwise, why set arbitrary rules?

Jonathan Tobin, California

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Does the clerk interact with the outside world? If not, I then I'm not sure that is an issue. I like to listen to music myself while I work. It makes working more pleasant.

Lesley Hoenig, Michigan

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What's he doing? Sitting at computer and typing? or doing scut work like alphabetizing or collating? If so, I'd let it slide. If it doesn't interfere with his work, who cares?

Ronald Jones, Florida

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