

What's That Sound?

The Impact of Office Noise
on Workforce Productivity

Workplace Acoustics Study: Published 2019

Commissioned by Interface, Inc.

Overview

While business leaders continue to employ open office floorplans and flexible work stations to encourage collaboration, office workers around the world say workplace noise hinders productivity and concentration. Studies show the open office has its benefits, but it can also leave the workforce at large increasingly overwhelmed by noise and stressed by a lack of quiet space. From distracting side conversations to loud movements through the office, “What’s That Sound” reveals how office noise impacts workers and businesses in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia. It highlights sentiments, environments, expectations, and tolerance levels that vary by country.

The survey results indicate that office-based workers are mentally impacted by noise, therefore, not working to their full potential – they report distraction, difficulty concentrating, and heightened stress. For most, working in this state lowers creativity and focus. It’s imperative that employers consider the impact of office noise and offer acoustical solutions that allow for both collaboration and focused work.

Key Findings

62% of office workers surveyed in the U.S., U.K., and Australia say that minimizing distractions in their office space is important to conducting business. However, more than half (55%) of offices are described as “noisy,” and 69% of office workers in those disruptive environments report that noise negatively impacts their concentration levels, productivity, and creativity.

There are some differences in how employees respond to noise concerns in each of the surveyed regions:

- Those in the U.K. report having the most difficult time concentrating in a noisy environment, causing them to be the least productive and creative.
- U.S. office workers seem to be significantly less impacted by noise, despite reporting the lowest number of employers taking action to mitigate noise.
- Office workers in Australia strive to drown out the environmental noise that causes stress and anxiety by purchasing headphones.

Despite these differences, most workers generally seem resigned to either deal with or try to mitigate noise on their own.

Methodology

As companies work to create productive workspaces that accommodate a variety of work styles, Interface conducted research to understand and measure employees’ awareness of acoustics in the office.

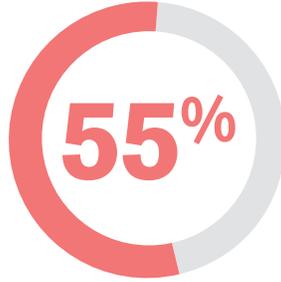
This online survey was conducted in the U.S., U.K., and Australia by Radius Global Market Research from September 12 – September 28, 2018. The 2,014 adults working in an office includes 1,008 in the U.S., 504 in the U.K., and 502 in Australia. For further information, contact Interface at press@interface.com.

Noisy Workplaces: A Global Issue

It should come as no surprise that the majority (62%) believe keeping noise to a minimum is necessary to conduct business. In fact, nearly 80% confirm that office noise makes it harder to concentrate on their work. Despite differences in workplace culture and office design in the U.S., the U.K., and Australia, a majority (55%) of those surveyed indicate their work environment is noisy, and nearly 1 in 3 say it negatively impacts productivity levels.



Across the U.S., U.K., and Australia agree that reducing noise is critical to properly conducting business



Feel that their environments are noisy

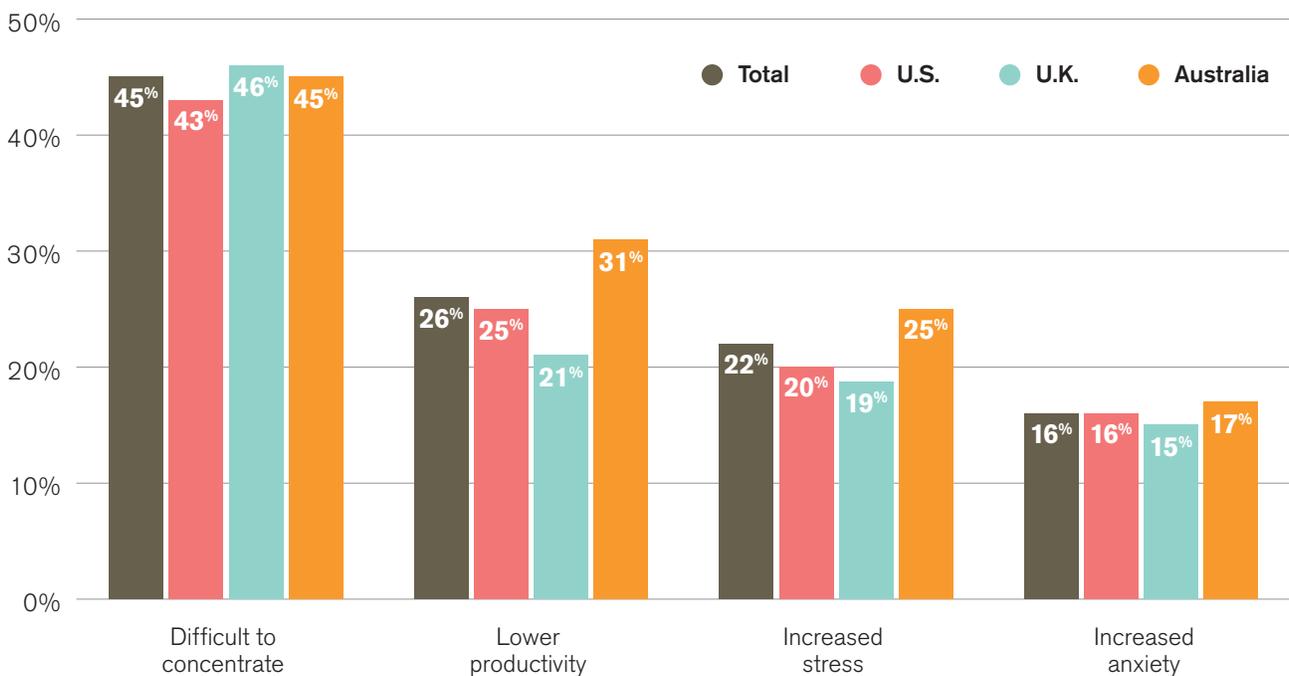


Say that noise makes it hard to concentrate on work

Noise Impacts Office Workers

Office workers surveyed suggest a noisy office environment makes it difficult to focus, with 45% of managers reporting complaints from employees about their difficulties concentrating. In Australia, specifically, these complaints led to secondary issues like lack of motivation and creativity.

*Which of the following, if any, has an employee complained to their manager about regarding noise?
Please select all that apply.*



Implication for Business

A majority of employees in the U.S., U.K., and Australia indicate noisy offices cause increased stress levels and higher levels of anxiety. These same employees do not receive support from their organizations. Perhaps the most concerning is the perceived negligence of employers in these countries to make simple, positive changes to the office environment. This is troubling both for current employees as well as for the future workforce, as **50% reveal that noise levels would impact their decision to accept a job** and 5% reported considering leaving their company due to noise.

Workers Affected, Despite Varying Work Areas

Nearly a third (32%) of respondents report working at an assigned desk or work station in an open environment. However, only 31% indicate that employers provide rooms for phone calls/conversations (e.g. private rooms, small meeting rooms, phone booths).

What's more, nearly half of workers in the U.K. (48%) report working at an assigned desk or work station, resulting in claims of increased stress and low productivity.

Potentially concerning for employers looking to foster collaboration with an open office floorplan, 16% of surveyed employees have chosen to work remotely (either from home or at another location) due to noise in the office.

These findings reveal the need for more touchdown areas, focus rooms, and / or designated quiet areas for employees to retreat.

Top Noise Distractions:

 Conversations among employees **(71%)**

 Phone conversations **(67%)**

 Phones ringing **(62%)**

 People walking around **(54%)**

Work Areas



32%

Are assigned a desk or work station in an open environment



23%

Work in a private office



16%

Are assigned a desk or work station in a cube



12%

Share an office with one or two other people

What's Causing All the Noise?

Researchers at [Stanford University](#)¹ found employees had more motivation and were more determined to persevere with challenges when they felt they were working with others on a task. This research, and much more like it, has led many organizations to seek out new workplace design strategies – including open office plans and an increase in collaborative spaces – to encourage teamwork.

While the [International Facility Management Association](#)² notes that 70% of U.S. companies offer some type of open floorplan, a study by [Harvard Business School](#)³ illustrates that these layouts can negatively affect employee productivity and collaboration.

The “What’s That Sound” study indicates that current trends in workplace design may have ignored, or not accounted for, the impacts noise can have on employee productivity and well-being. While the majority of employees surveyed say it is critical to have as little noise as possible and 55% say noise makes them edgy or irritable, more than one half (53%) say they have to make efforts to reduce or avoid noise themselves, and more than four in ten (44%) report their employers have done nothing to address it.

Employers should take heed and consider steps to balance collaborative, creative, and open office design with their employees’ need for a variety of working spaces including quiet, focused areas, in a “work choice” model.

Top Causes of Office Noise	 U.S.	 U.K.	 Australia
Co-workers talking to each other	76%	75%	63%
Talking on the phone	67%	72%	61%
Phones ringing	65%	63%	59%
People walking around	56%	55%	51%
Printer/fax machines in use	45%	N/A	N/A
Keyboard clacking	N/A	47%	39%

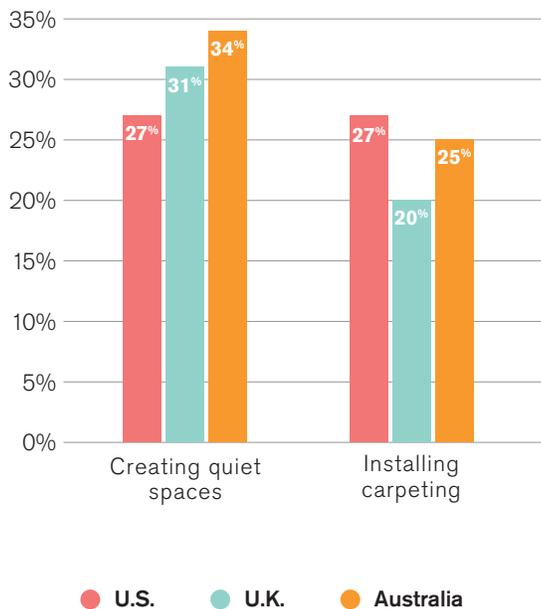
Remedies for Noise

While doing away with collaboration is not the remedy to noise concerns, structuring environments to segment spaces for conversation and quiet work is one solution. Those employees who work at offices with wood, ceramic tile, and concrete flooring say it is noisy at their office, which is significantly higher than those who work in offices with carpeting (45% vs. 54%).

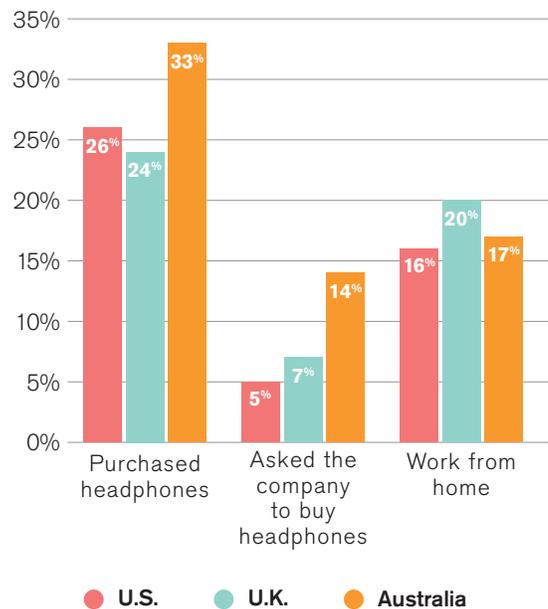
Only 31% of respondents report their workplace uses carpeting or area rugs to mitigate noise.

Across the U.S., U.K., and Australia, office workers state that noise impacts them and too often they must solve the problem themselves, with 44% saying their company does nothing to address noise. In Australia, for example, a third of workers buy and bring headphones to the office. And where possible, many employees simply opt to work away from their office altogether. Driving employees to work remotely simply due to noise – and therefore limiting the highly sought-after benefits of inter-team collaboration – might be a surprising outcome of modern workplace design trends. However, noise is a problem that employers can address relatively easily with a few simple changes.

What Are Employers Doing?



What Are Employees Doing?



Key Regional Differences

Those in the U.K. are significantly more likely to cite difficulty concentrating (60%) due to noise than those in other countries. They also report feeling the least productive (35%) and creative (70%).



Difficulty Concentrating due to noise

- **U.K. – 60%**
- Australia – 50%
- U.S. – 47%



Lower Productivity due to noise

- **U.K. – 35%**
- Australia – 28%
- U.S. – 24%



Less creative when it is noisy in the office

- **U.K. – 70%**
 - Australia – 65%
 - U.S. – 57%
-

About half of U.S. (50%) and U.K. (48%) employees feel their company does nothing to mitigate noise in the office, as opposed to only 35% of Australian employees, who report employers providing rooms for phone calls/conversations and headphones at higher rates.

Additionally, Australian workers appear to be the most likely to complain to managers about feeling less motivated or creative due to noise. They are also the most likely to work from a remote location.



Employer provides rooms for phone calls/conversations

- **Australia – 34%**
- U.K. – 31%
- U.S. – 27%



Employer provides headphones

- **Australia – 27%**
 - U.K. – 17%
 - U.S. – 13%
-

U.S. employees seem to be less impacted by noise, despite reporting the lowest number of employers taking action to mitigate noise.



Noise in my office makes me edgy/irritable

- U.K. – 59%
- Australia – 59%
- **U.S. – 47%**



My job would be easier if I had less noise in my office

- U.K. – 72%
- Australia – 72%
- **U.S. – 61%**

Craving Quiet



U.S. Employees Need Quiet Workspaces

The majority (62%) of the office-based professionals surveyed in the U.S. report that noise in the workplace negatively impacts them, citing concentration difficulties and productivity levels as the top two reasons. In fact, more than half of respondents report that a quiet, distraction-free workplace is critical to their ability to conduct company business.

Challenges with Workplace Noise: How Employees Feel



Say it is critical to have as little noise as possible to conduct company business



Need as few distractions as possible to conduct company business



Blame noise in the workplace for their difficulty in concentration and lower productivity

Silence is Golden - and Simple

When asked about the effects of noise, employees agree that it negatively impacts their mood, job ease, creativity, and enjoyment. For example, 61% of U.S. office workers say their jobs would be easier if there was less noise in the office.

Happiness and Stress Impacts

47%

Noise in the office makes me edgy or irritable

61%

My job would be easier if there was less noise in the office

59%

I would enjoy the job more if there was less noise in the office

57%

I am less creative when there is noise at the office

Implication for Business

While 68% of U.S. professionals surveyed say they need as few distractions as possible to conduct business, half (50%) report that their employers take no action to handle noise in the office. Furthermore, a study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*⁴ notes that workers in a noisy office felt unmotivated to complete cognitive tasks and had elevated stress hormones. With this in mind, it is critical that businesses take notice and begin to make changes to curb office noise.

Inhibited by Distraction



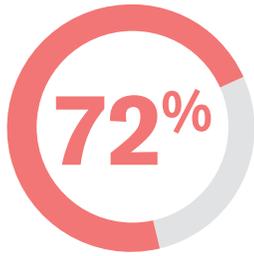
U.K. Employees Can't Work in Noisy Workplaces

"I can't concentrate" and "I don't feel productive" are the complaints most often heard from office-based professionals in the U.K. For three quarters of respondents (75%), complaints stem from the impacts of noisy offices. This cycle of poor concentration and poor productivity keeps employees from delivering the best work possible.

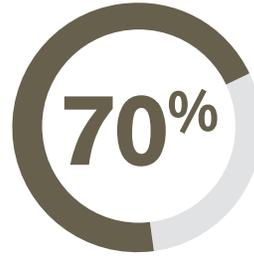
Challenges with Workplace Noise: How Employees Feel



Say it is critical to have as little noise as possible to conduct company business



Need as few distractions as possible to conduct company business



Need a quiet space to be creative



Blame noise in the workplace for their difficulty in concentration

Happiness is a Quiet Space

With so many U.K. employees who report feeling they are not working at their optimal levels of creativity, concentration, and productivity, the noise problem is also leading to emotional consequences which could cause negative changes in workplace culture. More than half (59%) of U.K. office workers report that a noisy office makes them edgy or irritable, suggesting that the noise directly impacts their well-being.

Happiness and Stress Impacts

59%

Noise in the office makes me edgy or irritable

72%

My job would be easier if there was less noise in the office

61%

I would enjoy the job more if there was less noise in the office

Implication for Business

As the majority of employees in the U.K. surveyed state that noise impacts them negatively and that they themselves have to take action to reduce or avoid it, employers should take notice. U.K. employees say productivity and creativity would increase if their employer would reduce noise in the workplace. Yet, just under half (48%) of employers alter the work environment to handle noise to help their people concentrate, produce, and enjoy their work.

Finding Their Own Solution



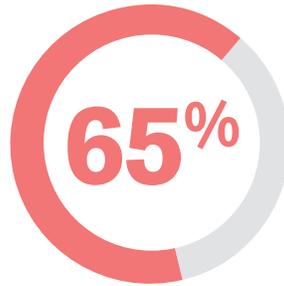
Noise Stops Business in Australia

Though Australians surveyed are inclined to say that their employer does take strides to create a quiet workplace (65%), they also report being emotionally impacted by noise. Half of office workers in the country (50%) find that noise makes it difficult to concentrate and even more (72%) say the noise hinders their concentration and ability to perform.

Challenges with Workplace Noise: How Employees Feel



Say it is critical to have as little noise as possible to conduct company business



Need as few distractions as possible to conduct company business



Say it is harder to concentrate on work when there is noise around them

Less Noise, More Joy

Of the three countries surveyed, Australians are most personally impacted by environmental challenges that hinder their concentration and productivity. Almost three-quarters of the workforce (72%) report that their job would be easier with less noise and nearly as many (69%) say it is not as enjoyable as it could be due to office noise. These figures indicate that employers have an opportunity to implement changes in the workplace that could have a significant – and positive – impact on culture and productivity.

Happiness and Stress Impacts

59%

Noise in the office makes me edgy or irritable

72%

My job would be easier if there was less noise in the office

69%

I would enjoy the job more if there was less noise in the office

Implication for Business

Noise in the workplace causes stress and decreased productivity and concentration for Australia's employees. Additionally, noise impacts employee satisfaction, with the majority surveyed (69%) stating they would enjoy their job more if there was less noise in the office. With a few changes in the workplace, employers can make measurable improvements on how well their people perform and how fulfilled they are in their work, driving enhanced productivity and well-being.

Solving for Workplace Noise

According to those surveyed in this study, noisy, distracting workspaces negatively impact productivity, creativity, and enjoyment for office-based professionals. Even with the promise of greater efficiency that a quiet workplace affords, employees report that a large number of businesses do not take steps to address the noise, impacting workplace happiness and increasing stress.

According to Bruce McEvoy of architecture and design firm Perkins+Will, current workplace design trends such as quiet rooms and small collaboration spaces contribute to overall noise reduction across office spaces. Sound expert Julian Treasure of the Sound Agency also notes that employers can implement very simple acoustic treatments to reduce noise levels.⁵

“A bookshelf at the back of the room will diffuse sound. Plants are helpful and sound absorbers can be printed on walls, so they look beautiful and soak up all the sound that hits them.” – Julian Treasure

Architects and designers, and their corporate end customers, should also consider their flooring choices for sound control in office interior design. “The wrong flooring can be catastrophic for working spaces,” explains Treasure. Specifically, Treasure identifies concrete, hardwood, and tile as flooring materials that are terrible for acoustics but continue to be specified because of their trendy aesthetics. For instance, a reception area outfitted with one of these flooring types, surrounded by hard walls and topped by an open ceiling, makes office noise that much worse because the hard surfaces bounce the click-clack of shoes around and create an echo chamber for loud voices. In the “What’s That Sound” study, 54% of respondents cite noise from people walking by as a key issue. “By contrast, a well-designed, soft floor covering can reduce noise dramatically, creating a more peaceful working environment and reducing stress levels.”

Modular flooring with acoustic qualities can reduce noise without limiting the collaborative culture. Installing carpet tiles and/or LVT with acoustic benefits in specific work areas or laid wall-to-wall is a simple way to optimize any work environment for either collaboration or quiet, independent work.

Top Reasons Employers Should Address Office Noise

1. Increased concentration
2. Enhanced creativity
3. Increased productivity
4. Improved culture
5. Happier, less stressed employees

About Interface

Interface, Inc. is a global flooring company specializing in carbon neutral carpet tile and resilient flooring, including luxury vinyl tile (LVT) and nora® rubber flooring. We help our customers create high-performance interior spaces that support well-being, productivity, and creativity, as well as the sustainability of the planet. Our mission, Climate Take Back™, invites you to join us as we commit to operating in a way that is restorative to the planet and creates a climate fit for life.

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