

Returning to the workplace? Here's how to stay focused in a noisy office

July 21 2021, by Helen Hodgetts, Nick Perham



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

With some offices set to reopen as restrictions ease, more of us may soon be working from somewhere other than the kitchen table. While a return to the office may sound thrilling for some, this isn't going to be the case for everyone.

A 2020 [poll from YouGov](#) found that most workers want to continue to work from home in some capacity after restrictions lift. But with news that [some firms](#) have requested staff to return to the [office](#) from September (in some form or another), office life will be on the horizon for at least some of us.

For many people, a return to the office may also mean a return to shared workspaces, which may take a bit of adjustment after so long working at home. This may be particularly the case if your at home office has been fairly quiet.

Shared working spaces can mean more interruptions and noise to contend with. And this can increase feelings of [stress and frustration](#). [Research](#), for example, shows that when we get interrupted and have to unexpectedly suspend what we're doing to complete a separate activity—such as have an impromptu meeting with a colleague—our memory for the original [task](#) can decay. This can make it harder to pick up where we left off when we resume working.

Interruptions also increase the chance of [errors and omissions](#) creeping in to our work. This can result in inaccuracies or more time needed to rectify those mistakes.

[Studies](#) show that we don't even have to stop and attend to the distraction in the environment for it to impair our performance. Even when trying to block out background sound, mental disruption still arises. Simple tasks such as mental arithmetic are impaired by acoustically varying sounds—such as speech and [music](#)—as they clash with our brain's ability to process information in a certain order.

Similarly, tasks that involve understanding the meaning of language, such as reading and writing, are more impaired by sounds that contain language—such as speech and music with lyrics—due to a clash of

[processing semantic information](#). So while it may feel lovely to be back surrounded with your colleagues again, it might initially be a little harder to get your head down if lots of conversations are going on around you.

While ignoring interruptions or background sound altogether isn't always possible, research shows there are things you can do to help to keep disturbances to a minimum.



Credit: cottonbro studio from Pexels

Prepare your space

Background sound can reduce performance on some tasks by [up to 50%](#), so it's worth thinking about what might help to keep this to a minimum.

If you really need to concentrate on a task, think about swapping desks or moving to a quieter area. If this isn't possible, then [noise-canceling headphones](#) may help block out [background noise](#). If nothing else, wearing headphones sends a message to co-workers that you are less open to conversation and therefore less likely to be interrupted.

Plan for interruptions

If you do need to break off, or get pulled away, try to find a natural pause in your work. [Research](#) shows that dealing with interruptions between tasks is less disruptive than stopping what you are doing in the moment and trying to pick it up again later. You might want to quickly note down key points that were foremost in your mind, or leave the mouse cursor on the position reached in an article. These [cues](#) can help you to pick up where you left off. Even just pausing to make a mental note of what you were about to do next, can be beneficial when you come to resume.

Consider music (depending what you're doing)

[Research](#) shows that it's easier to work in quieter spaces, but some people feel that listening to music can be [beneficial](#). [Research](#) has shown, for example, that if your task is design-based—such as [product design](#) or architecture—and if the task you are working on requires you to mentally rotate objects, then listening to your favorite music before you start can improve your performance for a short period of time.

But for tasks that involve remembering things in order or understanding the meaning of text—such as mental arithmetic and reading and

writing—your brain will process [background music](#) as distraction. It doesn't matter if it's music you like or dislike, or even whether the music is loud or quiet—[studies](#) show that you will be more prone to making errors.

Ultimately, heading back to the workplace is going to mean an adjustment period and some level of compromise when it comes to noise levels and interruptions. But, with many companies taking a [flexible approach](#) to remote and office working, hopefully you'll be able to find a balance (and noise level) that suits you wherever you are.

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Citation: Returning to the workplace? Here's how to stay focused in a noisy office (2021, July 21) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-07-workplace-focused-noisy-office.html>

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