

Title:

iPods in the Workplace: Diligence or Distraction?

Word Count:

1148

Summary:

The most wonderful and irritating thing about iPods in the office, says author Barbara Pachter, is their ability to cut workers off from the real world. "The 'pro' part of it is that their music doesn't really bother other people, and it may help some people focus." she said. "The downside is that people get so caught up in what they are listening to that they don't hear others talking to them."

Keywords:

ipod, iphone, apple, mac, gadget, zune, itunes

Article Body:

Aplet, 32 and a former rock musician, rarely separates himself from his iPod, and that includes while he's at work.

When he's not enjoying his downloaded music, from Bob Marley to the White Stripes, he listens to podcasts about Web design. Recently he plugged his iPod into the office's audio system and blared holiday music, much to the delight of his fellow staffers.

"My iPod's a lifesaver," says Aplet. "If I'm coding a Web site and I need to be focused and not distracted by conversations, I'll put on a headset and tune out. Then I'll just pound away on the keyboard."

Tuning Out to Get Cranking

Office drones everywhere have been doing the same thing for years, and their ranks seem to be growing.

A recent survey by Spherion, a recruiting and staffing company, found that nearly a third of U.S. workers now listen to music on their iPods or similar devices while on the job. About 80 percent of those workers said the devices improve their job satisfaction and productivity.

"I am in favor of any technology that can be used for entertainment while

looking exactly like work to the casual observer," jokes "Dilbert" cartoonist Scott Adams in an e-mail interview. "And any entertainment you can find during a business meeting is well worth the risk of being detected."

However, what do bosses and colleagues think about the iPod invasion? That's where things can get complicated.

Closing Doors

Is listening to music at work really a boost to productivity, they wonder, or is it a distraction?

Does plugging into an iPod isolate listeners from their coworkers, shutting down natural communication and driving wedges between younger employees and their less-technologically savvy colleagues? Will an employee who is wrapped up in a Jordin Sparks song hear her telephone, or a fire alarm?

What about security issues? Is it possible for a disgruntled worker to download sensitive corporate information as easily as he can a song from iTunes?

Some companies, typically smaller, tech-oriented firms, are fine with their employees firing up iPods and MP3 players on the job. A few, including international firms like National Semiconductor and Capital One Financial, have even purchased them in bulk for employees who can use them to listen to training sessions and other company communications at their desks, while traveling or even at home.

www.ipods-world.com'You've Got to Be Careful'

However, not all companies are excited about the invasion of the iPod people.

Asked about iPods at Intel (Nasdaq: INTC) in Folsom, Calif., company spokesperson Teri Munger pauses.

"I have never seen anyone with an iPod in the workplace," at least in her building, she says.

The tiny players are not as innocuous as they look, some companies insist, and raise some serious workplace questions.

"They're wonderful devices," says Barbara Pachter, an office-etiquette and communications specialist in New Jersey. "With all of these kinds of technologies, though, it's about how you use them in your individual work space. You've got to be careful."

The Spherion survey, conducted by Harris Interactive (Nasdaq: HPOL), found that younger workers are most likely to listen to music on their iPods while working. Almost half of adults ages 25 to 29 say they do so, compared with 22 percent of workers ages 50 to 64.

Those iPods, MP3 players and the like seem to be most commonly used among workers with "more monotonous jobs," like filing and photocopying, and solitary jobs that require little interaction with colleagues or the public, says Brett Wiatre, Spherion's Western region director of operations.

"In that kind of niche situation, the music seems to keep people motivated and moving," Wiatre says.

Not All Workplaces Right for iPod

Daniel Robin, a workplace consultant in Santa Cruz, Calif., agrees that the devices have their place at some work sites.

www.ipods-world.com However, at others? Not so much.

"It seems fine if a person is flying solo, like an information-technology technician who spends a lot of time in transit to user sites," Robin says. However, they're "safety no-nos," he says, in other cases.

"What if you can't hear a forklift approaching?" Robin asks.

Or a colleague complaining?

The most wonderful and irritating thing about iPods in the office, says Pachter, is their ability to cut workers off from the real world.

"The 'pro' part of it is that their music doesn't really bother other people, and it may help some people focus," says Pachter, coauthor of the book *New Rules@Work* (\$13.95, Prentice Hall, 272 pages).

"The downside is that people get so caught up in what they are listening to that they don't hear others talking to them. When their headsets are on, it's impossible to tell if they're listening to you, or listening to their music. It drives me crazy!"

iPod iSolation

"Dilbert" creator Adams, who has poked fun at the phenomenon in his wildly popular comic strip about life in the work cubicle, says he doubts that anyone

"is more productive with distractions than without."

"Still, anything that makes your coworkers less likely to talk to you has to be a good thing," he jokes.

Dale Carnegie Training takes the matter a bit more seriously. The company advises caution when using iPods at work.

"Even if your office sanctions iPod use, first consider your specific position and goals," Dale Carnegie's Web site reads. "Are you new and trying to form good working relationships?

"The iPod may isolate you and discourage interaction with others."

[Setting Policies](http://www.ipods-world.com)

At Intel, the decision about whether using iPods is appropriate is up to individual managers, says Munger. Generally, it's acceptable if "work is not impacted, employees are acting in a safe manner and their cube mates are not being distracted," she says.

Wiatre of Spherion says some companies are setting policies about when and how iPods can be used on the job, just as they have placed restrictions on the use of cell phones and other personal technological devices.

"Some of our clients ban them," he says. "Others are setting policies specific to the job and the work environment. We encourage employers to set established, consistent standards, so that there are no misunderstandings."

Folsom startup SynapSense has no such policies. Most of its 40 employees, who hail from such far-flung places as South Africa, India and Barbados, embrace iPods at work, says spokesperson Patricia Nealon.

"We have a very diverse set of people, and they listen to all kinds of different music," she says. "In a cubicle environment where people retain their own space and need to focus on what's right in front of them, it works out great."

For software developers or code writers, anyway. Nealon herself leaves her iPod at home.

"I'm a marketing person, and I love interacting with people around me," she says. "I only use my iPod when I work out."