

Working to the beat: How music can make us more productive

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Doctoral candidate Kathleen Keeler is researching the best kind of music to listen to at work. Credit: Kevin Morley, University Relations

Music makes us happy. Listening to music produces dopamine—nature's happy pill—in the brain. And music also makes us sad. Listening to

Harry Chapin's "Cat's in the Cradle," Johnny Cash's version of "Hurt" or just about anything by Hank Williams produces tears. In fact, music can evoke every emotion known to man.

But can music also make us productive?

Yes, if it's the right [music](#), according to Kathleen R. Keeler, a doctoral student, and Jose M. Cortina, Ph.D., a professor in the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Business, who have researched the link between musical characteristics and job performance.

Their review, "Working to the Beat," looks at immediate physiological and emotional responses elicited by music and how they affect performance. They found that other facets such as volume, lyrics, familiarity and musical preference also can potentially influence work outcomes.

"While technology has made listening to music in the workplace easier, music surprisingly has deep roots within industry and labor," said Keeler, who will graduate from the School of Business this week.

Work songs were widely used by a variety of occupations, such as factory workers, agricultural laborers, sailors, and miners. The Muzak Corp. developed "functional music" after World War II, making programmable music accessible for the traditional office setting—and elevators.

Muzak conducted its own extensive research on music and behavioral responses, Keeler said, developing a "stimulus progression" program in which music was used to increase productivity without being distracting to employees. Workplaces ordered from a selection of recordings, each of which was designed with a specific order and type of music to counteract the fatigue cycles in humans; for example, the fastest and

most uplifting songs were played at 10:30 a.m. and again at 3:30 p.m. during the workday.

Early empirical and anecdotal evidence suggests that music not only improved worker productivity, but also increased workers' perceived happiness. Keeler and Cortina's research supports that premise.

"The lesson is really that no music will hurt performance, and anything that keeps you awake will help," Cortina said. "I recommend Boston's 'More than a Feeling' [for simple tasks] seeing as how it is the best [song](#) ever written. Alternatively, the entire 'Hamilton' soundtrack should do the trick."

Keeler and Cortina also explored the relationship between type of music and type of work. Low-complexity songs such as James Taylor's "Carolina in My Mind" or The Beatles' "Let It Be" could help a person better perform complex and [creative tasks](#) such as planning, reasoning and problem solving because the song style facilitates cognitive flexibility and working memory. Fast tempo, high variation songs that help facilitate executive attention and inhibitory control, such as Bonnie Tyler's "Holding Out For A Hero" or The Rolling Stones' "Paint It Black" would be helpful with tasks that are simple and routine and emphasize quantity and speed.

"Both simple and routine tasks require a narrower range of task cues because, although the task may be simple and well learned, concentration on these tasks may be difficult due to the often boring and repetitive nature of the work," Keeler said.

Task quality is likely to be higher when listening to songs that are moderate in tempo and dynamic variation, such as The Zombies' "She's Not There" or Rachmaninoff's "Morceaux de Fantaisie." Songs such as "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" or the "Theme from Raiders of the

Lost Ark" are likely to facilitate task quantity or speed, because these songs are fast in tempo, have high dynamic variation, and are low in complexity.

"Music can be helpful, harmful or inconsequential depending on the type of music and the type of task on which you are working," Cortina said. "The overarching reason is that music with different characteristics has different effects on emotion and physiological arousal, which in turn affects attention."

More information: Working to the Beat:
workingtothebeat.com/index.html

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