

COMMENTARY

Breaking the sound barrier: Quiet spaces may also foster inclusivity for the neurodiverse community

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The authors (Asselineau et al., 2024) highlight a wide variety of benefits of incorporating silence into the workplace. They note that increasing the use of silence in the workplace has the potential to improve the well-being, productivity, and emotional state of employees. They note specifically that “Silence can help to slow down, step back and take stock, regulate emotions, and reach better decisions and behaviors by facilitating the focus and concentration of individuals” (p. 21). Although we agree that silence can potentially benefit all employees if deployed effectively, we also believe it is important to note that silence can be particularly beneficial to individuals who are particularly sensitive to sound such as the neurodiverse. Thus, silence has the potential to improve workplace inclusivity as well.

Neurodiversity refers to a variety of cognitive disorders including attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, dyslexia, dyscalculia, Tourette's syndrome, and other disorders (Doyle & McDowall, 2022; Russo et al., 2023; Singer, 1999). Researchers have noted that neurodiverse individuals can be beneficial for the workplace and often bring new insights and innovations to their organizations (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Houdek, 2022). However, despite the fact that many neurodiverse individuals are highly capable and highly intelligent, unemployment rates among the neurodiverse continue to be very high; one researcher estimated that 80% of individuals with mild neurodivergence are unemployed (Austin & Pisano, 2017; see also Patton, 2019). Further, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives often overlook neurodiversity, and only 1 in 10 organizations include neurodiversity in their DEI programs (Russo et al., 2023).

Though neurodiverse individuals frequently struggle to gain employment, organizations are increasingly interested in providing accommodations to their neurodiverse talent (Austin & Pisano, 2017). There is increasing evidence that other workplace accommodations for neurodiverse individuals can lead to successful workplace outcomes for neurodiverse individuals. One study found that with appropriate selection and onboarding, neurodiverse individuals were considerably more likely to retain employment (Rampton et al., 2023). Evidence indicates that providing accommodating interview settings and utilizing appropriate scoring mechanisms can help neurodiverse employees succeed in the selection process (Russo et al., 2023). However, researchers examining workplace accommodations for neurodiverse individuals often focus on the employment interview; there has been less focus on how neurodiverse individuals can be supported once they enter the workplace. Beyond more inclusive interviewing, there is little empirical evidence to demonstrate which accommodations may be most successful for neurodiverse individuals (see Patton, 2019).

Though there is little empirical evidence identifying best practices for developing inclusive spaces for neurodiverse individuals, providing quiet spaces has great potential for increasing inclusivity for these individuals. Weber et al. (2024) note that although the vast majority of research on neurodiverse individuals focuses on children, there is consistent evidence that

individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit disorder (ADD), ADHD, and dyspraxia benefit from quiet environments. Neurodiverse individuals often struggle with loud noises and open spaces. Hayward et al. (2019) noted that individuals with ASD may experience hypersensitivity to sound that can, in turn, impact their well-being in the workplace. Weber et al. (2024) noted that individuals with ADD and ADHD can be similarly sensitive to sound; likewise, excessive sound can interrupt movement planning for individuals with dyspraxia. In reviewing the literature around neurodiversity and workplace accommodations, those researchers noted that “the little evidence available suggests that hypersensitivity is linked to loss of concentration and performance” (p. 3). As such, it becomes increasingly important for organizations to recognize how silence in the workplace can help address issues of sound hypersensitivity and benefit workers, especially those who are neurodivergent.

Although there is little empirical evidence guiding best practices for providing quiet spaces for neurodiverse individuals, many organizations have begun to incorporate quiet spaces in order to support their neurodiverse communities. Ernst and Young, for example, provides low traffic and quiet workspace for neurodiverse individuals (Ovaska-Few, 2018). Freddie Mac allows neurodivergent individuals to wear headphones at work that can cancel out intrusive noises (Russo et al., 2023). However, although organizations are currently pursuing noise-related initiatives to improve inclusivity for the neurodiverse, there is little empirical evidence to demonstrate what the best practices for including these individuals should be. One study, for example, recently found that neurodiverse individuals had greater cognitive performance with louder white noise present, but their stress levels were also increased as white noise become louder (Awada et al., 2022). As the authors of the focal paper note, there is no guarantee that silence itself would lead to better performance among employees, and this may also be true for neurodiverse individuals.

One opportunity for avoiding loud noises and further incorporating beneficial silence into the workplace stems from the use of alternative work arrangements. Options such as remote work or flexible scheduling can create silence at work when employees most need it. For instance, employees using flexible scheduling can opt to work in the quiet hours of the morning or evening when they can be more relaxed and productive without the distractions of business as usual. Employees who work remotely can utilize the silence of a more comfortable and secure location: their own home. Alternative work arrangements provide an opportunity for naturally incorporating silence into the workplace in a manner that is most helpful to the worker. This may be especially true for neurodivergent employees, who benefit greatly from alternative work arrangements to avoid the crisis of sensory overstimulation (Szulc et al., 2023). Though certain considerations may first need to be addressed to best facilitate neurodivergent employees' success in remote work, Das et al. (2021) provided a robust list of design considerations and accessibility recommendations that can be implemented for the best use of remote work in serving neurodivergent employees.

It is important to note that although providing quiet environments is an important step for including neurodiverse individuals, it is also important to train managers about the importance of these accommodations. In one study, whether the accommodation for the neurodiverse individual was seen as justified by the manager was a significant predictor of job satisfaction for the neurodiverse employee (Rampton et al., 2023). Indeed, other researchers have also found that upskilling managers to successfully supervise neurodivergent employees is essential for neurodiverse employees to succeed (Russo et al., 2023). Thus, although providing silent spaces may be important for neurodiverse individuals, training managers to appreciate the importance of these spaces may also be important.

Universal design advocates often note that design improvements that increase accessibilities for some groups actually tend to benefit everyone. We think silence may be similarly beneficial for all. However, as the authors note the benefits for the general population, we believe it is also important to note the potential benefit for neurodiverse individuals. Neurodiverse individuals often struggle with loud, noisy, distracting environments, and providing quiet spaces (or the opportunity for

quiet space) may help these employees immensely. Thus, we agree that silence in the workplace, when deployed appropriately, can benefit all employees in a workplace. However, it is important to note that these efforts also make the workplace more inclusive. Incorporating elements of silence into the workplace should lead workplaces to be more peaceful, healthier, and more inclusive for neurodiverse individuals.

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