

The Sound of Silence

You're seeing them more lately, especially in your millennial coworkers: earbuds. Maybe you wear them yourself! In one ear or two, whether "in the zone" or "needing some space," earbuds send the same message: *Off limits. Do not disturb. Thanks, but no thanks.* Do the benefits of earbuds outweigh their potentially career-damaging consequences?

Some studies show music increases productivity. A Top 40 hit can help extroverts brighten the mundane, while an ambient classic can help introverts focus. And music is just plain fun! It's also a passive retention tool that lets employees follow their own work style without disturbing others. But listening through earbuds sends different signals than softly streaming Pandora.

Earbuds take you offline from your coworkers and can make you seem uninterested—not good career objectives! And what's peaceful to you may be uncomfortable to that coworker trying to get your attention. Should she tap your shoulder and risk a freak-out, or text you while she's lurking nearby? Shutting out "distractions" keeps you from conversations—everything from "How was your weekend?" to key project messages (Bob didn't say you're working too slow, he said you're going to Oslo!). And colleague interaction is key in many office cultures. Remember, managers tend to hire and promote people they know!

Does this mean music is off the menu? No, but it means there should be a balance. Schedule your tunes time, say from 1–2 each afternoon, and allow time to interact with colleagues—smile and engage, and show others you are part of the team. Otherwise you might unwittingly find yourself singing, "I Am a Rock, I Am an Island"!