



# Music @Work

**It's unlikely that the effects of music and music therapy are a part of your workplace wellness tools. They should be.**

» BY JOEL KRANC

More than half a century ago, The Beatles' John Lennon famously said that Christianity was on the decline and his little band from Liverpool was "bigger than Jesus" – at least at that point in history. The comment was heard around the world and led to burnings of Beatles albums and radio stations refusing to play their music. And that was not the first incident of upset involving music. A decade before that, in 1955, a letter-writing campaign in Chicago accused rock stations of playing "dirty music."

Music has united and polarized.

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## Music's mood-enhancing abilities are what should drive all employers to let employees crank up the volume, at least a little bit.

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**JENNIFER BUCHANAN**

owner of JB Music Therapy and former president of the Canadian Association of Music Therapy



**DR. ANNELI HAAKE**

music evaluation consultant and researcher



Music is not without its controversy and has a way of setting off emotions in people that can really divide them. In the modern world, we are never very far from our music. Walk by anyone on the street, look up from your phone on the subway or even observe people in the library. Everyone has some form of headset on and is listening (to music or podcasts or some similar form of entertainment).

Given that music is so easy to access and is ubiquitous in people's lives, does that mean it has a place during work and/or at your workplace? The short answer is: yes.

### LISTENING TO TUNES



our employees already knew that. According to a 2018 survey by Accountemps, 61% of professionals said they are somewhat more productive when music is playing in the office. Also, more than 70% of the 400 Canadian workers questioned said their companies allow music at work, with 41% saying there are no restrictions and 20% saying there are restrictions, i.e. they must wear headphones and/or keep the volume to a minimum.

"People are looking to be more focused and more creative, and at the C-suite level they are looking to increase productivity," says Jennifer Buchanan, owner of JB Music Therapy and former president of the Canadian Association of Music Therapy. She goes on to say that stress needs to decrease if productivity is to rise. "Whether it's an increase, or we're just hearing more about it,

there is definitely stress at the workplace."

So, she adds, if the workplace is going to be a place where we try to alleviate stress and help people better focus on their tasks (and their lives), we have to offer as many tools as possible to provide that help. "Providing a variety of tools that are going to work with individuals is essential, because no one tool will work for every person. Music absolutely needs to be a part of the arsenal."

She adds: "When it comes to the toolkit [for employers] it's not the music itself, and it's not even the sound source itself, it's knowing when to use that music throughout the day because it's not always appropriate. It's also [about] finding the right music for you because, unfortunately, we also know that the same genre of music is not going to work for everyone that works for you—it could even have a negative effect on your employees."

And because mood is such an important element within stressful situations, music's mood-enhancing abilities are what should drive all employers to let employees crank up the volume, at least a little bit.

"Music seems to fulfill a range of important functions for employees, including providing relief from stress and improving concentration," notes music evaluation consultant and researcher Dr. Anneli Haake, who wrote a PhD at the University of Sheffield, U.K., on the effects of music listening in offices. "The most common reasons for listening to music at work are to improve mood and relax. Music can also help employees to engage in work



tasks, through blocking out distracting noise in the office.”

She emphasizes that music choice and control play a large part in these benefits. “If music is forced upon people, the music can be irritating and annoying, and we know from research that office noise can have severe negative effects on employee health, well-being and productivity,” she says.

#### YOUR DAILY DOSAGE



Productivity, stress, mood and a whole myriad of other reasons exist to justify music at work and normalize its usage more. But what happens when the “mood” turns even darker?

With any illness the first action is often to prescribe something. Terry Stuart, Chief Innovation Officer at Deloitte and co-author of *The Awesome Music Project*, asks: “If music is so therapeutic, why aren’t we prescribing it?” He says that currently there is not enough clinical evidence to prescribe music as therapy and so created his book project (which is now a concert series and non-for-profit organization) to raise funds to do more clinical research on the healing powers of music on anxiety and depression.

One hundred percent of the profit from the book will go to fund research at the Center for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH). A joint research project between CAMH and the Music and Health Research Collaboratory at the University of Toronto (MaHRC) will explore the power of music to treat clinical depression. Patients will participate in a four-week, 12-session neurologic music therapy program focusing

on selective attention, executive function and movement exercises. The study will examine how music can be applied to help re-train the brain in the areas of control attention, memory and movement—three areas that are affected by clinical depression.

Stuart is also working with McMaster University’s LiveLab to study the neuroscientific evaluation of human responses (e.g., market research, defining important aspects of culture) and what makes for successful human interactions (e.g., educational techniques, group problem solving).

*The Awesome Music Project* is a series of short stories told by Canadian celebrities and notable people that have suffered from or have been touched by depression and how music helped them through their situations. Ultimately, the research can help identify patients with depression who would benefit from neurologic music therapy.

Stuart says that the costs of depression and anxiety can be more of a drain on the healthcare system than other terminal diseases like cancer, for example. “This is pervasive and it is impacting everyone. It is costing our society and companies a lot of money, whether it is absenteeism or long-term disability leaves or even worse—presenteeism. HR professionals need to think about how to minimize the costs and more importantly how to help workers be optimal performers.”

One way to help with worker performance is through benefits, something he says Deloitte is improving ten-fold internally, which can be used towards music

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**TERRY STUART**



chief innovation officer at Deloitte, and co-author of *The Awesome Music Project*

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therapy, cognitive therapy and mindfulness apps, for example. “So an HR professionals job, I think, is to decide what things they want to be funding, how to give control of that to employees and, along with benefits providers, be much more aware of the variety of tools that are available to people going through [depression or stress].”

Personally, Stuart says things like *The Awesome Music Project* have helped create awareness and a “playbook” that can help HR professionals get a dialogue going with their employees.

#### THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE



etting the message across to workers that their workplace is a friendly environment for music needs to be communicated effectively. Buchanan says it can

start with the welcoming package workers receive when they first start their new jobs. “That would be a good first step, that as an organization you value [music at work] and you recognize it as important, and want to encourage it with your employees.”

“It comes down to the values of the organization,” she says. Having employees feel connected to one another is important, so using music to encourage a more shared experience together could be effective. An example would be having staff members provide a playlist that makes them feel their best. At the end of the week the playlists can be shared, getting people talking and allowing people to get to know each other better.

Also, if or when headphones are allowed should be communicated to employees. Buchanan stresses the need for breaks too. Having set times of the day when you can energize yourself or “wake yourself up”

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## HOW DO WE MAKE MUSIC WORK AT WORK?

Jennifer Buchanan, owner of JB Music Therapy and former president of the Canadian Association of Music Therapy, says there is no easy solution to developing a productive playlist for two or more people. “Like all good work procedures and strategies, it takes time and it starts with being proactive instead of reactive,” she says. “Take the time to identify the diverse needs and cultures of the group you belong to.”

Here are five suggested guidelines or steps for helping your organization use and select music at work:

- 1** Discuss the **BENEFITS** of playing music in your environment. Have an open dialogue about the potential upside of music. Discuss the research and your particular desired outcomes.
- 2** Organize a forum where everyone can discuss their list of **PREFERENCES**.
- 3** **CREATE** a compilation of music, music that everyone is open to—this may take several days or weeks. Don’t rush. Try to enjoy the process as much as the desired product.
- 4** **SET** guidelines around when the music will be played (it is best if it is only specific times of day). Suggestions are first thing in the morning, lunch, end of day, or only Fridays or special occasions.
- 5** Use music to **CONNECT** with your teammates. A favourite activity is to organize one lunch a week that includes one team member’s ‘Best Top 5’ that boosts their mood. Their music is the only music to play over that lunch. It will be discussed and connected to. This is a great way to deepen relationships quickly at work.





would be a good way to ensure the power of music is having its biggest impact, rather than just as a constant distraction throughout the day. “Short doses can have a higher impact than listening to music all day,” she says.

Besides internal messaging to employees about music and its effects (good or bad), companies use music for outward messaging as well. Buchanan says that on-hold music is an exercise in branding. “There needs to be intention when it comes to selecting that music and how you want your customers to feel by the time they get to your customer reps.” And while some companies already do this, she says more companies should allow people to choose what they want to hear when they are on hold. This may be a missed branding opportunity if companies are not already doing it. Separately, music that is played throughout a business, whether it be mall music, elevator music or holiday music, can and should be discussed by teams, in order to find a balance of what works for employees but also how best to engage customers.

Often workplaces take more time considering the physical workspace and how the visual representation affects employees and first impressions. But the auditory environment can be just as important, if not more, to our workplace health and happiness. Maybe it’s time to change your tune. **W**

*Joel Kranc is editor and deputy publisher of Your Workplace.*