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COMMENTARY

Embracing silence: Creating inclusive spaces for autistic employees

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I concur with Asselineau et al. (2024) that workplace silence profoundly impacts individual and organizational processes. Although they have detailed its significance across different contexts, a vital aspect merits deeper investigation. Namely, many autistic individuals exhibit hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli, such as noise. For this demographic, as well as for nonautistic individuals with sensory processing disorders, exposure to noise can be extremely distressing. In this commentary, I outline how Asselineau et al.'s ideas can be further applied in the context of autistic employees and those with sensory processing disorders to benefit both affected individuals and employers.

An autistic employee and the workplace environment

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition, a different-than-typical way of human development, manifesting itself in differences in the way people communicate, form relationships, or express emotions. Autistic individuals often face job barriers and stigmatization when employed (Szulc et al., 2021). However, in line with the strength-based approach to neurodiversity, the challenges that autistic employees face in the labor market stem more from workplace environment deficits than from individual characteristics (see: Wiklund et al., 2018). Indeed, many I-O psychologists discuss the value of the strength-based approach and are looking for ways to make workplaces accessible and welcoming to employees with distinct neurological profiles (e.g., LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023; Silver et al., 2023).

Autism and hypersensitivity

Even 90% of autistic people can experience their senses more intensely than others (Balasco et al., 2020). Temple Grandin, a renowned autistic academic, compared loud noises to the feeling of "a dentist's drill hitting a nerve" that literally causes pain (Grandin, 2009: 63). At work, some autistic individuals may become overwhelmed by background noise, such as ringing phones, chatter, or office equipment. De Vries (2021) highlights findings from a study where one third of autistic participants reported struggling with sensory overload at work and characterizing noise as "annoying" or "painful" (p. 282). Such an overload of sensory input can lead to difficulty concentrating, increased stress, and even meltdowns, underscoring why autistic employees often perceive remote work as a preferable option (e.g., Kalmanovich-Cohen & Stanton, 2023). Although hypersensitivity can impede the well-being and performance of some autistic employees, there has been a lack of investigation by I-O scholars into what employers or HR departments can do to support individuals with heightened sensory experiences. Inspired by the

strength-based approach to neurodiversity, I aim to address this gap by exploring the implications of hypersensitivity for the design of office spaces.

How to embrace silence and create inclusive spaces?

To address the need for practical guidance on accommodating autistic individuals with sound hypersensitivity, I offer guidelines to foster silence and create inclusive workplaces. These guidelines, rooted in the strength-based approach, aim to tailor office environments to the specific needs of those with sound hypersensitivity, potentially enhancing well-being and empowering affected employees to excel in the workplace.

Design quieter workspaces

Designate quiet areas or chill rooms within the office environment. Such spaces can be considered a safe environment where employees can work without distractions. Noise-reducing materials, such as acoustic panels or soft carpets, can help to minimize auditory disruptions. Where possible, avoid big, open-plan offices. Some employees may benefit from noise cancelling headphones or keyboards.

Encourage more informed communication

Encouraging employees to speak at a lower volume and utilize nonverbal cues when possible may help reduce everyday noise levels in the office. Encouraging staff to take turns speaking during larger meetings can help prevent individuals from talking over each other, thereby improving focus and productivity.

Educate staff

Training sessions on sensory sensitivities in the workplace can enhance communication by improving employees' understanding of hypersensitivity to sound and fostering empathy toward affected individuals. It can also equip organizational members with strategies for creating silent work environments (such as sending an email instead of organizing a meeting).

Measure impact

Collect feedback from autistic employees and their colleagues to evaluate the effectiveness of existing initiatives and identify areas for improvement.

Concluding remarks

Asselineau et al. highlighted the scarcity of quiet times, emphasizing their luxury amid modern noisy environments. I join the authors in underscoring the value of silence. By providing specific and theory-informed guidelines, I aim to alert I-O scholars and practitioners to the diverse ways we process noise. Further research could explore how noise sensitivity affects autistic individuals' productivity and evaluate training programs' effectiveness in raising awareness and support among coworkers and managers. Overall, accommodating hypersensitivity to sounds in the workplace not only demonstrates organizational empathy and equity but also represents a crucial step toward leveraging the collective strengths of every individual for shared organizational success.

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