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Health and wellbeing – noise and light in the modern office

Studies are increasingly showing that, by using sophisticated equipment and techniques to control noise levels and lighting options in modern offices, employers are improving their employees' health and wellbeing and productivity.

NOISE

In a recent survey by Oxford Economics of over 1,200 senior employees, 53% of employees report that ambient noise reduces their work satisfaction and productivity. Open plan offices contribute to this. But too quiet an environment can also be a problem as it stifles communication and creates unease and a lack of confidentiality.

Employers are resorting to techniques such as the broadcast of pink noise. Sound masking helps employees concentrate and reduces the need to resort to expensive sound baffles or personal headphones.

LIGHTING

Good quality lighting is necessary for office work but light is a stimulant and can reinforce and upset sleep patterns if people are exposed to the wrong colour or intensity at different times of the day. The colour (spectrum) and intensity of light are key. The body's circadian rhythms have evolved to react to different colour and intensity of light in the natural world, and if circadian rhythms are disrupted that is bad for health and bad for productivity.

PINK NOISE



Pink Noise is a variation of white noise that has equal energy in all octaves of frequency. This is broadcast at a low level and has the effect of making human speech less discernable (the technological equivalent of the "muffliato" spell).

TRAVERS SMITH



"Different light conditions in an office environment can affect alertness and performance."

A number of studies have been carried out in different environments (schools, care homes, offices, factories). Results have shown, for example, that exposure to green light reduces levels of stress and mental fatigue, whereas blue light is a stimulant and is valuable for increasing alertness at the beginning of a working day, but can create sleep problems in workers who work long hours or shifts.

MANIPULATING THE WORK FORCE?

There is a concern that if employers manipulate light and noise levels in order to maximise productivity this could in some circumstances have an adverse effect on the health of the individuals affected. There is particular sensitivity with people working irregular hours and shift workers where the employer's interest and the worker's interest may not be the same. This can be addressed by giving an element of control to individuals (for example desk lamps with different colour and intensity settings) and inviting employee engagement with noise and lighting plans. Personal headphones are thought to be bad for communication and interaction between members of a team, but they can be popular with employees which means that discouraging their use can be sensitive.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT

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