



ALL YOUR EMPLOYEES ARE DISTRACTED

The realities of today's open office
and what you can do about it





THE PROMISE WAS SO STRONG

Hip work spaces that attract Gens Y and Z.

More cost-efficient offices that support flexible work.

Environments that encourage collaboration and innovation.

This is what companies set out to create in today's open offices.

Goodbye cube farms, hello airy, light-filled workspaces with open pods, huddle rooms and all kinds of perks—from coffee machines and blenders to table tennis and video gaming.

Brilliant, right?

Well, not exactly.

Today's workers love the aesthetic and vibe of the open office. More than half say they prefer an open shared floor plan office, and that number goes up steadily with younger generations.

But workers are decidedly frustrated with the functional problems that come along with today's open offices.

Instead of energized teams gathering in common spaces to brainstorm and innovate, you're more likely to see workers getting annoyed by all the distractions that surround them—or hiding out.

This is the reality for 5,151 office workers around the world we surveyed.

Nearly all report being distracted while trying to work.

And more than a third of workers we surveyed are always or very often distracted.

It's amazing any work is getting done!

SURVEY SNAPSHOTS

Global survey of 5,151 office workers across 10 countries

MORE THAN
1/2

OF WORKERS PREFER OPEN PLAN OFFICES AND THAT NUMBER CLIMBS WITH GENS Y AND Z

99%

OF WORKERS IN OPEN PLAN OFFICES GET DISTRACTED AT LEAST SOME OF THE TIME

4^{out} of 10

WORKERS IN OPEN PLAN OFFICES ARE ALWAYS OR VERY OFTEN DISTRACTED

NEARLY
1ⁱⁿ 3

WORKERS IN OPEN PLAN OFFICES LOSE 1 HOUR OR MORE OF WORK TO DISTRACTIONS EVERY DAY

7^{out} of 10

WOULD BE MORE PRODUCTIVE IF DISTRACTIONS WERE REDUCED

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

IT'S NOT JUST ANNOYING—IT'S KEEPING WORKERS FROM GETTING STUFF DONE

Nearly a third of employees in open offices report that distractions cost them one hour or more of productive work time every day. Nearly half report an inability to focus while at work. Nearly three quarters of workers we surveyed say they would be more productive if office distractions were reduced. Across all countries surveyed, younger generations lose more productive work time to distraction than older workers. As these younger workers make up a larger percentage of our workforce, this challenge will only get worse.

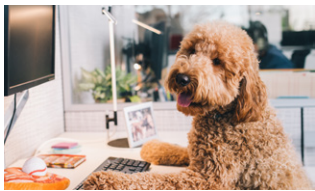
OPEN OFFICE DISTRACTIONS DAMAGE THE CUSTOMER AND EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

Workers say reducing office distractions would increase employee engagement, satisfaction, and even well-being. More than half say they have had trouble listening or being heard on calls. And nearly a quarter have appeared unprofessional to customers or clients on a call, a troubling indicator.



Did You Know? A majority of survey participants in China and India have had a customer or co-worker say they heard a distracting noise when on a phone call with them. And they most frequently report appearing unprofessional to customers or clients while on a call.

In the age of Glassdoor, all parts of the business need to care about the employee experience and satisfaction. Daily frustrations with distractions and noisy co-workers can harm teamwork, culture, and reputation.



REAL OPEN OFFICE PERIL
“Barking dogs in the office.”

REAL OPEN OFFICE PERILS We asked employees around the world to tell us about distractions they’ve personally experienced in the open office and we got an earful! You’ll find several throughout this piece.

Have your own open office distraction story? Share at [#OpenOfficePerils](#) on social media.



INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

“Future work spaces need to be agile and give people greater flexibility and choice. The right architecture, design, and furniture are important, but these won’t meet the need on their own. Creating smarter more productive office environments is a team sport. IT, HR and Workplace Solutions must work together, learn about each other’s disciplines, and create a holistic approach that includes the physical space, the technology and worker behavior. Partnering to understand the issue is a great first step.”

Alan Ni
Aruba, a Hewlett Packard Company,
Director of Smart Spaces and IoT



INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

“Forward-looking companies are going after the opportunity to create a more compelling employee experience through a partnership of IT, HR, and Real Estate. This cross-functional team must work more closely than ever to create a workplace environment that reinforces a company’s culture, increases employee collaboration, and drives productivity.”

Jeanne Meister
Founding Partner Future Workplace

WHY DISTRACTION MATTERS: LATEST RESEARCH

PRODUCTIVITY TAKES A HIT

- A recent review of 100+ studies on open offices found that open layouts consistently led to lower rates of concentration and focus.
- [Research by Harvard Business School Associate Professor Ethan Bernstein](#) reveals that transitioning to an open office architecture can create an environment that’s overstimulating for employees, decreasing organizational productivity.

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND WELL-BEING SUFFER

- A widely publicized [Oxford Economics Survey](#) showed that the ability to focus without interruptions is a top priority for employees when it comes to office design, because focus is when real work happens. Access to amenities like free food was far less important.
- According to a [UC Irvine study](#), “People compensate for interruptions by working faster, but this comes at a price: experiencing more stress, higher frustration, time pressure, and effort.”
- [Mercer’s 2018 Global Talent Trends survey](#) found that one in two employees would like to see a greater focus on well-being at their company. This includes an emphasis on physical and psychological well-being.



Did You Know? The younger the worker, the more likely they are to prefer open plan offices. Even in Germany, where the fewest people prefer open plan offices, nearly triple the number of Gen Z employees prefer open plan compared to Boomers. The open office is not going away any time soon, so companies need to make it work.



REAL OPEN OFFICE PERIL

“The Friday afternoon wind-down party complete with loud music and loud talkers.”

IT CAN CLOSE THE GAP

Most employees don't know who at their company can best solve the open office dilemma and reduce distractions in their open offices.

Only 1 in 7 go to IT to resolve their issues with office distractions. More than half (53%) of employees go to their direct manager, while about a third go to HR or Facilities.

This is surprising, as IT typically has the ownership and access to the technologies and tools that could make the biggest reduction in noise-based distractions. Clearly this is a missed opportunity.



According to Gartner data, about two-thirds of business leaders think their companies need to speed up their [digital transformation](#) or face losing ground to competitors. Creating an adaptive, collaborative, and productive office environment is an important element in the workplace transformation underway. IT is well positioned to deliver on this vision.

IT teams should reach out across their organizations and lead the effort to minimize distractions for employees in open offices. They can help their organizations realize the upside of greater focus, productivity and employee satisfaction.

INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE



“Getting the technology right can reduce noisy distractions and ensure smooth, consistent, and productive transitions across all work areas—remote, at a dedicated workspace, and in rooms around campus. Today’s workforce expects a great technology experience at work. And we need to deliver it.”

Paul Johnson, CIO, Poly



REAL OPEN OFFICE PERIL

“People who play ping pong, frisbee, and loud video games at work instead of doing their jobs.”



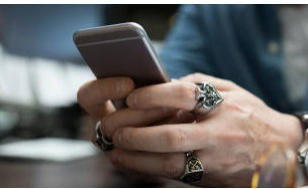
WHAT'S DISTRACTING WORKERS?

THE BIGGEST OPEN OFFICE PERIL? NOISY CO-WORKERS

Most employees can't escape the noise and interruptions coming from their co-workers. Today's new open offices have all kinds of fun spaces to work in—from shared work tables to cafeterias with free food and drinks. Even so, most people spend nearly all of the workday in their primary workspaces. And that's typically not behind a closed door. Only a third of employees surveyed currently have a closed office to escape to during their workday.



Did You Know? Workers in India spend the least time at their primary workspace compared to other countries and spend the highest amount of time working with others. Not surprisingly then, India was the country with the highest number of people reporting being “always” distracted at work. The more collaborative your culture, the more distraction challenges you’ll encounter.



REAL OPEN OFFICE PERIL
“Annoying ring tones and people yelling into their mobile phones while pacing around.”

TOP 6 OFFICE DISTRACTIONS

People in noisy open offices still need to get work done. But you won't believe how many things distract a typical worker every day from just that. Here are the top offenders, all rated as “high” or “very high” distractions.



1. Loud-talking co-worker on the phone 2. Office celebrations 3. Co-workers talking nearby 4. Table and video games 5. Phone rings or alerts 6. Pets in the office



INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

“Companies are recognizing the growing importance of providing an employee experience which mirrors their best customer experience. This is not just an HR issue but a business one and it requires creating a shared vision among HR, IT and Real Estate executives so the experience of working at the company becomes a tool for both attracting and retaining talent.”

Deborah Butters
SVP & Chief Human Resources Officer,
PerkinElmer

WORK BY PHONE OR VIDEO COMES WITH EVEN MORE DISTRACTION

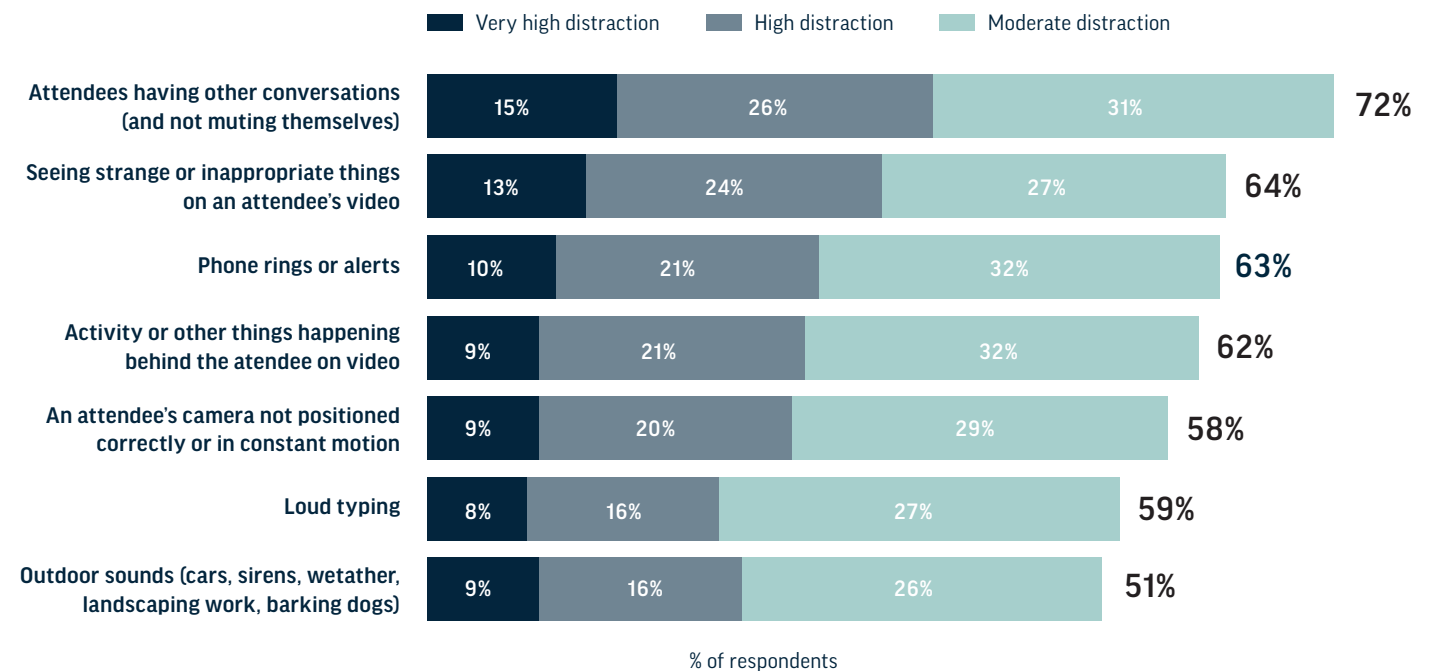
All workers today spend a big part of their day in virtual meetings and collaborating over phone and video—talking to others inside and outside the company. Many people spend most of their day connected over phone or video, with nearly one in six spending half of their day or more on calls.

And when it comes to working this way, there are plenty of distractions to go around. Co-workers top the list again, with attendees having side conversations and not muting their line the most distracting.



Did You Know? The level of distraction overall on calls varies from country to country, but in nearly all countries, the younger the employees, the more they are being distracted. This will put more pressure on companies to help workers stay focused, despite all the distractions.

MOST COMMON DISTRACTIONS DURING PHONE OR VIDEO CALLS



REAL OPEN OFFICE PERIL
“Fire alarm test while I’m on the phone”



NEARLY EVERYONE GETS FRUSTRATED ON CALLS

Nearly all workers are frustrated at least occasionally due to distractions during a phone or video call, while more than one quarter are frustrated *very often or always*.
When you are the one playing the video game or taking a phone call in your open cubicle, you probably don't realize the level of disruption you're causing. But we've all been on the other side. We've all seen how quickly mild annoyance with a distraction can lead to full-blown anger—especially if someone is facing a major deadline or has a customer on the other end of the phone.

Did You Know? Those in India are the most likely to be frustrated by distractions on a video or phone call, followed by France and the UK.

Employees in Germany, Spain, and India are more likely than those in other countries to speak directly to the person causing the distraction. In addition, workers in India were most likely to ask for help from their manager. For more on the open office experience in India, read, [“Why open-plan offices are pulling down productivity.”](#) a recent piece in *The Times of India*.

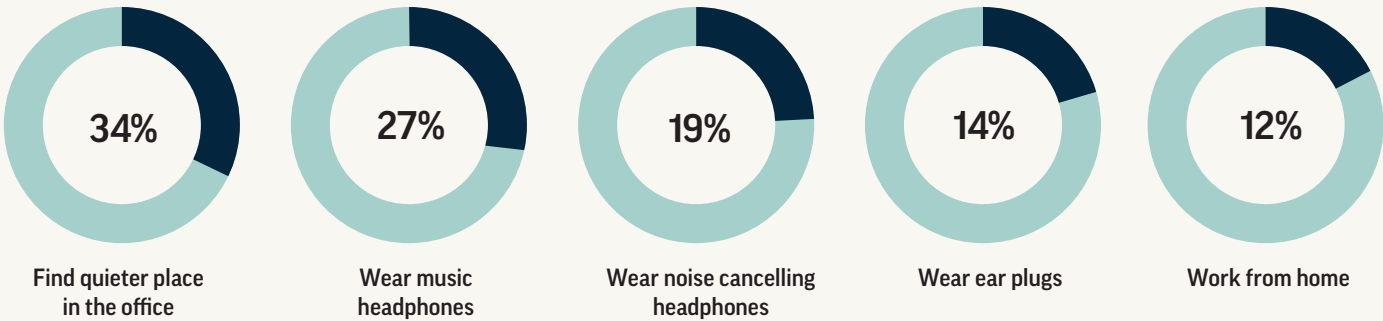


REAL OPEN OFFICE PERIL
“My colleague clips his nails at his desk—Ugh!”

EMPLOYEES TRY TO FIND FOCUS

Distractions in open offices can stifle collaboration and teaming instead of encouraging it. Most workers look for ways to hide out from distractions—insulating and isolating themselves from other co-workers. A few try to confront the offenders to stop the distractions, which can create a whole new set of issues. Alarmingly, one in five have not figured out any solution. And older workers are struggling the most—three times as many Boomers than Gen Z workers admit to not finding a solution to their open office distractions.

FLEE OR HIDE FROM DISTRACTIONS



SUFFER IN SILENCE



CONFRONT THE PROBLEM





DO OPEN OFFICE DISTRACTIONS VARY BY COUNTRY?

The responses around the world were more similar than different—especially when it came to the distractions in the open office. There were some regional differences in office preferences, though.

When asked what type of corporate office they prefer, Germany had the most workers by far (7 out of 10) who prefer a privacy-oriented floorplan and closed offices. Germany is also the country where the most employees work in that type of office.

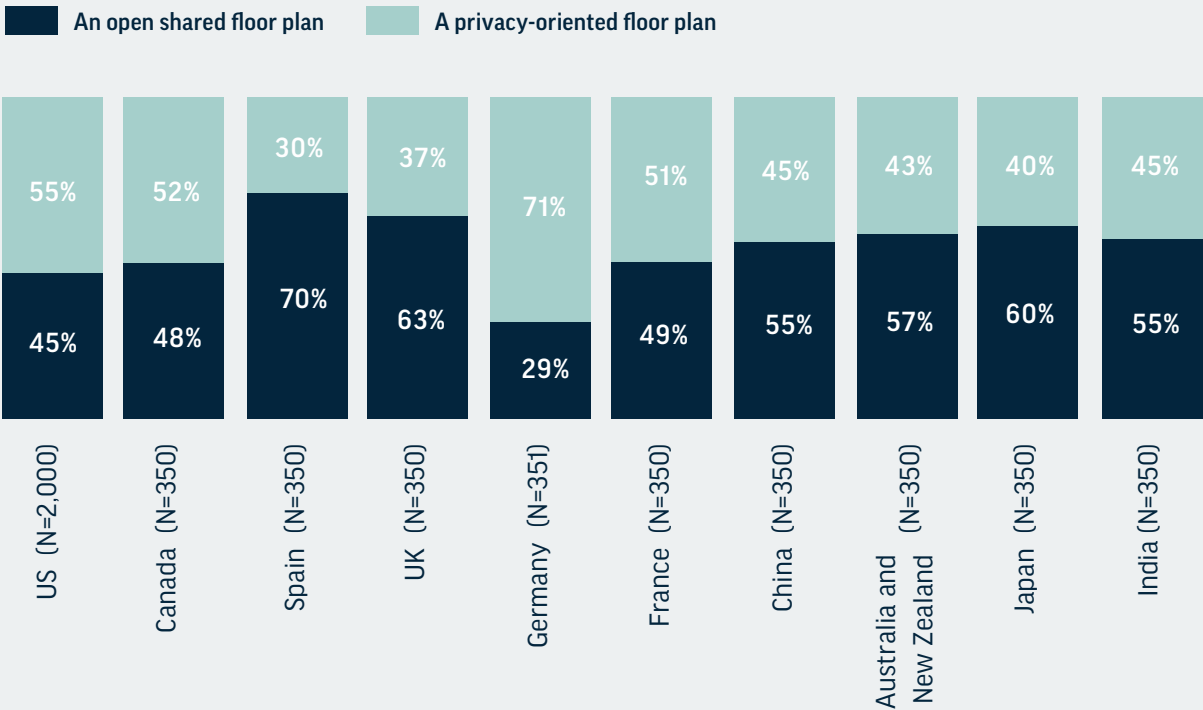
By contrast, 7 out of 10 workers in Spain preferred an open plan, as did most employees in the UK, Japan, Australia, China, India and the U.S. Japan currently reports the most open floor plan workplaces, followed by the UK and Spain.

Did You Know? Office parties appear to be a bigger distraction in France and China than in other countries. Santé!.

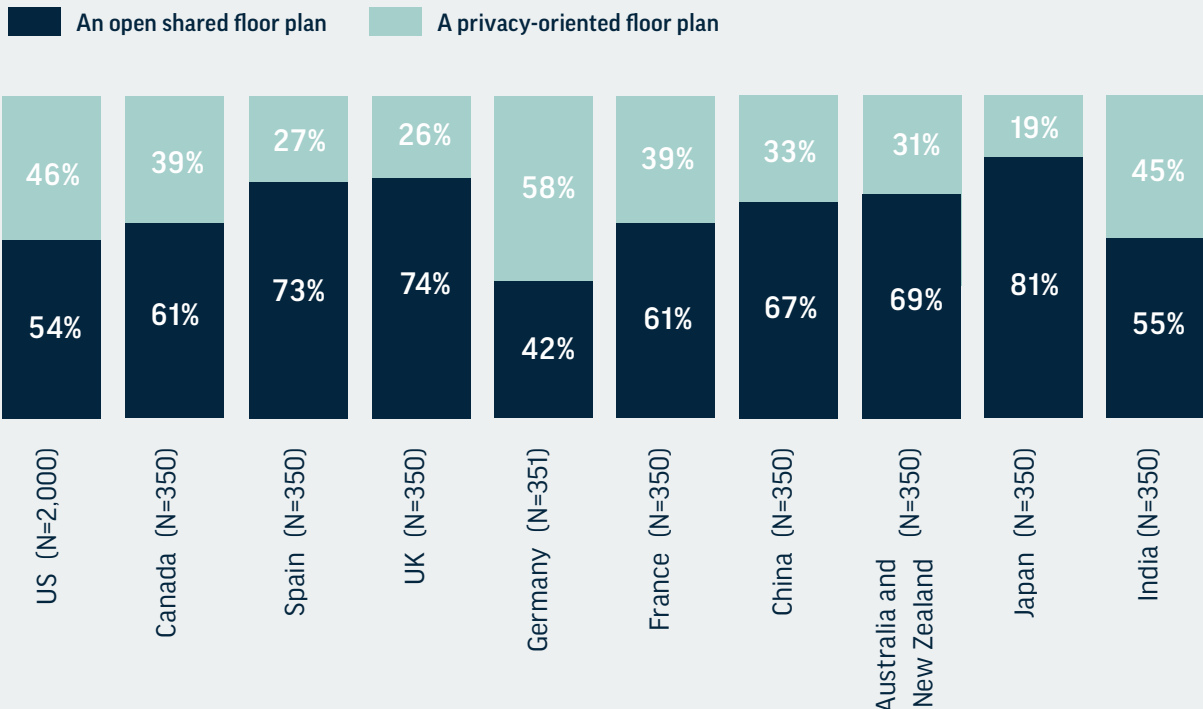


REAL OPEN OFFICE PERIL
“The arrival of the tea trolley.”

WHAT WORKERS PREFER



WHAT WORKERS ACTUALLY HAVE





TAKE ACTION: 7 STEPS TO SOLVE OPEN OFFICE DISTRACTION

#1 FIND YOUR INTERNAL PARTNERS

Discuss the implications of this study with your IT, HR and Workplace Solutions peers and decide how to work together. How will you create workspaces that allow for team collaboration as well as quiet spaces to complete focused work assignments?

#2 UNCOVER YOUR EMPLOYEES' PERSPECTIVE ON DISTRACTION

Survey your workforce to understand how your workers and your bottom line are impacted by noise and distraction. What are the biggest issues, and what's the impact?

#3 BUILD A HOLISTIC PLAN

Work with your cross-functional team to create a shared vision and strategy of how your organization will equip your people and your workspaces to create a noise and distraction-free open office. Focus on business drivers—how you'll reduce distraction so employees can be more productive and engaged.

#4 INVESTIGATE TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS

Most employees want and expect their company to equip them with better technology to eliminate background noise. Learn about the approaches, technologies and best practices being used to eliminate noise and distractions in the open office. Find proven technology vendors to help you pilot, measure and manage your solutions.

#5 IDENTIFY CREATIVE WORKSPACE SOLUTIONS

Reducing distraction in open offices requires tech-enriched spaces that are configurable and flexible. Examples? Creating more quiet zones where people use noise canceling headphones and step away for calls. Or carving out space for huddle rooms and phone booths equipped with audio video and content sharing platforms. Determine the most critical use cases and find optimal solutions.

#6 STEP UP TRAINING

Enlist HR to create training that will minimize distraction where it starts. Show managers with large virtual teams across time zones how to lead great virtual meetings. Train all employees on how to conduct phone and video meetings with a mix of on-site and virtual workers. IT teams used to online platforms like Slack and Skype can help teams still working to get comfortable.

#7 BENCHMARK AND MEASURE

Taking a more holistic approach makes determining ROI more complex. Find metrics across the different areas of the business and build them into your measurement approach. For example, make sure your organization is measuring employee satisfaction across the full range of the employee experience—including office design, individual workspace, technology, and people practices.

FIND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

TAKE ACTION NOW

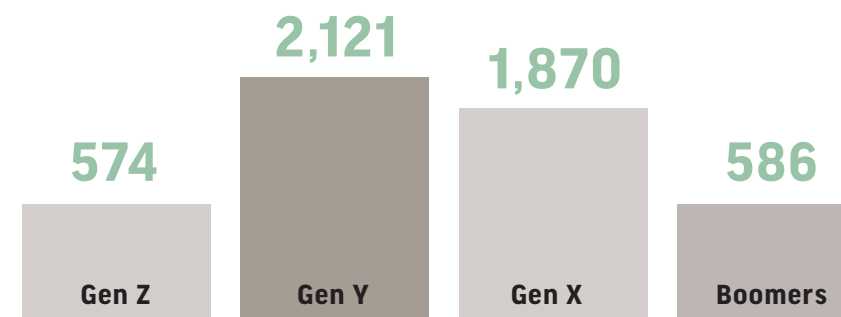
ABOUT THE SURVEY



5,151
Office workers



Across **10** countries



Multiple age groups



Large, mid-size, and small organizations
Broad range of job functions

This global survey was conducted for Poly and Future Workplace by Savanta. They surveyed 5,151 knowledge workers across US, Canada, Spain, UK, Germany, France, China, Australia and New Zealand, Japan, and India between March 18th–26th, 2019. The study focused on employees who work at least three days a week in a corporate office environment. Multiple age groups and job functions are included, and small, mid-sized, and large organizations are equally represented.

[Poly](#) is a global communications company that powers meaningful human connection and collaboration. Poly combines legendary audio expertise and powerful video and conferencing capabilities to overcome the distractions, complexity and distance that make communication in and out of the workplace challenging.

Poly believes in solutions that make life easier when they work together and with our partners' services. Our headsets, software, desk phones, audio and video conferencing, analytics and services are used worldwide and are a leading choice for every kind of workspace. For more information, please visit www.poly.com.

[Future Workplace](#) is an HR advisory and research firm providing insights on the future of learning and working. Our mission is to promote the development of senior HR leaders.

Future Workplace operates the [Future Workplace Network](#),™ a consortium of HR, Talent, and Corporate Learning Leaders from FORTUNE 1,000 organizations who convene four times a year to discuss and debate how to prepare for the future of work.

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