



**Jabra®**

**PRODUCTIVITY AT THE OFFICE  
- CHALLENGES 2015**

# PRODUCTIVITY AT THE OFFICE - CHALLENGES 2015

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In May 2015 audio and communications technology specialist Jabra surveyed close to 2.500 office knowledge workers from 10 countries about their challenges and pain points in their office space. From this came a massive 80-page study on behaviors and issues. The following is an executive summary of the full study, with views on how to find and handle the different issues with today's working environment.

### **DEFINITION OF “THE KNOWLEDGE WORKER”**

-Skilled, professional office-based staff who's primary tasks are turning data into knowledge, making good decisions and bringing these into play with colleagues and business partners

# KNOWLEDGE WORKER PRODUCTIVITY - THE VALUE OF TIME SPENT WORKING



Organizations and employees are striving to achieve high levels of productivity – it is a sign of, and key factor in, business success. This report examines the challenges knowledge workers and organisations are facing in achieving productivity in the context of new organisational structures, work spaces and technology.

## INTRODUCTION

Nations, organisations and knowledge worker individuals continually strive to improve productivity. It is critical to national GDP growth, it ensures secure employment, and better standards of living. Nations continually compare and contrast their productivity to determine success and stability. It is estimated that without growth in productivity, global GDP will rapidly decline<sup>1</sup>. It is recognised as an indicator of competitiveness and success.

Productivity is a key factor for governments, nations and individuals alike. Of increasing importance is the productivity of certain individuals: knowledge workers. The future job market is increasingly made up of knowledge workers. The US workforce, for example, is thought to consist of 44% knowledge workers in 2015<sup>4</sup>. The success and the pro-

ductivity of those knowledge workers is a critical factor in the success of those organisations, and on a grander scale, for the economy of the countries in which they operate.

There are plenty of limiting factors; an ageing population in developed countries, investments in technology that have created more challenges than they solve, demotivated or disengaged employees. It's estimated that only 13% of employees are engaged at work<sup>1</sup>, so the vast majority not engaged with their tasks or job role are therefore highly likely to be less productive. There are major productivity gains to be made for the overall success of the business.

In a bid to improve productivity, organisations have long been deploying new technology, adding collaboration or communication tools to improve communication between employees or with people external to the organisation. They are also re-considering the design of working spaces, moving away from cubicle designs to open plan offices, with a focus on collaborative spaces. Changes are also felt in the organisational structure, with decision making shifting to groups rather than individuals, and information workflows happening in a more horizontal manner.



## ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

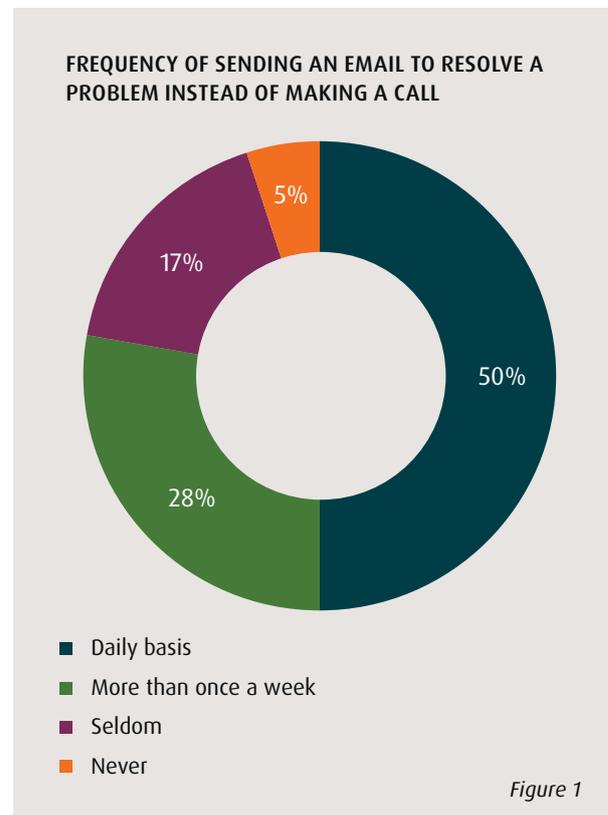
New technologies are intended to make collaborating with co-workers easier than ever, yet many organisations are doing it less efficiently than ever. Some of the explanation lies in current organisational structures.

Time at work has changed considerably. Today it is non-routine, specialised, diverse, intense and complex. Excessive management control and coordination takes time, time that most organisations now try to avoid investing. As a response to organisations' need to move faster and be more dynamic, management structures are flattening. Colleagues, rather than managers, are increasingly taking over the coordination of work. More decisions are made together and progress of projects are shared more openly. This makes the requirements for effective work performance more complex.

A flat organisation requires more interaction in the form of communication, collaboration and conversations in order to coordinate work. Technology must support those interactions as new mobile devices and services make collaboration between a globally dispersed workforce possible. This leads to a change in the way communication happens. 78% would rather send an email than make a call to resolve a problem (see figure 1).

The future promises a change in the world of work, with global networked virtual workspaces in which efficient work anytime from anywhere is possible. These are the forecasts and benefits many organisations believe in, but in reality, we continue to see people struggling with adopting and exploiting the possibilities to achieve productivity.

Flatter organisation charts are meant to drive quicker decision making and are pushing the need for alignment and coordination to all levels of the company. In some respects, making communication easier and making colleagues more available, has made the organisation more inefficient.



## TIME AT WORK

Organisational structures are changing, and communication methods are helping employees achieve productivity to varying success. How is this affecting the productivity of their time at work?

Results are created at the intersection of productivity, creativity and happiness. The 'flow', or the time at which people work at their best, producing high quality and high value work, is as a result of these important factors.

There are plenty of tools available to enable effective communication and collaboration. Yet, working days are still punctuated by distractions like email and untimely interruptions and requests for information from coworkers. Blaming technology for this is misguided as some of the explanation also lies with organisational structures and the impact it has on the way people work (see figure 2).

This inefficiency comes at a cost to the business. In one study, employees claimed that time lost to interruptions accounted for **40% to 60% of their day** - between 3 and 5 hours every day. Factor in the loss of momentum caused by the initial distraction, and the time needed to restart, and it has a serious impact on the business.

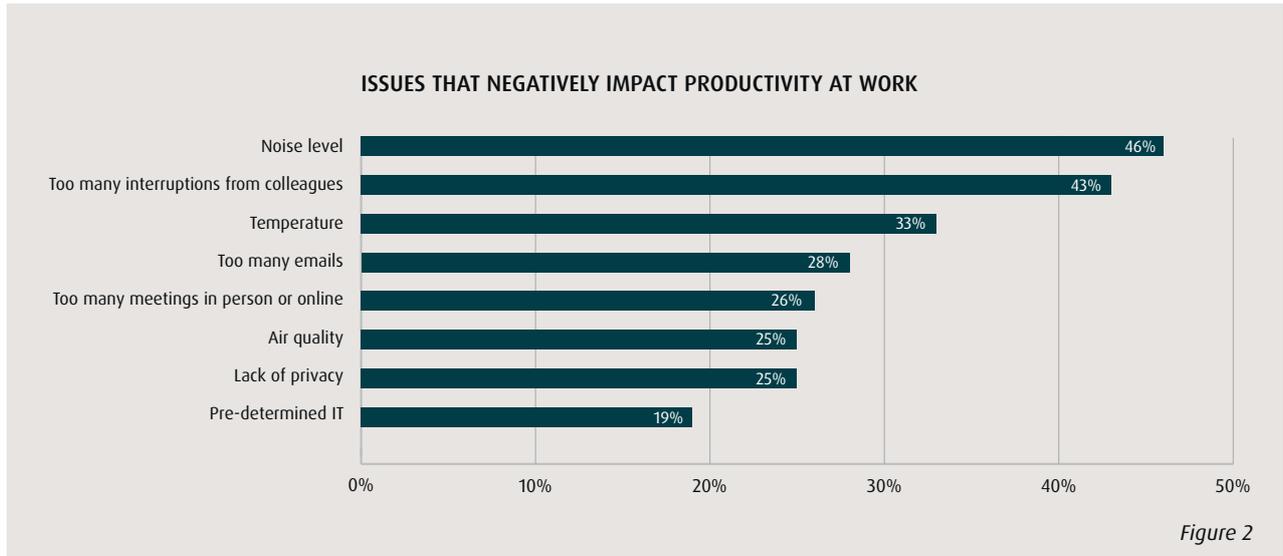
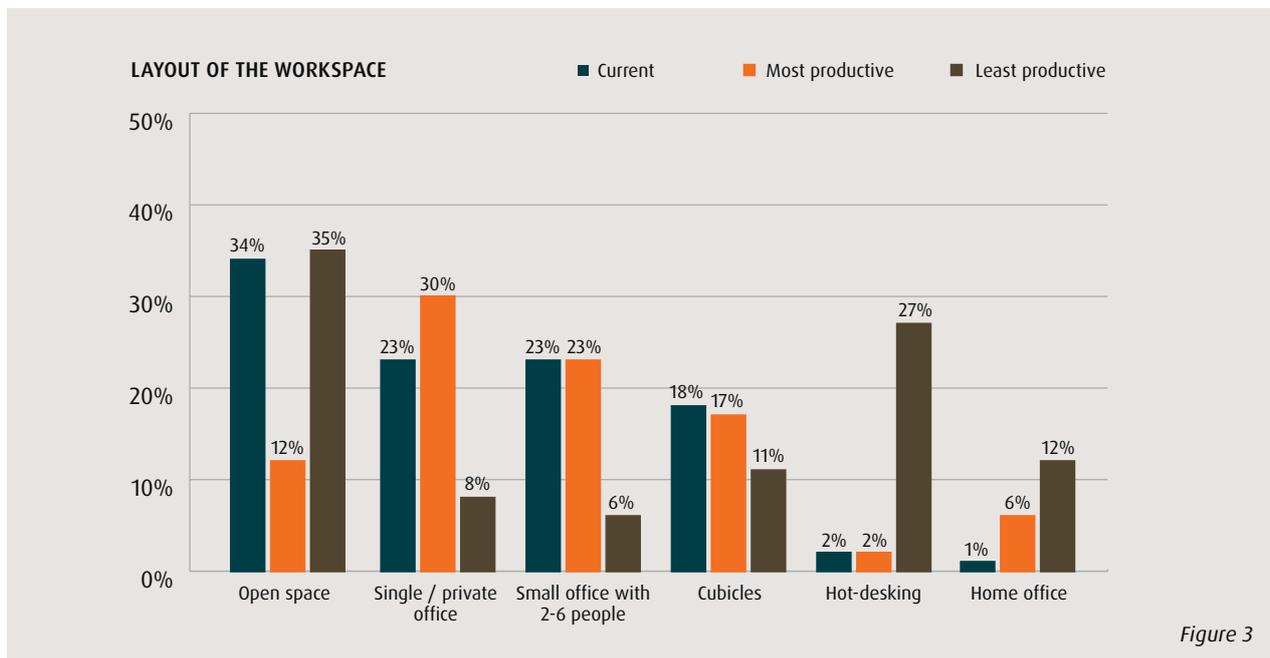


Figure 2



## CONCENTRATION VS COLLABORATION

According to neurological research<sup>6</sup>, people need 90 consecutive minutes to focus fully on a task and get into a state of full concentration and flow. The ultradian cycle, a cycle that is present in both our sleeping and waking lives, indicates that the human brain can only focus on one thing for 90 to 120 minutes before it needs a break. Whilst trying to plan 8-hour working days, this is causing unnecessary stress and instead days should be planned around 90 minute concentration peaks.

5 out of 10 believe that questions from colleagues interrupt them negatively. An interesting paradox, given collective work is supposed to be more productive.

In a normal 'open office' setting, 90 minutes of concentration without disruption is very rare. Studies show that knowledge workers are interrupted at least every 10 minutes. And when they are interrupted, it takes an average of 23 minutes and 15 seconds to refocus on the task. Many knowledge workers are therefore completing tasks in between interruptions and a working environment with little time to focus.

## Decision making

The output of the office 'production line' is making good decisions and a process of converting information into knowledge. For this process to take place, it requires focus and concentration of the knowledge worker. Making good decisions requires employees to truly reflect upon new insights to bring new ideas and opinions into play – often in conversations or collaboration with colleagues or external partners. In other words: reflection and making good decisions takes time and comes in the form of individual, focused and quiet work. Possible sources of interruptions include noise in the open office, incoming e-mails and messenger chat, and the possibility of workers being able to concentrate decreases (see figure 2).

## Individual space

With the number of square metres allocated to an employee in the modern open office space decreasing drastically, the need for knowledge workers around the world to escape the increasing noise and disturbances is increasing. According to Gensler Architects<sup>5</sup> every office worker could enjoy 50m<sup>2</sup> to themselves fifty years ago: in 2020 that number will be reduced to 10m<sup>2</sup>.

In the study, 4 out of 10 report that open space are the least productive work arrangements, while 3 out of 10 report that single offices or cubicles are the most productive (see figure 3). Sound effects play a huge role and background noise is increasingly reported as a problem. More surprising is the fact that 5 out of 10 believe that questions



from colleagues interrupt them negatively. An interesting paradox, given collective work is supposed to be more productive.

**Understanding workplace needs**

Workplaces need to offer space to facilitate conversations and innovation, as well as quiet places for concentration and individual work that requires heavy-duty thinking. If a business cannot have both, they need to know: what is most important to the business and the employees in that workspace, and is it possible to offer a choice?

Business decisions on workplace needs should be made through a process that starts with establishing when the most value creating work is done. Is value creating work more dependent on collaboration and constant interaction or on individual work with a high concentration level? Work place design decisions are, and should be, built on these insights. Individual thinking is best done in a library-like environment, knowledge sharing works better if you

dedicate space to a café-like environment. The next step is to start changing the company’s culture to maximise the benefits of that set-up.

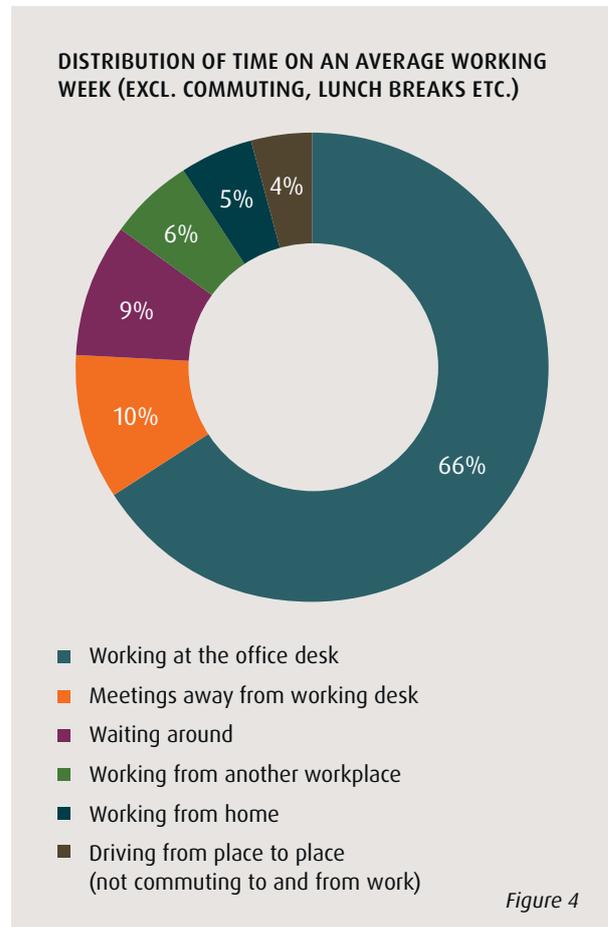
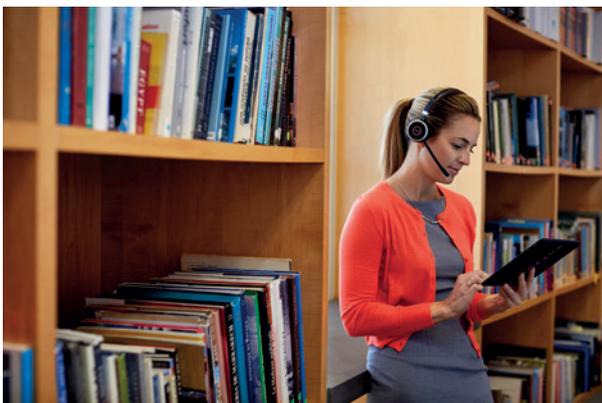


Figure 4

### MEETING-TIME

Collaboration is the foremost driver of innovation and productivity in the workplace. In fact, the ability to collaborate is the fuel that has propelled humankind since the dawn of time. It reflects our innate desire to face issues, solve problems and improve the world around us.

In many companies, the typical knowledge worker can spend up to two-thirds of their time in concentration mode (at the desk), creating new insights and transforming data into knowledge. But those efforts are of no value until they are shared, challenged and tested in collaboration with others (typically in a meeting).

36% claiming meetings diminish their personal productivity.

When knowledge workers need transparency and new knowledge, they will very often schedule a meeting in order to engage and interact with colleagues. Face-time is the most effective way to build trust – a key factor in today’s more complex and networked world of work.

The majority of knowledge workers want to attend meetings because of the perceived productivity gain to the organisation, despite 36% claiming meetings diminish their personal productivity (see figure 5).

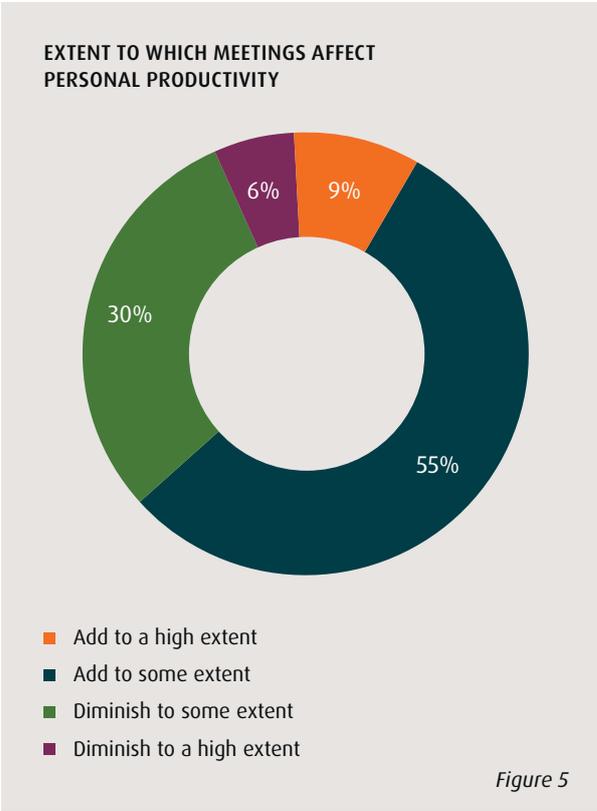


Figure 5

Meetings might appear to create transparency yet a very good, relevant and productive meeting is not always standard experience.

In a conference call scenario, some of the most annoying issues are due to sound, whether not being able to hear people’s voices, irrelevant background noise, connection issues, overall audio quality or not knowing if speakerphones are working as intended and that other participants can hear the speaker. Frustratingly for knowledge workers, these issues are also the most frequent (see figure 6).

Holding meetings is unproductive in many ways. Firstly, the amount of time spent in meetings can detract from time doing knowledge work. Secondly, the way meetings are conducted without minutes, with delays and participants checking e-mails or being distracted is a major problem.

5 out of 10 spend time on discussions without sufficient direction, one of the biggest barriers to productivity in meetings. 3 out of 10 report that lack of decision-making in meetings negatively affects the productivity.

**ISSUES WITH SPEAKERPHONES FOR CONFERENCE CALLS THAT OCCUR REGULARLY, OFTEN OR ALWAYS**

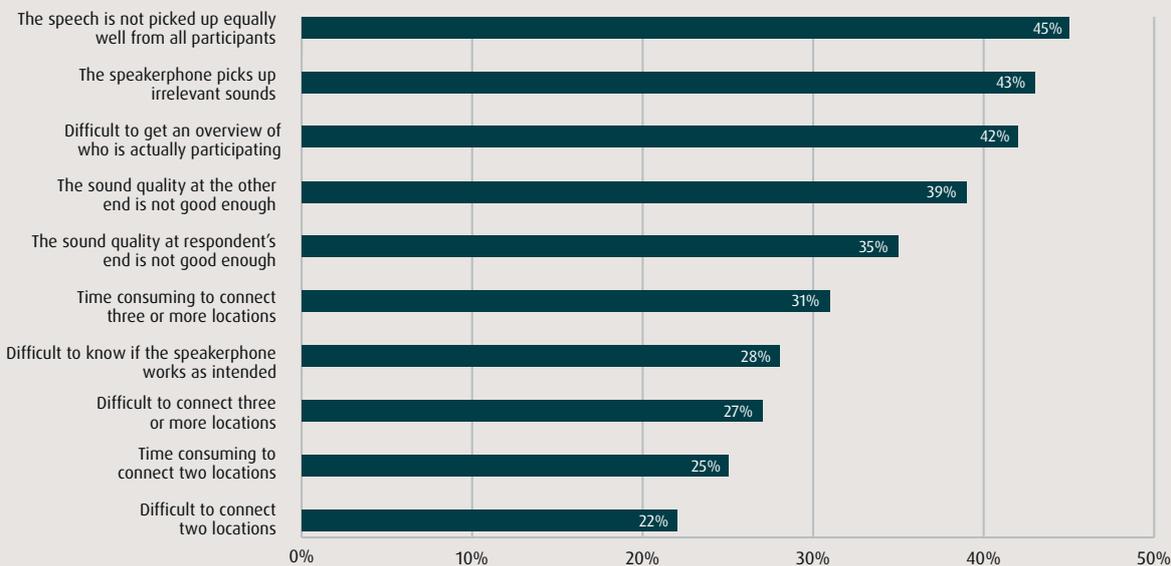


Figure 6

We know that selecting the appropriate attendees is also a challenge. Poorly organised meetings can be caused by many things: 32% cite lack of decision making and 31% cite lack of follow-up, 26% a lack of preparation and 25% the effect of latecomers (see figure 7).

Another key issue that is affecting meetings today is technology. Today, a third of conference calls are delayed due

to setup issues with connections and speaker phones, 15% of meeting time is spent on 'getting started', and one of the most common frustrations is poor sound quality.

Productive collaboration is about solving problems and producing good decisions - engaging the right people and activating the right knowledge is key.

**ISSUES THAT PREVENT MEETINGS FROM ADDING (MORE) TO PRODUCTIVITY**

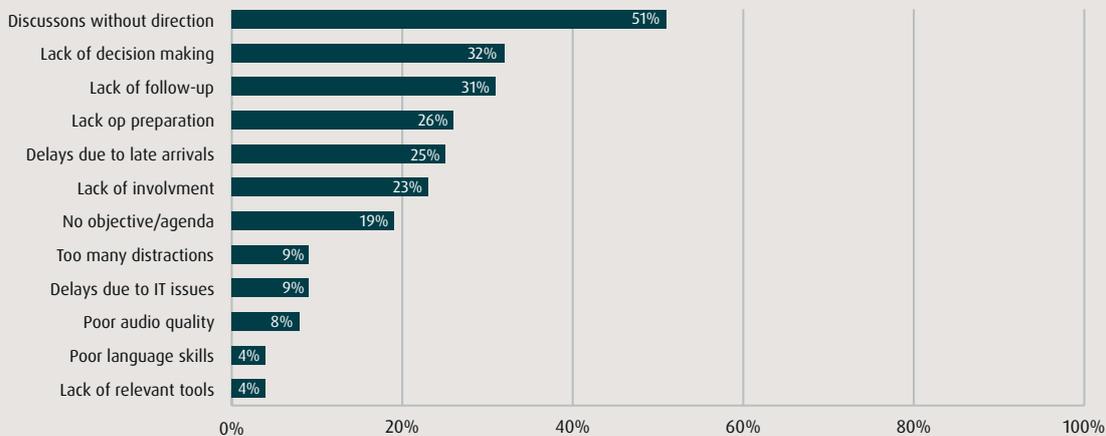


Figure 7



## DESK-TIME

The private space around the desk, where workers can create a concentration zone, is under attack from several angles.

The amount of time knowledge workers spend at desks makes a clear case for productivity to be found for time spent at the desk; over 66% of the working week, and over 6 times more than in meetings, despite reports of mobile and flexible workers, or 'road warriors' becoming commonplace (see figure 4).

Why are workers spending so much time at their desks? The most likely explanation is autonomy - allowing individuals to control the pace, order and location of their work. This is increasingly important as in a more complex, interconnected and dynamic world of constant interaction the sense of control could seem to be diminishing.

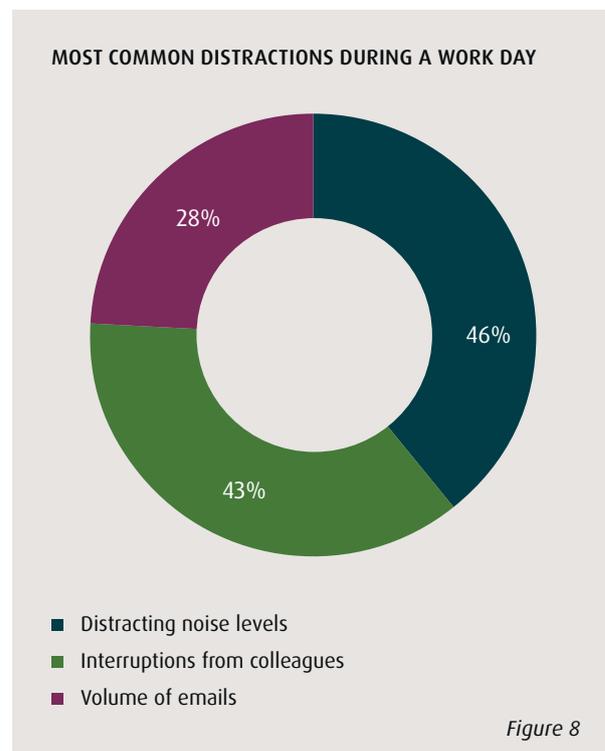
This is also evident in the ongoing preference for using email for communication. E-mail is the preferred method of communication by 52%<sup>2</sup>, and according to McKinsey, an average worker spends 28 hours a week reading and answering e-mails. It is silent so does not disturb those around you, it is non-urgent and because it is closed, it provides a way to control a conversation. However, it often

affects concentration levels, and whilst it is good for confirming a decision, it offers little during the decision-making process. Workers are striving to gain control to remain productive, but are not always selecting the right tools to achieve this.

In terms of seating structure, today, open plan is the most common option, yet the least productive (together with hot-desking). Single offices are viewed as most productive. In a working day, knowledge workers are dealing with up to 17 different distractions, most of which are caused by other people. Most common are distracting noise levels (46% of respondents), interruptions from colleagues (43%), and volume of emails (28%) (see figure 8). Open plan offices are set up to enable better collaboration, but individuals want time without disturbances to concentrate.

People are more inclined to send an e-mail rather than taking a call (see fig. 1), but at the same time, e-mails is one of the most distracting factors during a work day (figure 2 or 8). So, in fact, people are part of their own problem, due to the working paradoxes of our time.

There are also factors not caused by people but the controllable elements of the environment around them. Temperature, air quality, and lack of privacy all affect the concentration time achieved at a desk.



## THE TIME AT WORK PARADOX

Many organisations have employees that are using non-productive ways of working, yet initiatives that improve productivity are too often achieving the opposite. New technology and office designs are introduced as a positive influence, but are instead detracting from productivity. The challenge is overcoming this paradox to achieve the 'flexible, productive and wise work' that is within reach.

Businesses need a better understanding of human behaviour offering elements of autonomy on the individual level and transparency on the collective level, and an acute awareness of when communication methods or a way of working is not delivering the intended benefits.

Who is responsible for productivity in the modern workplace?

Jabra's philosophy on 'New Ways of Working' is the idea of organising work towards realising people's full potential. Jabra wants to advocate for managers and employees alike to make a conscious choice of work-modes depending on task whether collaboration, concentration, conversation or communication:

- Concentration is about making good decisions by turning information into knowledge
- Communication is transference of knowledge independent of time and location
- Collaboration is the most powerful tool to turn complex problems into valuable solutions. Bring new knowledge into play with colleagues or business partners
- Conversations between two people, who genuinely listen to understand and talk to impact behaviour, is the most effective tool to elevate the value of human interactions

Organisations should continually ask themselves: Who is responsible for productivity in the modern workplace? How do we enable better productivity in the modern workplace? How do we measure the impact of better productivity?

## JOIN THE "NEW WAYS OF WORKING" INITIATIVE

Jabra's New Ways of Working initiative is a joint initiative that involves everybody who is struggling with changes in how we work, how we organise work and how we motivate employees and colleagues to be part of the journey. It advocates a reflection on how to best design work for improving the four Cs; concentration, conversation, communication and collaboration, and in turn becoming more innovative, productive, and successful.

Follow our blog and join us in the discussion  
[www.blog.jabra.com](http://www.blog.jabra.com)

## HOW JABRA MEETS THE CHALLENGES

A lot of issues with today's working environment are about two common factors: sound and technology, as this research also shows. At Jabra we work specifically with audio and unified communications solutions that improve the modern work space and enable individuals to hear more, do more and be more. The modern challenges are reflected in the products that we take to market.

If you are interested in learning more, please go to:  
[jabra.com/speak](http://jabra.com/speak) or [jabra.com/office](http://jabra.com/office)

Connect with Jabra on social media:  
**LinkedIn** - [linkedin.com/company/jabra](https://www.linkedin.com/company/jabra)  
**Twitter** - [@We\\_are\\_Jabra](https://twitter.com/We_are_Jabra)  
**Facebook** - [facebook.com/jabra](https://www.facebook.com/jabra)

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

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A sample of just under 2,449 responses represents populations of office workers gathered in 10 different countries. The largest share is from the USA, less are from European

countries, Russia and Asia. The Jabra 'Productivity of Office Workers' study was conducted in May 2015 in collaboration with Lindberg International.

### <sup>1</sup> Gallup report

### <sup>2</sup> Jabra Work Potential tool

[http://www.jabra.com/campaigns/nwow?\\_ga=1.150976176.701618004.1440746579](http://www.jabra.com/campaigns/nwow?_ga=1.150976176.701618004.1440746579)

### <sup>3</sup> The Costs of Poor Communication, Solari

<http://www.solari.net/toward-humanity/2009/10/18/the-costs-of-poor-communication/>

### <sup>4</sup> Practices for Engaging the 21st Century Workforce: Challenges of Talent Management in a Changing Workplace, FT Press

<http://www.ftpress.com/articles/article.aspx?p=2137183&seqNum=4>

### <sup>5</sup> 2008 Workplace Survey, Gensler

<http://www.gensler.com/doc/survey-2008-u-s-workplace-survey>

### <sup>6</sup> Why you need to unplug every 90 minutes, Fast Company

<http://www.fastcompany.com/3013188/unplug/why-you-need-to-unplug-every-90-minutes>

## ABOUT JABRA

Jabra is the brand of GN Netcom, a subsidiary of GN Store Nord A/S (GN) - listed on NASDAQ OMX. Jabra employs approximately 950 people worldwide and in 2014 produced an annual revenue which amounted to DKK 2,871 million. Jabra is a world leader in the development, manufacturing, and marketing of a broad range of communications and audio solutions. With a reputation for innovation, reliability, and ease of use that goes back more than two decades, Jabra's consumer and business divisions produce corded and wireless headsets, plus mobile and in-office speakerphones that empower individuals and businesses through increased freedom of movement, comfort, and functionality.