



# The concentration zone

Perspectives on knowledge worker productivity

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## The concentration zone

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

In a bid to improve productivity, organizations have long been deploying new technology, adding collaboration or communication tools to improve commu-

nication between employees or with people external to the organization. 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 - sometimes at the expense of workers trying to focus and complete their tasks.

Here is our perspective on a key work-mode to today's knowledge workers: Concentration.

# The hidden secret of the super-productive

If you tune into your biological rhythm, you can do more work in less time... without the stress.

The secret to being super-productive lies in the natural circadian rhythm between the two hemispheres of our brain. When you are primarily dominated by the left brain side, you are most productive at work. You feel alert and see things straight. When the right side dominates, you recover, boost the immune system, and clear your thoughts.

The two are never dominant at the same time. Instead, our brain is hardwired to be dominated by either the right side or the left side in a circular rhythm, normally lasting between 90-120 minutes. This circular movement is called the ultradian rhythm, and it works 24 hours a day, even regulating our stages of sleep at night.

## Definition of “The Knowledge Worker”

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

The natural rhythm dictates that you can only use your logical, linear left brain for around an hour and a half. After that, you must switch to the right brain hemisphere for roughly 20 minutes. Normally, you start getting drowsy, yawn, and feel a sudden urge to eat and stretch your body.

Unfortunately, most of us do not work according to our natural, ultradian rhythms. Instead of utilizing the productive potential we have in 90-minute bursts, we allow our surroundings to disturb us, depriving us of our super-concentrated state of mind. Usually when the brain orders us to rest, we force ourselves to carry on, pumping natural stress hormones such as adrenalin, noradrenalin, and cortisol into our bodies.

## How You Become Super-Productive

Knowing your ultradian rhythms can help you become immensely effective and productive. All you need is to plan your activities so that you work in exactly the right 90-minute periods during the day, making sure that you are not disturbed while in the ultra-productive mode.

At the same time, you must cherish the 20-minute breaks when your body is predominantly controlled by the right brain hemisphere. Go for a walk. Small talk with your colleagues or do something else that doesn't require too much mental capacity.

If you note how productive and energized you are at different times during the day on a piece of paper, your unique work pattern will soon emerge. After that, it's up to you to utilize this powerful new information.

## The Do's And Don'ts of the Productive Brain Cycle

If managed the right way, most knowledge workers are capable of producing what normally takes 10-12 hours of traditional work in just three bursts of 90 minutes of work, followed by three 20-minute breaks. No more long hours burning the midnight oil.

This discovery is great news for companies and managers striving to increase work productivity to keep pace with the demands of the market. But it also requires most workplaces to organize work and office spaces in completely new ways.

We must supply quiet rooms for people working in open office spaces. We must respect the employees who need some time to themselves, and stop mistreating people who take a short nap or leave the office for a while.

“In a world in which our attention is increasingly under siege, better focus makes it possible to get more work done, in less time, at a higher level of quality”\*

– Schwartz & Porath

But most importantly, we must deal with the “always on” attitude of the modern workplace. In the future, the “off” time is most important.

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## Confetti days kill productivity

Confetti days are when you are constantly interrupted with issues not on your original to-do list. This makes it impossible to complete even the smallest of tasks; it rips your day into little pieces and leaves you where you were when the day began.

Confetti days are part of the modern workplace. According to a *study* by the University of California, office workers were interrupted roughly every ten minutes by colleagues, their smart phone, or emails.

While not every distraction may throw you off course, some of them are bound to pull you away from what you're doing. Once thrown off track, it can take as much as 23 minutes for you to return to the original task - if you even succeed in doing so.

...office workers were interrupted roughly **every ten minutes** by colleagues, their smart phone, or emails.

These interruptions add up to many hours lost. This is frustrating for the individual, but it also costs the business a considerable amount of money and lost opportunities.

Here is what you can do to put a stop to this?

- **Tell people when you're busy**

Simply telling people around you that you need to concentrate will help. Very rarely will people intentionally interrupt you if you have told them you're under pressure. In fact, they will often protect you from outside interruptions and try to solve issues themselves.

- **Set presence indicator on "busy"**

This is a no-brainer, but few of us do it. UC clients let you change your status to "don't disturb" or "busy." This way people will likely only interrupt you if it's absolutely urgent.

- **Don't pick up the phone**

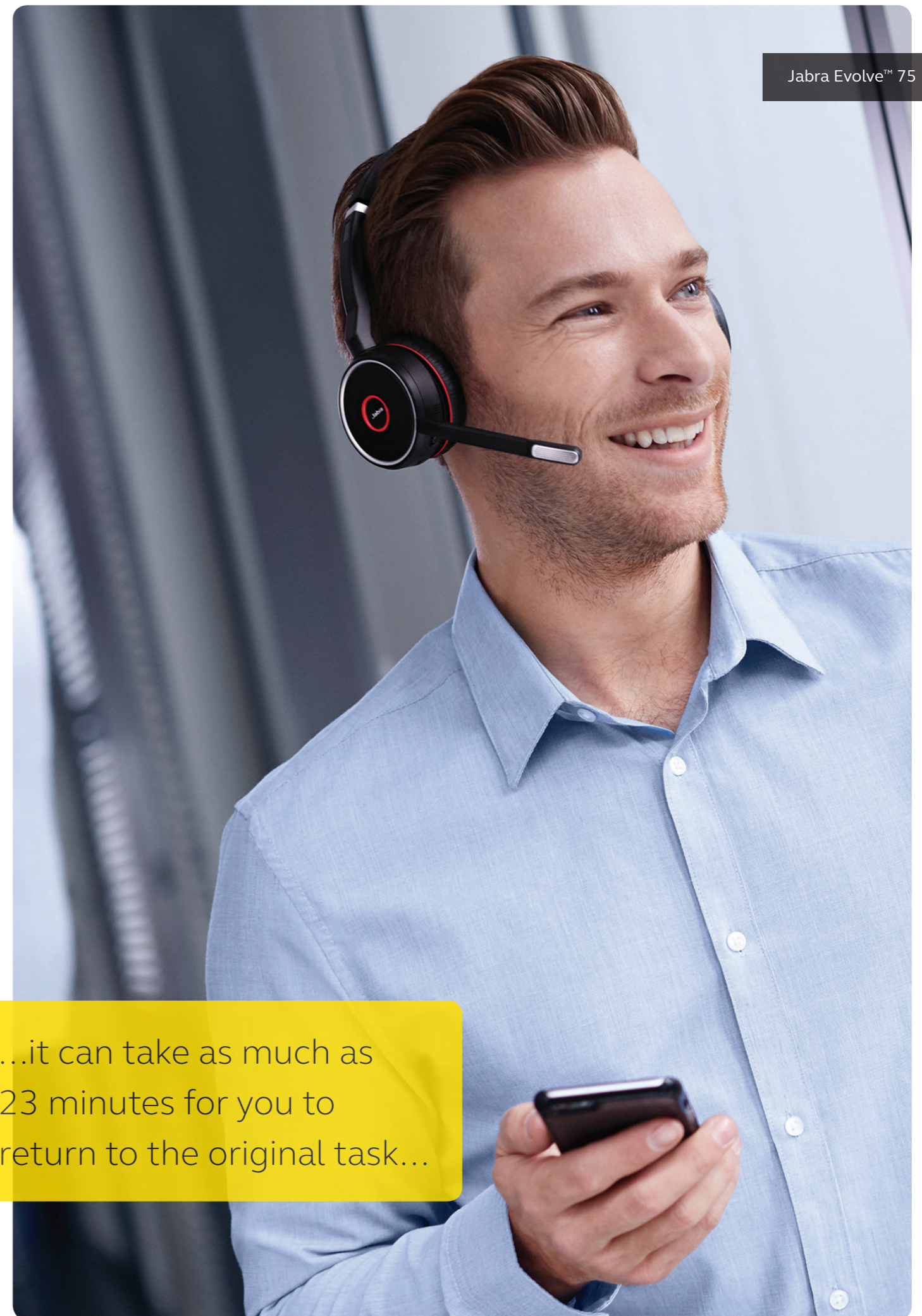
Few questions are urgent; most can wait an hour or two. Not feeling like you must take every call is a good strategy when you have to get things done without interruptions.

- **Go somewhere else**

Not being there to get interrupted is also effective. Finding a conference room or working at home, if possible, will save you from much distraction.

Unfortunately, confetti days are here to stay, but you can avoid much of this distraction by using these simple tips.

...it can take as much as 23 minutes for you to return to the original task...





## It's time to face the big, open space

We've seen the research and heard the warnings: big, open offices kill creativity, stress employees, and crush productivity. But you can actually make open office work - all it takes is a very important choice and a closer look at your company's culture.

They were the kings of the financial crisis: the procurement officers that cut costs and gave imperiled companies the extra cash that they were dying for. They saved our butts when saving money was easier than selling products - and we thank them!

However, in order to cut costs on real estate, they also took big, open space offices to a completely new level. In a CoreNet Global survey, 55 percent of

the corporate real estate professionals reported that square footage per worker has decreased between five and 25 percent over the last five years.

Forty percent of the respondents predicted that their companies will reach less than 100 square feet per worker in 2017 - an all-time low. The average for all companies will be 151 square feet in 2017, compared to 225 square feet in 2010.

## Square footage per worker has decreased between five and **25 percent** over the last five years.

Less space is money saved, but cramming people together takes a toll on work life quality. An overwhelming amount of research shows that big, open space offices generate stress, spoil worker relations, and reduce motivation. Recent research from Sweden also proves that the bigger the office rooms, the more sick days people take.

### Get the Best of Both Worlds

Ideally, workplaces need the best of both worlds: open spaces to facilitate conversations and innovation, as well as quiet rooms for concentration and individual work.

If you can't have both, you need to answer a really tough question: What's most important at your workplace? When does your company create most value? Are you most dependent on collaboration and constant interaction? Or are you more dependent on individual work with a high level of concentration?

Once you have decided, the next steps become clear. First, the design: individual thinking is best done in a library-like environment; knowledge sharing works better if you dedicate your few square feet to a café-like environment.

When the physical layout is in place, it's time to work on your company's culture. All employees must respect the individual's choice of workspace, and you need to provide options for people to collaborate or work alone. That's where separate rooms for meetings, opportunities to work at home, headsets to reduce noise, etc., comes in.

### Engage With Your Employees - And Make the Decision Together

Making the decision is hard and you shouldn't make this decision alone. You must make it along with the employees and you must also lay out the ground rules and values of working together in the office.

How can we be even better at taking care of our work environment? How do we secure that we stay innovative if we primarily work in silence - and how do we get some personal work and thinking done if we are all in a constant dialog?

The right choice, a supporting culture and continuous improvement, is the recipe for high productivity and happy employees. It may take some time to get there, but when you do, it means a lot of money for your company.

The average square feet per worker will be 151 in 2017, compared to 225 square feet in 2010.

## The guide to ultimate (work-) happiness

“The zone” is where it’s at. That is where the magic happens, where you are the most productive and - yes - happy! Getting there on demand is hard, but with a little planning, the zone may not be out of reach.

‘Flow’, ‘the zone’, ‘the groove’, it is all the same: It is the magnetic place where you are at your best, and where you produce high quality work. It is at the intersection between productivity, creativity, and pure happiness - the place where workers and athletes alike aspire to be.

Large and innovative companies, like Google, have made a science out of *creating spots* where employees can achieve work flow together or alone, playing with colors, shapes, themes, and space to create a place where this magic can happen.

For example, Google has invested in ski gondolas in their Zurich office, a pub-like meeting room in Dublin, and a sidewalk cafe in Istanbul - and they claim that the product of their HR or “People Operations Department” can be measured in double digits.

### It Does Not Take a Budget to Create Happiness

Most companies do not have the budget to build ski gondolas. Workers must settle for the occasional quiet room or working from home or in a coffee shop. But there are some guiding principles that can still help these workers get in ‘the zone’.

- **Find the right surroundings**

Maybe it is not your office. It may be your living room or a coffee shop. The ideal place to work is different for each of us. Find yours.

- **Find your props**

It may be that your best work is not done on your laptop but on your 2-in-1 device or your tablet. Find the props that work for you.

- **Silence or sound?**

For some, the right tunes help them get in the zone. Others find music distracting and work best in silence. It’s deeply personal, so choose your flavor.

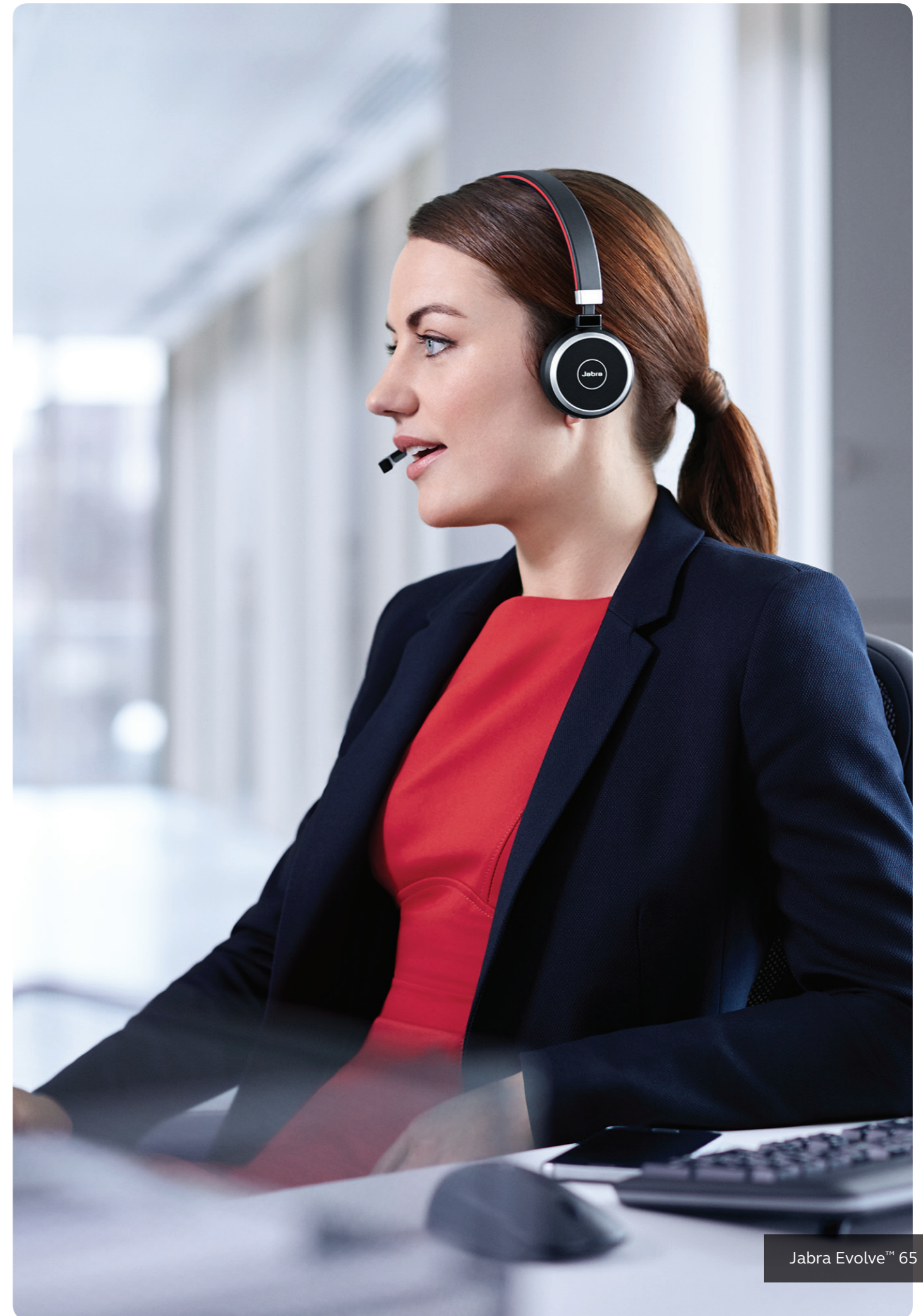
- **Find your ultimate rhythm**

While some people get their best work done during the day, others prefer evenings. Stick to the rhythm that you find most productive.

- **Find you level**

Not all activities can get you in the flow. It’s best to find an activity that is hard enough to force you to concentrate, but not so hard that it will interrupt your train of thought.

Flow is all about an emotional state of undiluted focus. It is not easy to attain, but it can be practiced, and it gets easier as you go. There are plenty of paths to the zone and you will have to find yours. Once you get there, it will be worth it.



## Hush! How to harness the power of silence

You lose more than 66 percent of your productivity through accidental noise in the office. That's more than half your work day disappearing into thin air. It does not have to be that way; Small changes in the office can have major impact on your productivity.

“Schizophonia” is a state of confusion experienced when what you hear and see do not match for a longer period of time – say, a full workday. It is an interesting concept, because about 70 percent of us work in open-plan offices, and many use earbuds with music to cancel out the noise of chattering colleagues.

But this in itself is not a viable solution. While shutting out sounds with music may help, we tend to play the “wrong” kind of music in the attempt to block out our peers.

You lose more than **66 percent** of your productivity through accidental noise in the office.

### Too Many Voices in Your Head

Julian Treasure touches upon this in one of his highly recommendable *TED talks*, stating that we can only follow 1.6 conversations at the same time. When you are typing, it adds up to one conversation in your head and 0.6 of the song lyrics in your earbuds. Or - more often - the other way around. So, essentially, if you are writing and listening to music at the same time, you only hear 0.6 of your own voice. That does not sound very productive, does it?

Yet, open offices are not going away even though they *reduce productivity by 66 percent* compared to a silent environment. Listening to music through earbuds simply places a layer of noise over an already noisy environment – and you cannot get rid of your carrot-crunching, next-desk neighbor, because she is also your greatest resource in accounting.

So, what can we do about it? First of all, if you have a problem with noise in your office, you absolutely have to speak up. The noise is bad for your health, sanity, and business. Chances are, if the noise is bothering you, then you are probably not alone.

### Five Ways to Achieve Silence and Success

Here's how a few changes to the environment, technology, and behavior in the office can help may decrease noise and improve the working environment.

- **Move the noisy things away**

Machinery accounts for much of the noise in the modern office – especially because of its social setting. A water cooler or coffee machine encourages conversation, which creates noise and decreases productivity. Move machines and venues for noisy, social gatherings away from the open plan.

- **Reduce visual noise**

What you see is what you get interrupted by. Create natural breaks in your field of vision by using bookshelves or room dividers, for example. This is quite effective, as you are suddenly awarded with a hint of seclusion.



- **Use noise-cancelling headphones**

As an alternative to music, *noise-canceling headphones* offer a filter for sound. Their passive noise cancellation shuts out noise by fitting tightly to your ears. Active noise cancellation measures and actively counters surrounding sounds. In combination, they're very effective indeed.

- **Make an arrangement with colleagues**

As mentioned earlier, if the noise bothers you, it probably bothers your colleagues as well. Try to find a common agreement: no talking after lunch, meetings can be held in another room, telephone conversations can be taken off the office floor, and so on.

- **Have an escape plan**

If all else fails, you should have a place to escape to: your home, the coffee shop, or the library. But this is not a solution that will stand the test of time. Working off site is only when you really need to focus. It should not be a daily necessity. If it is, you need to implement some of the above or you may end up putting your health at risk.

...we can only follow **1.6 conversations** at the same time...

## Productivity at the office

### The time at work paradox

Many organizations 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 behavior 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 organizing work towards realizing 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

Organizations 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.

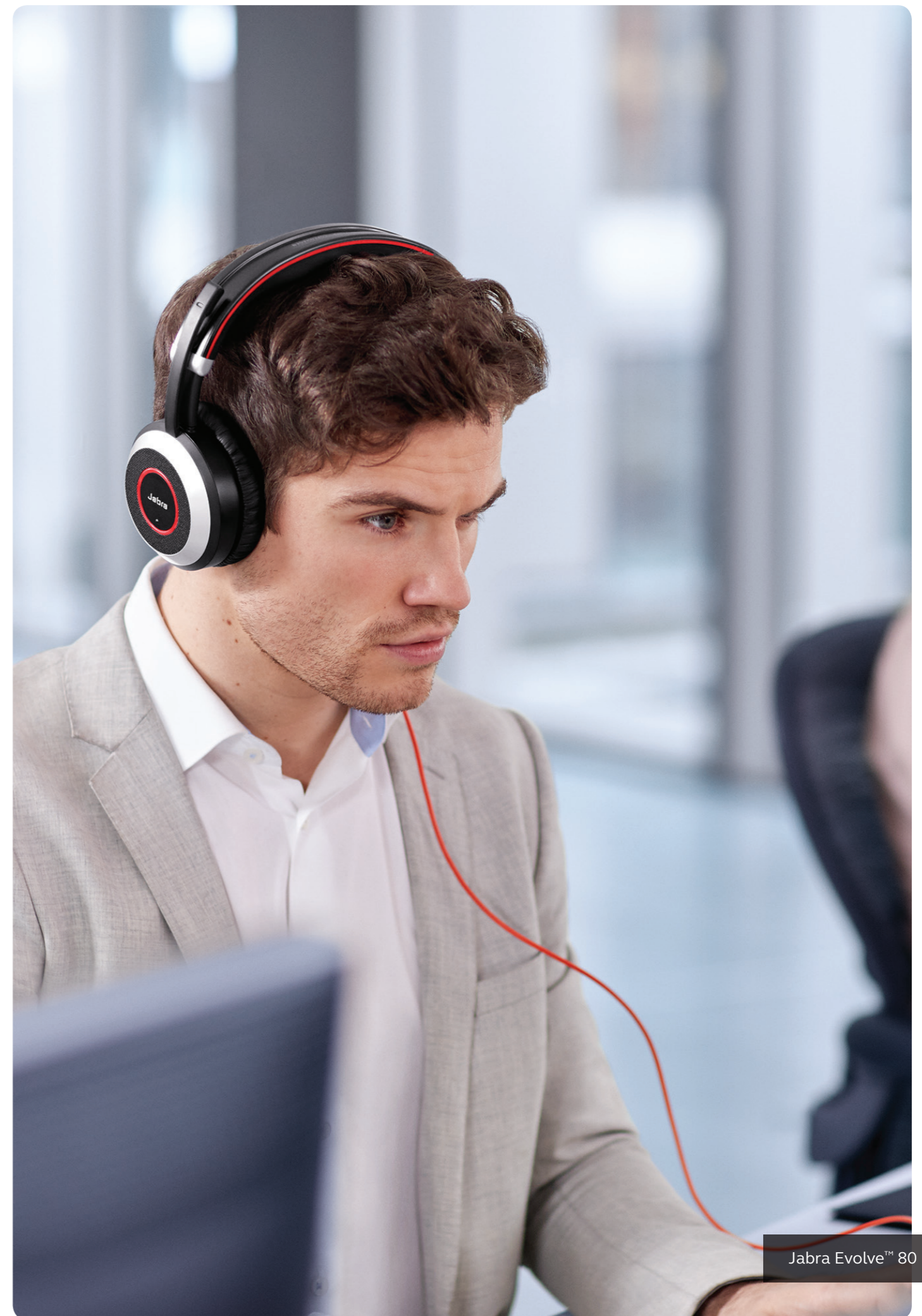
Follow our blog and join us in the discussion [www.blog.jabra.com](http://www.blog.jabra.com)

### 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)

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\* Tony Schwartz and Christine Porath, 2014  
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[www.jabra.com](http://www.jabra.com)

#### **About Jabra**

Jabra, part of the GN Group, is a leading developer and manufacturer of communications and sound solutions. We are committed to letting people hear more, do more and be more than they ever thought possible. We believe that through sound, we can transform lives. Jabra innovates and empowers with sound solutions for businesses and consumers, producing corded and wireless headsets, portable and in-office speakerphones, and sports earbuds. Jabra employs 1,000 people worldwide, and produced an annual revenue of DKK3.5 bn in 2016. The GN Group operates in more than 90 countries, and has almost 150 years' experience in innovation and delivering reliability and ease of use. Founded in 1869, employing over 5,000 people, and listed on Nasdaq Copenhagen, GN makes life sound better.

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