

Why Quieter Offices Aren't Better with Bill Schiffmiller (S8:E9)(Transcript)

PODCAST

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So what we need to realize, especially with noise, is how it affects our overall wellbeing. So it can make us moody. And when it makes us moody, it affects our relationships. And it can also create stress. And when you have stress, we are aware of how it can affect your blood pressure, your heart rate, and as well as other kinds of medical health conditions too.

Chris Congdon: Noise is a part of the workplace we all experience but can't always control: My guest today says the sounds and acoustics we experience at work not only impacts our performance, it impacts our wellbeing.

Welcome to Work Better, the Steelcase podcast where we speak with experts about how to help the world work better. I'm your host Chris Congdon and my guest today is auditory-health expert, Bill Schiffmiller. Bill is the founder of Akoio where he reframes noise not as a nuisance, but as information—a signal that reveals patterns of work and communication barriers.

Now, if we pull back and go, "Hey, I never thought that noise can affect the way people perform." How do we get it into the mindset of HR? How do we get it into the mindset of those who are responsible? And most organizations do not know about that and it's no fault of their own. I think a lot of it has to do with it cannot be seen.

From auditory fatigue to inclusive design choices that support people with hearing differences, Bill's work pushes companies to think beyond compliance and toward environments where everyone can thrive.

Bill also shared much of his personal story with me and that's where we started.

Chris Congdon: So Bill Schiffmiller, thank you so much for joining us on Work Better Today.

Bill Schiffmiller: Thank you, Chris for having me. I'm just so thrilled and my association with Steelcase goes way back when I was studying design management at pr and I'm just so thrilled that I could be associated with you and the Steelcase team. So thank you.

Chris Congdon: Oh, thank you so much. I didn't know that, but you know what I do know is you've been a lifelong hearing aid user and I am taking a class right now that is about cognition in the physical environment and in class last week we literally were just learning about the importance of hearing and cognition. So it's serendipitous that we've come together right now.

So I would love to just hear you talk a little bit about your background and you know, being a hearing aid user for your life. Like, can you just talk about how that's experienced and shaped your career?

Bill Schiffmiller: Yeah, absolutely. And Chris, I love how you kicked off by saying a hearing aid user and not somebody with a hearing loss or hearing disability, because right there you just change it to something that's positive because we all are end users of something and we all have our strengths and weaknesses, so thank you for that.

Yeah. So I was born with some hearing loss, but it was not known until I was six years old. And that happened in grade school. And it was my first grade teacher who knew something was going on, walked behind me, clapped her hand, and I didn't respond. And that was the beginning of, "hey, Billy needs to get hearing aid." And so back then we had only one choice, and those were analog hearing aids. They were very obvious, big and bulky.

But as I progressed through the years, hearing aids had been a part of my ability to hear and part of my own social wellbeing. How am I going to fit in socially with my peers, without my ear hearing being noticeable as my eyeglasses. So we all heard four eyes while I was also getting four ears. So that kind of experience socially, along with the technology that was available, led me to better understand who I am as someone with a hearing loss, the person I became personally and professionally.

So I have been through a great deal of technologies over the years to where we are today where we have digital hearing aid and it is so packed with all kinds of technology when back in the day it was all about volume. 3:14

Chris Congdon: Hey Bill, do you mind if I ask kind of a personal question, but growing up with using hearing aids like, I mean, I just remember as a child, you know, that well, kids weren't always very nice about kids that had any sort of differences and you know, hearing aids were always something that you'd think of that older people would wear, not necessarily a young person who was six or seven or however you know, when you started really wearing them, what was that like for you as a child?

Bill Schiffmiller: Well, first of all, not only was it noticeable, but you heard it because the volume was so loud, it would cause feedback and the kid would respond, and we all know how mean kids can be with others. So they started to call me all kinds of names. And so what I learned about that is, look really not about granddad hearing aides This is my hearing aid. And so, I learned from my mom, sticks and stones may break my bones, my words may not hurt me.

So I took that into contact and I made light of the hearing aid that I had. And so I would say, oh, you heard that feedback? Well, I have the Mets game on right now, and they just hit a home run. And also very unusual for a child to have hearing aids. Because they look like they have special needs. And when you have special needs, now you are in a special class and therefore you have speech therapy. So my speech would not be as clear as it is today. So now you have the hearing aid, but you also have my speech impediment at the time, which I now call my deaf accent. It's about how do you put a twist on it. Back then, those were tough times.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. So how did this impact the mission behind Ayo?

Bill Schiffmiller: So, first of all, Akyo derives from two languages. In Greek acoustic with a K means acoustic. And in Tagalo, which is Filipino ako, A.K.O, means "I", first person, so I hear.

It all came about because of a product I invented called the hearing aid battery dispenser by Akoyo. I wanted to solve the problem of changing the hearing aid battery. How can, how do we with a device that's easy to carry, store and change the battery. And if you are familiar with the classic non-rechargeable hearing aid, you had to change the battery. But if you have somebody with dexterity vision challenges, it was hard.

So I invented this product that automatically removes the tab and then you would place it and put it in your hearing aid and you would discard the old battery into the dispenser. So it was like a loop system.

Chris Congdon: That's fascinating., I have had this experience with my with my father. So I mean, this is going to kind of the age, the other end of the age spectrum because he's 93. But we've gone through the whole process of trying to change batteries when he had very limited dexterity, and so that was really difficult.

Bill Schiffmiller: You can relate.

Chris Congdon: Yeah, totally can relate. But let's bring this even broader and just talk about hearing health and its role in overall health, and I'd love it if we could spend some time on cognitive health there in particular, but just in general, why should we all care about hearing health?

Bill Schiffmiller: As you may notice, I muted for a second because there was a siren coming from the streets of Manhattan. So just think about how disruptive that was or can be for somebody who cannot tolerate that kind of noise level.

And when we talk about auditory matters at Akoyo, we're not just talking about hearing loss, we're talking about three parts that make up auditory matter. And that is noise, which is a disruptive, sound which can be pleasant, and then hearing, which is your communication piece.

So when we talk about auditory matter, we have to look at each slice of the pie and say, "Hey, what am I really challenged with, am I having trouble with communication, comprehending the conversation, or do I find that I cannot focus because of that disruptive noise?"

But then, there might be, what I think for most people is a sound that can be pleasant. I think everybody benefits. So they're all interconnected.

And the other thing too is when you take those things into account. And we're talking about the workplace. It affects your mood. It affects your ability to perform. Therefore, it's going to affect your ability to produce well at work.

Now, what does that mean? Well, to an employer that might mean, okay, maybe there's a high absenteeism rate. Maybe there are additional health costs associated with that. And ultimately, if there is more than one employee, it can impact the whole organization and ultimately it can affect the bottom line for an organization.

Chris Congdon: Yeah, I mean, I find sometimes when I'm in a noisy environment sometimes I get grumpy, you know, like I'll, I'll just feel myself getting a little short because the noise is just getting to me. But I also think it's harder when it is noise, not a pleasant sound, or not about hearing, but literally noise. It also makes it harder to concentrate and to focus. So I also feel like for employers that would be impacting my ability to your point, Bill, to do my best work.

Bill Schiffmiller: Absolutely. And you also have to take into account, well, where that noise is coming from. Am I working remotely? Am I working at the office? What's going on in those situations now? If you are commuting to the office, think about how your day is starting. What is your household like? If you have children and they're loud and they're running around, that can affect you. And if you like television and if you do use the radio, maybe it can be noisy.

And then if you take public transportation, what about the PA system? On the public transportation and well the fellow commuters who may be loud, by the time you get to the office, you are already exhausted. Now I'm supposed to be ready to perform and be at my best. So it's not just in those isolated environments that you are working in.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. I still feel like noise in the office; we hear it continues to be the number one complaint that employees have. And why do you think organizations underestimate the problem with noise?

Bill Schiffmiller: Well, let's talk about auditory matters. For starters, what do they understand what noise is about? It's taken for granted and you can't really see it now. Those organizations that may be addressing it think like a solution like Steelcase offers, like attenuating the environment with attenuation materials and how you design fixtures around that. That, can be great.

And the other thing too is when it comes to the American Disability Act, ADA guidelines, remember that is 40 years old, they didn't take auditory matters into account. They took deafening into account, which are different from regular human challenges. Two different things, even though it is the ability to hear. So we need to be raising awareness on auditory matters and look at those three slices of the pie that I mentioned and go "Okay, are we having an auditory issue here in the office?"

Because remember, maybe there's a communication dynamic among employees that needs to be considered. Where are we miscommunicating and things like that. So what I try to do is offer a workshop to give them insight and make them aware, because each organization is different and they'll come back with a different response to noise, hearing, sound, we have different take on it. Once you have aha moment in that organization, then they could start thinking about what can we do to make it better?

Chris Congdon: Yeah. Hey, I wanna ask about the opposite end of the spectrum. We used to have this room, a testing space for sound that we're somehow like sound was almost entirely eliminated, like everything was padded and stuff. And when you walked into it, it was actually, it was kind of creepy. Like there was zero sound in it. It made me really anxious going into it, but I've even been in spaces where it's not devoid of sound, but like you're kind of discouraged from talking. And I find that uncomfortable too. You know, it's also like it's too quiet. Is there an issue there, Bill?

Bill Schiffmiller: Absolutely. So just because we want silent tranquility doesn't mean it's a one solution or for everyone. Everyone had a different reaction to those kind of environments.

My sister-in-law has impeccable hearing, so does my wife. My wife could be in a restaurant where it's noisy and she could be hearing a conversation on the other side of the room. And she's not paying attention to me, and she goes, "oh my God, that couple is breaking up." But she doesn't like total tranquility. Same thing with her sister-in-law. My sister-in-law actually freaks out when it is totally quiet. So she needs some kind of commotion, white noise, just the feeling, but they belong. Or it's like rocking a baby to sleep, you know? Maybe it has a common soothing effect.

I, on the other hand, I've been in those silent rooms. Then after a while it seems like I'm in a vacuum. Like it's just too much. Like sometimes it's too good, too perfect. Doesn't necessarily mean it's the right solution.

Chris Congdon: So what advice do you have for leaders when they're trying to balance the need? Well, let's, first of all, maybe think about people who have hearing challenges. Like what are some of the things that leaders get wrong and what suggestions would you have for them?

Bill Schiffmiller: So what I would say is let's do away with any assumption that people have around here. What leaders need to be aware of is to pay attention to, well, what is communication like? Are we understanding each other? Are there gaps that are taking place in the communication? Let's take a look at that. They need to think about, "Hey guys, just like we do with our workshop, how is the environment affecting you?"

There was a study added by Quiet Mark, which is a London based group that will certify the noise level of consumer product -tabletop. And they give a mark. And one of the studies that they did with these appliances and, you know, looking at quieter appliances, they wanted to understand the work areas. It is no different from the policy that many organizations have when it comes to reasonable accommodation. How do you work with an employee with such accessibility, need and accommodate their needs? Assistive devices, what have you. So it is all about having an open dialogue. But I can assure you, you are always gonna have a leader who's going to relate. Your colleagues shared a father's experience. You shared your dad's experience. So if you can find that sweet spot, "Hey, I have a relative who experienced hearing loss", what could I do and make their participation better through better hearing, better listening.

Chris Congdon: So Bill, I wanna go a little further. You mentioned this earlier, and you highlighted how. Accessibility issues really took center stage around technologies like at events like CES and I'm curious about what are some of the new technologies and like, why is that important for employers to be aware of that?

Bill Schiffmiller: So it's the two things. What a technology looks like and what a service look like. And at the end of the day, what does that mean for a successful business model? For so long there have been many one trick ponies on how do I help with the blind, how do I help with the deaf community wheelchair bound individuals? You can't clump them all together.

You know, if we look at accessibility with a capital A. It's a lot to chew. Now it's about, okay, we got AI. We can collect a lot of data on what it means for a low vision user, a blind user, and then really pinpoint to the region where they're from, and then the different types of wheelchair users and depending on their condition, their age.

So AI is playing a fantastic role in better understanding the pain point, the challenges that these individuals are faced with. And then decide, okay, they have the gap, maybe we can come up with a fantastic solution. May it be through a technology or may it be through a service. And so what I'm seeing now that I have not seen, and even during my time at Apple where that accessibility is an issue for Apple retail. We are in a fantastic time with technology to clean a fantastic role in democratizing consumerization and giving independence to those with accessibility needs.

Chris Congdon: Bill, a lot of our listeners are designers of physical spaces, workplace designers, as well as education and healthcare. What advice do you have for those of us who are interested in designing workspaces? Like what does good sound design look like in a physical environment?

Bill Schiffmiller: Well, getting back to, don't assume I had a situation while I was at Apple where we introduced what was called made for iPhone Human. So what that meant was Phone calls were going directly into the hearing aid.

Chris Congdon: Okay.

Bill Schiffmiller: But a feature was removed where the phone alert would ring and it would alert you in the hearing aid. Well, that feature got removed. So I went to the engineer and said, why is this removed? And go, oh, well my dad didn't like it.

I said, your dad? Well, how long did I been wearing hearing aids? Oh, six months. I go, buddy, I've been wearing hearing aids since I'm six years old. Don't just assume and quickly remove a feature. You need to ask around, you need to include those who can benefit from any kind of auditory matter and just act on them for their perspective. Put yourself in their shoes.

One of the things that I always enjoy and even with my fellow colleagues, put them in those situations makes them uncomfortable. And get them to realize how I hear. But I hear where I don't hear every single word. So what do you do? Put up a recording that sounds like what I hear. And then think about at the end of the day, how did it make you feel? And that's what I want. All the designers, all these solution brokers, think about it. How did it make you feel? What do you want them to feel in the end? And it's not one solution for all.

And also keep the solution simple. It's hard to do, but keep it simple.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. I think that's such good advice and it feels like it ties with a theme that we talk about a lot on work better, which is that core principle of inclusive design of including the user of whatever it is, the space, the the thing that you're creating and designing. Include them in the process as opposed to assuming that, You know, if you don't experience those problems personally, you know, it's really hard to design for people when you don't have the same lived experience.

Bill Schiffmiller: And also go in not knowing what you don't know. And even with the end user. They don't know what you don't. They don't know. But think about how you ask the question. You want to ask open questions, not yes, no.

Chris Congdon: Hey, Bill, before I let you go, I'm gonna ask another personal question. Now, our viewers may not be able to see you right now. They might just be listening as they're driving in the car, but I can't really see your hearing aids and I'm curious about that. Well, now I can, as you hold them up to the camera. They're pretty small. And I think one of the things that I hear people worry about particularly as we have a multi-generational workforce, you have people who are older staying in the workforce, and one of the things I just learned in my class last week was that you might not think that you have a hearing problem, but you may have experienced hearing loss as you age or maybe you've overexposed yourself to, you know, too many head banger, rock concerts or what, or work environments.

Anyway, my question, I guess for the listeners is these hearing aids, like going forward, how would you describe them to people? So like, they don't have to be afraid of wearing them.

Bill Schiffmiller: So now you need to start by thinking about your human profile. What is your human profile? Take note of the situation you are in, where you appear to be struggling. These are not grandad hearing aides anymore. My hearing aids are prescriptive hearing aids because I have a profound loss. It's non-negotiable. I have to get a certain training program, I need to get the power of the nuances of a feature to help me hear better while it may annoyed and get better speech clarity.

But it's so subjective. You have those that may have mild to moderate hearing loss, but they don't qualify for a prescriptive hearing aid. They can feel assured that Apple is doing a fantastic job by offering the Apple Air Power Pro 2 and 3. What's great about that is it's affordable at \$249 versus my \$4,000 per hearing aid. So I have \$8,000 worth of hearing aid. Now, you're looking at \$259 and guess what? I can return it within 14, 30 days. What's great about it is you can do a hearing test within the Air Pod.

It would then tell you yes, the Air Pod is sufficient for your hearing needs. If not, it will advise you to see an audiologist. Now, there are great companies out there that have online services that allow you to take a hearing test and then they could send you a hearing aid that is appropriate for your needs. But it's not black and white. It's very, very subjective.

Chris Congdon: Yes. I think that's such good advice, Bill. Like, I'm just gonna repeat it. Everybody go see an audiologist. You go to see an eye doctor, you go to see a dentist. Why don't we think about our hearing as equally as important?

But also, you know, it makes such a huge impact not just on the quality of our lives, like, but when I think about our ability to socialize and to be in relationship with other people, being able to hear and hear well is such a critical part of that journey in life. So this is such an important issue. I'm just grateful you came to share what you've learned about all of this.

Bill Schiffmiller: Absolutely.

Chris Congdon: Any last words of wisdom for us, Bill?

Bill Schiffmiller: Well, I was thinking about the elephant in Bangkok, Thailand.

Chris Congdon: I didn't know you were going there, but okay. The elephant in Bangkok. Okay.

Bill Schiffmiller: But I'll tell you why auditory matter is made up of a vibration. Sound is vibration. So the poor elephant is dealing with the concrete jungle, the urban sound, and it's always making them nervous. When they're out in the wild it is part of the defense mechanism. It allowed them to see if there's an animal that's threatened them out in the wild, but now that they are brought into urban setting, it's always making them crazy. Now, put yourself in their shoes and we're all feeling that anxiety and stress due to noise. I know it was a little off, but I think it's all connected.

Chris Congdon: Well, I know for sure as I said before, too much noise and I start getting cranky and that's not good. That's not good for anybody. So, with that thank you so much for joining us today, Bill. It's just, I feel like I've learned so much and it's just been a delight talking with you so thank you.

Bill Schiffmiller: Likewise, Chris. Thank you. It helped me understand how noise can actually be information. When we consider how the sounds at work positively and negatively impact us, we can create healthier more inclusive workplaces.

If you enjoyed today's episode, share it with a friend or colleague. Be sure to follow us wherever you get your podcasts and visit us as steelcase.com/research to sign up for the Work Better Weekly newsletter for workplace research, and design ideas delivered right to your inbox.

Thanks again for being here and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.