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2c: Contextual Inquiry

For our first inquiry we wanted someone who works in a restaurant, a workplace environment proven to be consistently louder than OSHA standards recommend.¹ We approached Landon, a pasta cook at the Serafina restaurant in Eastlake, and interviewed him at a nearby coffee shop.

When he first started in the industry, Landon said that working in a restaurant seemed quite loud. Now, seven years later, he “never notices it anymore” and that it just seems normal. That said, all of his six prior restaurants had different working noise levels. These levels are highly dependent on the restaurant’s culture (fine dining, catering, etc.), the style of the kitchen (open vs. closed), the kitchen layout, and most importantly, the number of customers currently in the restaurant. In his experience, fine dining establishments are the quietest, open kitchens are quieter than closed kitchens because they have to keep the customers in mind, and the dish pit is the loudest section. He also admitted there is no discussion of hearing loss in the industry, and the only conversations about noise are about providing the best customer-experience. He takes steps to mitigate his noise exposure by taking his work breaks in the walk-in cooler as its “almost soundproof in there”. He says busier nights are tougher not only because work is busy, but because it’s harder to fall asleep: “You’re more tired physically, but since it was a high-stress night, your mind takes awhile to wind down”. When asked about using hearing protection while working, Landon was quick to say that it simply isn’t feasible. “In a kitchen you need to hear everything. It’s a dangerous place, and you have to have all of your senses.”

The interview model proved to be an effective mechanism of gaining context and insight to the work environment as a traditional master/apprentice model was unfeasible for this profession. Based on the information gathered, we get the sense that addressing hearing loss in this type of industry and environment will be somewhat problematic. One reason is the reliance on clear communication for efficient workflow during shifts. Breaks from work are also infrequent and nearly impossible during the loudest time (prime dining hours). Another major reason is the sheer lack of awareness for the dangers of constant exposure of loud noises, especially in upper management. We surmise that this may be due to the latent characteristics of hearing loss and the fact that it does not affect an individual until long after the instance of noise. With this study, further research, and development, there is an opportunity to bring awareness to this undermentioned danger, especially in this industry.

Our remaining inquiries include an audiologist (someone who studies hearing loss) and another food worker. Ideally the audiologist can provide a scientific background to help us communicate with future interviewees and help educate them on current noise exposure research. When Landon was told some facts about hearing loss, he seemed surprised and asked questions that we were unable to answer. For the other food worker, we are interested approaching someone who works in a different environment, perhaps a bar or music venue. This will allow us to compare them and perform more detailed analyses. We have reflected about our inquiry process and there are several things we can improve on. First is letting the interviewee, not the interviewer, carry the conversation. Without this balance, any natural insights of the interviewee may be stifled. They should feel comfortable elaborating on our questions instead of just giving a general response. It’s also critical that we have some concrete sampling of the environmental sound. Even in Landon’s case, we should have monitored the kitchen sound at Serafina. Finally, it’s important to interview people right after work when their memories and feelings are fresh. Even though an apprenticeship model is impossible, we should strive to match the experience.

¹ <http://www.noiseandhealth.org/text.asp?2009/11/44/145/53359>