

Shielding the office saved her career



Veronica Svensk is an economist and case manager at a government office in Sweden. When she got sick with electrical sensitivity, she got a shielded office so she could continue working.

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Veronica felt gradually worse over several years. By 2012 she had headaches, dizziness, was irritable and had problems concentrating. Her head felt foggy and sometimes she had to read the same text multiple times. She didn't sleep well, either.

She sometimes felt pressure in her head and her chest. The doctors x-rayed her, checked if she had multiple sclerosis or other diseases, but were at a loss to explain her symptoms.

She slept poorly at night, but when the family went to a vacation cabin in the woods she slept great. Why was that?

After a couple of years she saw a brochure about electrical sensitivities at a chiropractor's office. She tried to turn off the wireless network at home (the Wi-Fi router was close to her bed) and then slept fine. Now it all made sense.

What now?

Veronica's workplace was full of electronics. How could she continue working there? She had a Master's degree in economics, but it seemed useless now.

Veronica was thinking she might get another education in something like farming or horticulture, where she could work away from all the radiation.

When she told her immediate boss about her illness, the response was supportive. The next step was to see the company health service, which did not go so well. At the first meeting the physician listened with sympathy. At the second meeting the physician's attitude had changed completely — he must have gotten some negative information between the two meetings. It was clear there would be no help from there.

Veronica's boss was present at the second meeting. Once they left the meeting, she told Veronica that they would then solve this on their own.

It took some time and experimentation, but Veronica's management did what was necessary to accommodate her needs.

Dampening the wireless network

The building Veronica worked in had a wireless network (Wi-Fi) with network routers throughout the building.

They covered the routers with shielding fabric. This lowered the overall radiation level, but the network still worked. It was simply overkill before.

The Wi-Fi routers were mounted in the ceilings in the hallways. The shielding fabric (Swiss Shield) was sewn into form-fitting little covers that were unobtrusive.

Veronica's office

Veronica got a private office, which was shielded and had no wireless devices inside.



The shielding was done using the Swiss Shield shielding fabric, which is made from threads of copper and silver. The fabric was hung from metal rods attached to the ceiling on all four sides of Veronica. The fabric covered the walls, window and door (see pictures). A slit in the fabric allowed access through the door. The ceiling was shielded with thin aluminum blankets that were mounted underneath the ceiling tiles. The floor was not shielded as there was nothing below the room.

This setup can easily be removed later on.

It is essential to have no wireless devices inside a shielded room, as their radiation would bounce back from the walls and make everything worse. Having a private office makes that a lot easier.

Her computer does not use wireless at all. It is connected to the network through a cable and cords connect the keyboard, mouse and other peripherals. Her computer screen is set back from her on the desk.

Her telephone uses a landline and is not cordless.

Telling the colleagues

The shielding was quite visible through the open door to her office. It looked odd. People passing in the hallway looked at it with curiosity. She felt a little ashamed of having such a strange setup.

She decided to send out a memo to all her colleagues to explain the situation. It went to about a hundred people. It started with these words (in translation):

Perhaps not everybody knows that I've been electrically sensitive for some years. I feel poorly when exposed to microwaves from wireless devices, such as mobile phones and Wi-Fi routers.

The letter was positive, without any finger pointing.

Veronica was apprehensive about what the response would be, but it was overwhelmingly supportive.

Her colleagues turn off their wireless devices when she attends meetings. Sometimes the managers gently remind everyone in the room to do it.

In the lunch room, people are great at turning off their smart phones or keeping them as far away from Veronica as possible if they need to keep them on

People have been great.

Success

The measures were a success. Veronica feels well in her office and continues to work like any other person.

Before they installed the shielding and dampened the network, the radiation level in her office was typically in the hundreds of microwatts ($\mu\text{W}/\text{m}^2$). It now never exceeds $5 \mu\text{W}/\text{m}^2$. That is about a hundredfold reduction (about 20 dB).

Measures at home

Veronica and her husband made various changes at home, too. A major project was that they painted the bedroom with a shielding paint.

Patience and a positive attitude was crucial

Veronica stresses that keeping a positive attitude and being patient was essential for success. If she had been angry and accusatory, it would not have worked.

Initially just discussing the problem with her immediate boss was the right way to start. Then later talking to the other people in her group and eventually the whole building.

This approach did not ruffle people's feathers and cause them to become defensive. A positive attitude is necessary to get people's cooperation. It would be easy for someone to sabotage it all.

Comments

The sensitivities vary from person to person, so any workplace accommodation must be tailored to the person and the situation. Some people are less sensitive than Veronica and may need fewer measures. Others are more sensitive and can't even sit in front of a computer.

The shielding used in this example is very basic. It is possible to install much stronger shielding, though it will take more effort (see the link below for details).

The Swiss Shield material is a premium product that is available in several countries. There are other shielding fabrics available as well, though be aware that quality, shielding effect and price can vary dramatically. Some shielding fabrics have odors that are bothersome to sensitive people.

Sources

This article is based on the Swedish-language article *Jag fick ett skärmat rum och har kunnat jobba kvar*, which was published in the 2017/1 issue of *Ljusglimten*, a publication of the Swedish EHS support group. Personal communication with Veronica Svensk filled in some details.

This article is approved by Veronica Svensk.

More information and stories

The website www.eiwellspring.org has many other articles about shielding and about living with electrical sensitivities.