

Straight Talking

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Sounds Perfect

Noise – or lack of it – can be a major issue in today's office environments. Problems arising from poor acoustics, rarely obvious when moving into a building or newly refurbished space, tend to emerge only later down the line when they reach critical proportions and begin to affect your business. Over 70% of the requests for advice received by CBS are for the correction of existing issues, rather than the provision of consultancy at a design and planning stage.

Poor sound control can be extremely debilitating, not to mention costly to the business, potentially leading to stress problems arising from lack of privacy and loss of individual productivity. Equally, privacy - whether on the phone or in meetings and consultations - may be a key concern in sectors where confidentiality is paramount, such as medical, financial and legal environments.

Noise issues are prevalent in open place offices. Ideal for facilitating communication and economically attractive, an open plan office also removes the natural barriers which

absorb sound and prevent noise travelling. The situation is further complicated by the aesthetics of modern architecture. Hard surface materials such as metal ceilings, concrete, glass and tile floors have poor acoustic absorption properties, leading to bounceback effects, while large open spaces, for instance reception or atrium areas, can significantly affect speech intelligibility.

Layouts which comprise both cellular and open plan offices can be equally problematic. Noise transference from busy offices to adjacent quiet areas or conference rooms may be a distraction and can even affect understanding (for example where training courses are being held), whilst privacy may be compromised where confidential conversations in meeting rooms can be overheard from the outside.

Surprisingly, lack of noise is also a contributory factor to today's noise issues. The trend towards, for example, installing low noise air handling units and external glazing to facades has led to quieter offices and the removal of noise which previously had a neutralising or masking effect. This is particularly an issue where phone conversations may be intermittent, but clearly is less of an issue for environments such as call centres with a high level of voice traffic.

Overcoming noise problems is rarely about a single issue – rather it is about identifying the sources of noise in your offices and implementing a combination of measures to achieve balance and address noise spikes.

Next month we look at the different approaches to noise control and possible solutions. Look out also for the chance to win a distinctive piece of sound-absorbent wall art to enhance your office space.

