

The Sounds of the Changing Work Environment

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Workplace dynamics are ever changing with the inclusion of more millennials into the job market and the reliance on technology and communication tools that have taken the place of a paper driven work space. The need for a traditional work space is also shrinking with companies trying to reduce their real estate footprints both for financial gain and to meet the needs of an ever-evolving office culture.



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Many companies have moved from mostly closed office arrangements to open office environments with lower cube heights and closer proximity, and many are now adding hoteling areas to meet the growing demand for flexibility and an increase in telecommuting. The inclusion of collaborative areas, coffee shop type booths and casual lounge spaces in work environments allow employees options for teamwork spaces and encourage individuals to embrace their own work styles. These are all changes companies are making to be competitive in enticing candidates, retaining staff and creating a unique culture in their company.

Just like individuals have different learning styles, they also have different needs for their office environment to ensure they are efficient and productive in their job duties. When a company makes the shift from closed to open office space or from a private environment to a collaborative or roving office environment it can sometimes be a difficult adjustment for staff both from the

physical changes to their environment to the cultural shift in interaction or routine. Some of the biggest factors that influence satisfaction in workplace environments include: light – is it too bright or too dark? Temperature: Is it too cold or too hot? Sound: is it too loud or too quiet? Building automation systems have come a long way in improving the issues with light and temperature but the impact of acoustic issues on a work environment is oftentimes not considered until a company occupies their new space and starts hearing complaints. Most offices face these three problems: 1. Their office is too loud and disruptive because the sound travels throughout the space without the physical barriers to stop it (open office and call centers in particular). 2. Their office is too quiet, there is no background sound at all and when people do talk their co-workers can hear every single word, sneeze or laugh in the entire space (open and closed offices). 3. There are oral privacy issues that need to be addressed regarding HR, legal, HIPPA confidential conversations, mostly in private offices.

Sound masking can be used to treat these three issues in work environments to help improve staff and customer experience in the facility. Not only does sound masking improve occupant satisfaction in both health care and office environments but it also can provide some financial benefits for companies who utilize it in their space. There is a direct correlation between audible distractions and loss of productivity in a work environment and the cost is tangible. Studies have shown that it takes on average 15 minutes to regain a state of concentration after being distracted and audible distractions have been shown to dramatically increase in open office environments. Sound masking helps reduce the rates of audible distraction

and improves productivity in open office spaces. In addition, there are strict HIPPA oral privacy laws and legal concerns companies may face if the wrong confidential conversation is overheard by staff or other parties.

Here are some of our best practices for sound masking in open/closed offices: In open office space sound masking speakers are placed above the drop ceiling or above cloud ceilings or in the plenum for open structure ceilings. Most of the time the speakers are placed facing up so that there are no hot spots or gaps in coverage. Ideally a good sound masking system should be designed to separate zones according to the type of office space, open or closed as well as by the ceiling type and height in the space. Dividing spaces based on user type is also important, as sound levels can be dramatically different depending on department or use of the space. Choosing a sound masking system with automatic level control for open office environments and call centers in particular can also positively impact the acoustic comfort and employee satisfaction. When the sound masking adjusts automatically according to real time activity within the zone then the sound masking is never too loud or too quiet in that area. Calendar based systems operate on preset assumptions for user conditions and occupancy whereas with an automatically adjusting system takes active data and adjusts accordingly in real time. If you have more questions about the impact of acoustics in your office or on sound masking please visit our website: www.bssmn.com