



Masking Sound in the World of Open Office Spaces



Soft dB's Lynn Lombardo considers sound masking in open office spaces and the key links between background noise and workplace productivity.

The rise of open office spaces has generally been seen as a net positive in improving collaboration and communication within the workplace. While there's no denying these kind of workplace organizations close promoting consistency still out with regard workplace noise.



**Subscribe
To Soft dB
Newsletter**

Lynn Lombardo, Sales Manager for Soft dB, has seen the adverse effects that background noise can have in the workplace and, more specifically, within the open office space environment.

To start things off, we asked Lynn how sound masking works and how can it help efficiency within the workplace?

Lombardo: If you've ever been in a workplace where there's, for example, 10 people working in an open space and you hear everyone's conversation, that can be distracting to you. You're picking up everyone's voice and maybe you're trying to type, then you start typing what someone is saying because you're unknowingly listening to them — at Soft dB, we install speakers in your workplace that project white noise through the space to mask human speech and reduce those distractions.

You'll have no problem with people talking on the phone or hearing the person next to you, but it muffles the speech of anyone further, so you would know that they were speaking, but you can't discern the words. Consequently, your mind shuts it out and it doesn't become a distraction. It also works in the opposite kind of location where it's so quiet that you can't concentrate. It can do the same thing in an environment where it's too loud or too quiet, it's a non-distracting background noise and we calibrate it to each particular space so it helps muffle human noise and lower distractions.

It can also be used for privacy and confidentiality. There are a lot of spaces where you can walk by a CEO's office or an HR office and hear conversations, and if you don't want those to be heard outside of those offices, those conversations can be kept private through sound masking as well.

How does the layout of any given workplace affect noise levels and what kind of impact have workplaces with open floors had on noise within the workplace?

Lombardo: The big trend in office spaces is open, collaborative workspaces which is great but can be distracting when you're in one big open space with a lot of people. The only way to truly muffle human speech with construction is to either insulate the walls heavily or to have the walls go from floor to deck and most offices are not built that way. If there is a wall, it's built up to a drop ceiling or a partial wall so those are the kind of locations that would want a sound masking system to fill in where that noise is echoing above everyone.

Noise and distraction are always in the top-three complaints about a workplace. It's usually temperature, location and then sound. It's one of the top-three items that has to do with employee satisfaction in a workplace. I've spoken with people who say "I love where I work and the look of the office, but sometimes I leave the office to get stuff done because it's too loud." They work from home to get some peace and quiet, which you don't want them to do because you want them to be in the office and collaborating.

How does background noise affect employee productivity and do you have any examples of organizations that have particularly struggled with that?

Lombardo: I have worked with several call centres and you can hear the conversations of everyone in the background on the phone while they're also trying to talk to you. Their productivity is down because a lot of times they wait to call a client back since they can't hear what they're saying. Their employers want them to be able to consistently make and answer phone calls, putting sound masking in and reducing the number of background conversations they hear has increased their productivity and how many calls they can make within a day.

Too much noise in a workplace can be distracting, but can an overly quiet workplace also create problems for people?

Lombardo: I personally work from home and I keep the television on in the background because when it's too quiet my mind starts to drift and I think about all the things I need to do after work or something else I could be doing. A lot of times people's minds will drift when it's so quiet and you get lost in your own thoughts. It is helpful to have a consistent background noise to break that silence. When it's too quiet, even the slightest noise that would normally not distract — will distract you.

An example I like to use is when you're sleeping at night and the faucet in the next room is dripping. You hear that drip, drip, drip and now you can't sleep because you can hear that noise. If you have the windows open and it's raining and there's a consistent background noise of rain, a lot of times people find that it helps them fall asleep. It's the difference between it being a consistent all-over noise and being just an intermittent sound that breaks silence and becomes a distraction.

How do you balance creating a workplace that isn't too loud but also not too quiet and are there any benefits of particular noises that might not be intrusive to the workplace?

Lombardo: The benefits of masking noise in the background as opposed to music or something else is that not everyone's taste is the same. A lot of companies will try to do background music or TV, but that's not everyone's cup of tea so it doesn't always work the best.

Sound masking goes through all frequencies so it's just a nice consistent sound which can be soothing and relaxing for people and lower distraction. It's something that will fit everyone and you don't have to worry about whether or not it will work for everyone.

With respect to sound masking and background noise, what do you think the future of the workplace will look like over the next 5-10 years?

Lombardo: I think the trend of open spaces is definitely one that's here to stay. It's good to have that collaborative space where people can work together and I think gone are the days where everyone is in an individual office and you don't even know half the people who work in your company because all the doors all closed.

I'm hoping sound masking will just become a part of building and renovating these offices so that we're not putting a bandaid on a problem when it appears — we'll just never have the problem with the proper acoustics already set up in the space.

(...)

COMPLETE ARTICLE HERE!

PATRICK CWIKLINSKI Article, "*Masking Sound in the World of Open Office Spaces*", [officespacesoftware.com](https://www.officespacesoftware.com) | NOVEMBER 24, 2017