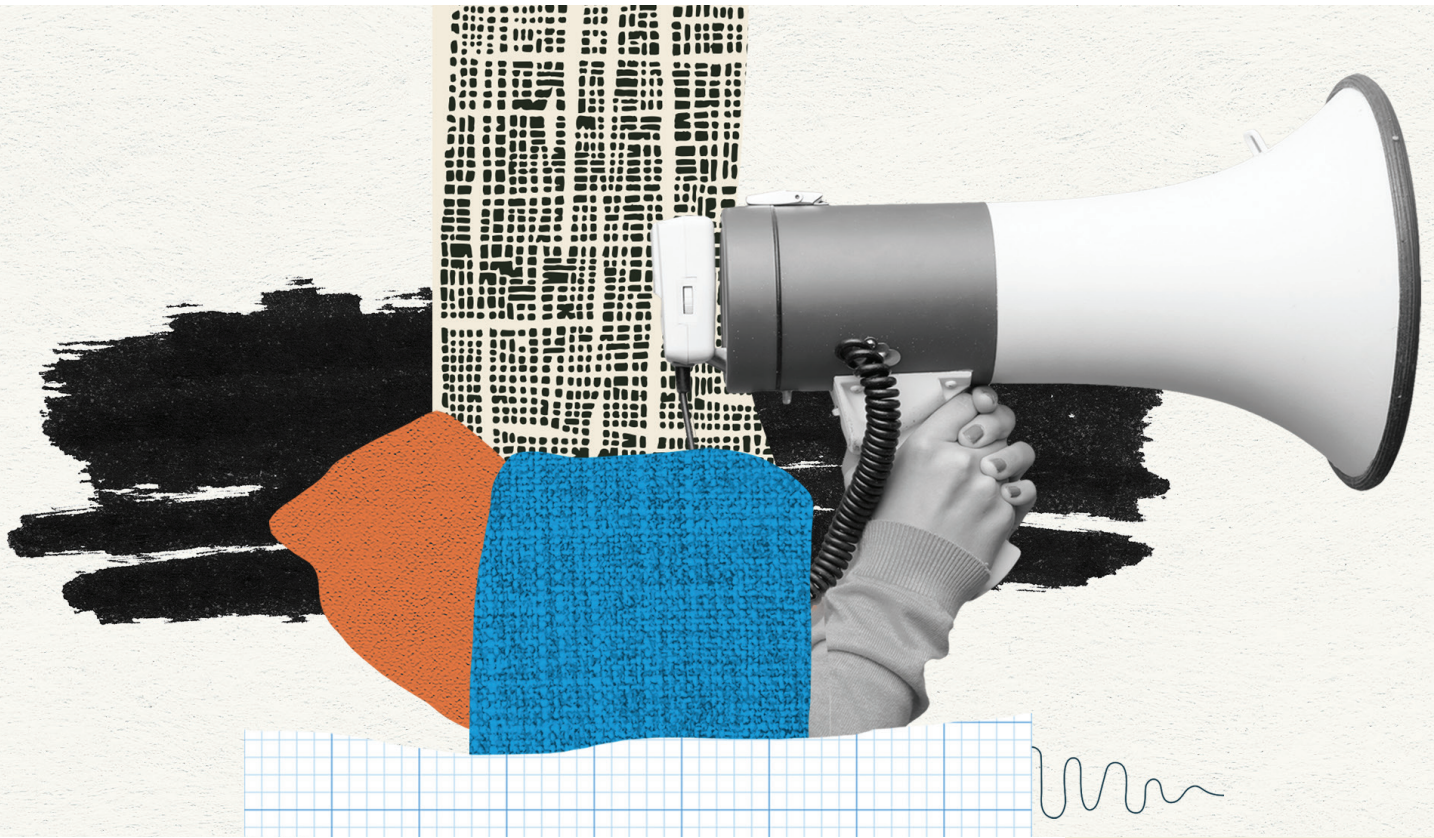


# Acoustics: Focus & Privacy in the Workplace



Acoustics is the science and art of sound. When applied to the interior landscape, acoustical design draws people into conversations, supports work, and influences how your brand and space are experienced. From open and private work areas to social spaces, every environment is affected by sound. The key is to balance audio input, so people hear the sounds they want while other sounds are filtered out—all at the right times and places.

Organizations can unlock the potential of space design with a thoughtful acoustics plan to enhance well-being—leading to healthier, engaged, and high-performing employees. Designing with acoustics in mind helps limit distractions and increase the ability to focus.

## Focus Work Defined

- A task requiring sustained (uninterrupted) attention that can vary in amount of mental effort
- How long to sustain attention depends on the task
- How much mental effort needed depends on the person
- The less one knows, the more effort is needed—learning takes more deliberate effort
- When mastery is achieved, tasks are more automated

## Designing for Focus Can:

Improve worker  
concentration by

**48%**

Lower work errors by

**10%**

Reduce employee  
stress by

**27%**

Eliminate conversational  
distractions by

**51%**

## How Noise Affects Employees

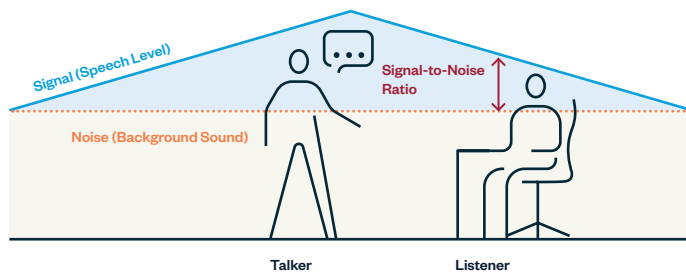
Numerous studies have measured employee satisfaction with their workplace environments and have pointed to noise as a major cause of reduced effectiveness, higher stress, and decreased job satisfaction. In one landmark study, evaluations from more than 50,000 workers in 351 buildings confirmed that the lack of speech privacy was the single greatest source of dissatisfaction. Additionally, almost 30% of those in private offices said that acoustics interfered with their ability to do their jobs. This hurts innovation.

# 70%

of employees are distracted by noisy offices

Source: Udemy in Depth Workplace Distraction Report, 2018

Designing spaces where people can manage visual and auditory distractions gives them more control over interferences and interruptions. Legible spaces and boundaries or zones offer visual and acoustical privacy and perceived barriers from the open office.



### How Sound Travels

As a sound wave spreads from a source, the sound level decays with distance. If there are no obstructions, it will eventually fall below the level of the surrounding background sound, where it becomes inaudible.

Science tells us there is no one-size-fits-all solution: Building a workplace strategy to support focus work starts with organizational culture to understand what people value. Employers who understand and address this need for varying workspaces are more successful.

Two essential and related issues in acoustical design are distractions caused by noise and a lack of speech privacy.

### To foster innovation...

77% of employees have a preference for quiet when focus is needed.



### However...

69% are dissatisfied with the noise level at their primary workspace.



Source: Gensler 2013 U.S. Workplace Survey

## 3 Culprits That Sabotage Focus Work



### Distractions

When unexpected off-task information captures our attention.

Just because it's unexpected, doesn't mean it's not beneficial to the person—even if it affects task performance.



### Interference

When off-task information gets confused with task information

Unhelpful to the task, but might prompt switching to a new, more important task.



### Interruptions

When a distraction or interference pulls us off a task entirely to start a new task.

Oftentimes, these are also useful and necessary.

A few seconds to a full minute is how long it takes on average person to re-engage with a task after a distraction.



## Designing for Speech Privacy

Speech privacy is simply the absence of speech intelligibility. Workers need opportunities to take a personal phone call, prepare for that upcoming presentation, and even conduct team meetings without the distractions of colleagues. The entirely-open-concept workspace, as the primary solution for work time, simply doesn't meet these needs.

Achieving the right level of speech privacy in a space requires careful assessment and alignment of functional needs with the ambient environment, background sound, and physical design elements, such as walls, ceilings, and floors.

To manage speech privacy and intelligibility, understand and apply the ABCD of acoustical workspace design by using elements that absorb, block, cover, and diffuse sound.

The investment in facilities is significant for any organization. Ultimately, facilities serve the organization and its people. With noise and speech privacy as leading causes for concern in the workplace, appropriately addressing acoustical performance benefits both the organization and its employees.

## The ABCD of Acoustical Workplace Design

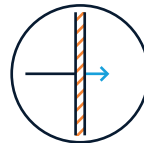


### Absorb

#### Absorb sounds within the space

Highly absorptive ceilings and carpeted floors

- Reduce sound levels within rooms
- Minimize undesirable reflections
- Performance indicated by NRC rating



### Block

#### Block sounds between the spaces

Physical construction using demountable or unitized wall systems and suspended ceiling tiles

- Block sound transmission between rooms
- Wall sound blocking indicated by STC ratings
- Ceiling sound blocking indicated by CAC ratings

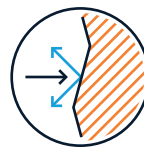


### Cover

#### Cover intruding sounds with background sound

Electronic sound masking system

- Carefully tuned in frequency and level to meet desired functional and privacy needs of different areas throughout the space
- Indicated by the sound level, measured in dBA



### Diffuse

#### Spread sound energy evenly in a space

In larger spaces, physical construction using sound diffusers placed on the walls or ceiling

- Diffuse, or scatter desired sounds throughout the room to ensure intelligibility
- Keep desired sounds from being absorbed and degraded before reaching listeners

### Want to learn more?

For more information on understanding acoustical design and creating spaces that enhance well-being for employees, please contact your local Haworth sales representative.