When Talk Isn’t Cheap
How Conversational Distractions Cost You Money
Economy. Efficiency. Effectiveness.

The current economic climate forces businesses to streamline systems and become more productive in every aspect of their operations. Businesses are downsizing the workforce, slashing budgets, and taking a hard look at each and every expense on the books. To cut costs, fewer people do the work, making focus and productivity the name of the game.

So, how can businesses be more productive and ultimately, more profitable? Marshaling the resources and talents of your employees every minute they’re on the job can be a challenge.

Being busy doesn’t necessarily translate to being productive.

Constant distractions from phone calls, meetings, email and conversations can derail even the most disciplined work associates. Workers lose an average of 6 hours every day to workplace distractions\(^1\), amounting to an estimated $759 billion lost by employers every year\(^2\).

The competitive nature of today's businesses strains the ability of workers to be productive. The focus on satisfaction and quality service means more time spent interacting with customers than ever before.

Collaborative work projects require multiple meetings and ongoing email conversation threads. Mobile technology allows workers to multitask, conducting multiple conversations and working on projects via telecommunications and computers all at the same time.

Under these conditions, workplace distractions directly impact worker productivity and bottom lines.
What Causes Office Distractions?

For the past 30 years, the employment services and human resource industries have studied and surveyed businesses to determine the predominant causes of workplace distractions:

- Cost-effective and collaborative open-plan workspaces make it difficult to control noise or subject others to private conversations.
- Workstation areas have become more compacted, increasing worker density to maximize the use of existing floor space.
- Collaborative office cultures create “chaotic” work environments with little physical structure or separation.
- Electronic distractions from audible computer cues, cell phones, telephones, or intercoms make it difficult to focus on tasks.
- Multitasking to the extreme has led to the condition of workplace ADHD or the inability to give full attention to the matter at hand.
- Heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) equipment is either loud and inefficient or too quiet that it no longer provides the subtle background noise to mask other office sounds.

Top Five Office Distractions

1. Overheard voice conversations.
2. Audible alarms, signals, and sounds.
3. Over-scheduling of meetings.
4. Personal email and web-surfing.
5. Activities to poor time management.
Time Lost to Work Distractions

Error rates and recovering from distractions result to more time lost to workplace distractions.

In a 300-person study, participants interrupted for 2.8 seconds made twice as many errors. 4.4-second interruptions tripled the rate of errors.\(^4\)

It takes 25 minutes to recover from a workplace distraction.\(^5\) With an average of 2.1 hours of distraction every day, today's workers feel overwhelmed, overstimulated, and unfulfilled.\(^6\)

---

### THE TIME MANAGEMENT MYTH

The year 2008 was the “Year of Information Overload” by the Basex Consulting Group, which conducts research on workplace conditions. Many businesses have instituted time management programs to assist employees with information overload and to help them establish organizational skills to combat inefficient multi-tasking.

Too many people believe that improving efficiency and productivity is purely a function of time management. If I schedule it and prioritize it, it will happen. This belief ignores the existence of office interruptions and distractions. Until we manage or mitigate those things in our work environment that distract or derail us, time management is a futile effort.

Some of these office distractions are directly addressable and are manageable with the right technology—user guidelines, training, and procedures.

Employees can easily ignore instant messaging, emails and phone calls, but not co-worker interruptions.
In response to information overload, companies like Intel launched a study of “quiet time” in 2007 to give workers a scheduled time where they will not be interrupted. Constant interruption increases anxiety, fatigue, and stress.

Other companies adopted email and web monitoring policies to reduce the amount of time spent on personal business and to keep workers on task. A company specializing in internet security found that at least 40% of employers outright block access to social networking sites.

Yet, none of these efforts address the number one cause of lost productivity-- noise from conversational distractions.
The Science of Sound

Office design coupled with technology advances made background noise the number one office distraction in the workplace today.

Contrary to what one might think, workspaces designed to be “quiet” result in conditions of total and absolute silence, relatively amplifying noise and conversational distractions. (Consider how quickly sound travels in a library.)

Increasing the background noise level through sound masking and equipping the area with functional acoustic panels are effective methods to reduce distracting conversational noise in quiet open workspaces.

Understanding how sound travels through any given open workspace allows us to design and proactively plan how to reduce distractions.

Managing Acoustics

You should ensure speech privacy to reduce distractions and improve productivity in open office environments. Speech privacy is the inability of an unintended audience to comprehend overheard speech, making noise less distracting.
The ABCs of acoustic design represent three ways to control sound levels and reduce distracting noise:

**Absorption**

**Blocking**

**Covering**

Acoustics engineers and office designers have developed specific products to lessen the impact of sound waves in open work environments.
Acoustic panels installed as wall art, ceiling tiles, table partitions or as demountable walls help absorb and block sound waves from traveling, reducing noise distractions. Acoustic panels enhance acoustic comfort in a work environment and provide a sense of visual privacy to employees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HVAC, Electric Motor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Speech</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1kHz – 4kHz</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dog Whistle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The dynamic colors and designs of these absorptive panels go well with the overall design of an office. Bright colors and contemporary designs for modern offices. Neutral and simple designs for the more formal and traditional industries. Acoustic panels enhance the acoustic and visual environment of a workspace.
Comfortable background sound targets and covers the human voice spectrum by using electro-acoustic systems to suppress sound. This technology is referred to as “speech privacy systems” for its ability to reduce conversational distractions and noise.

Sound masking systems are now more sophisticated and precise than the technology first used in the 1960s and 70s. Back then, loudspeakers in the ceiling distributed amplified noise signals throughout an office. The volume required to make human speech unintelligible was so high that the sound masking itself became a distraction.

Years later, acoustic engineers began using frequency generators that shaped sound to better mask speech, or the “pink” noise spectrum. Targeting this frequency of human speech raised the threshold of audibility, enough to mask intelligibility without requiring the higher volumes used in earlier systems.

Industry product lines now include systems targeting individual workspaces to increase privacy at targeted decibel levels. The ideal sound suppression system makes speech beyond a 12 to 16-foot radius unintelligible⁹, allowing workers to concentrate on individual tasks or collaborate with colleagues and improve productivity.

Together with acoustic panels, adaptive sound masking systems secure speech privacy and improve the acoustic environment of workspaces.

Several independent studies over the past ten years have documented the following improvements as a result of addressing office acoustics¹⁰:

- **48% improvement** in the ability to focus on tasks
- **52% improvement** in the elimination of distractions (especially overheard conversations)
- **27% improvement** in the reduction of stress (measured physical symptoms of stress)
- **10% improvement** in reducing error rates and increasing accuracy (performance of standard “information work” tasks)
A Sound Solution

Businesses throughout the world are saving thousands of dollars each year by recapturing lost man hours due to workplace distractions and interruptions. Proactive acoustic management through sound masking and acoustic panels prove to be a cost-effective way to improve productivity and increase bottom lines.

Since every work environment is different, specialized technicians can assess and design custom acoustic solutions to accommodate an office configuration or budget. To determine how your office would benefit from speech privacy through proactive acoustic management, complete the Sound Checklist on the following page and contact an acoustic system representative at:

MPS™ LLC
Toll Free: 866-557-8438
MakingPrivacySimple.com
The Sound Checklist

Walk through different areas of your office and note which sounds can be detected and how they affect an individual’s ability to focus. Check each box and indicate the level of distraction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sound</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phones Ringing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligible Conversation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printers, Copiers or Fax Machines</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keyboards Clicking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>File Drawers Sliding Opened/Closed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ringtone of a Cell Phone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laughter or Conversation from a Nearby Team Meeting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker Phone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Booting Up or Background Fan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doors Opening or Closing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noise from Outside the Building</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ventilation System</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References

1 Schulte, Brigid Work interruptions can cost you 6 hours a day. An efficiency expert explains how to avoid them. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2015/06/01/interruptions-at-work-can-cost-you-up-to-6-hours-a-day-heres-how-to-avoid-them/ 2015


4 Altmann, Trafton, Hambrick, Momentary interruptions can derail the train of thought, 10.1037/a0030986, 2013

5 Sue Shellenbarger, The Biggest Office Interruptions Are... 2013 https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-biggest-office-interruptions-are-1378852919


