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SOUND MANAGEMENT

Eight Simple Recommendations for Good Acoustical Etiquette in an Open Plan Office

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The number one facility-related complaint expressed by people working in the open plan office environment is inadequate acoustical privacy from neighbors. The increasing trend of lower cubicle wall heights directly contributes to the transfer of more unwanted sound from one cubicle to surrounding ones. The single most effective acoustical tool for reducing the annoyance of this sound transfer is adequate background sound, usually generated by an effective sound masking system. However, even the best sound masking system may not be able to fully reduce acoustical annoyance by itself. If implemented, the following recommendations will go a long way toward further enhancing acoustical privacy.

1. Never use a speakerphone. Not only is speakerphone sound an annoyance in itself, but people usually speak louder when using a speakerphone, causing further annoyance to their neighbors. The office noise transmitted to the external party by a speakerphone is also an annoyance to them, and may even degrade their ability to hear the conversation. Pick up the telephone handset or use a headset.
2. Develop a softer telephone voice. Many telephones have an adjustment called "sidetone" which can help with this. Sidetone is the amount of the telephone user's own voice that he hears in his receiver. If it is set too low, the user usually speaks louder than necessary, annoying his neighbor. Many telephone vendors don't take the time to adjust the sidetone properly during installation, and they may have to be called to make the adjustment. There are also "stoplight" type monitor devices available that remind the user to keep his voice down.
3. Adjust telephone ring loudness. If your phone has an adjustable ring loudness setting, make sure it is only as loud as necessary.
4. Set cell phones and pagers to minimum ring volume, or better still, vibrate mode. If vibrate mode is not feasible, make sure the ringtone setting is subtle and that the phone is as close to the user's work position as feasible so that it is audible at a low volume setting. Don't leave the cell phone when going to lunch – take it with you so that ringtones don't annoy neighbors when there is no one to pick up the phone.
5. Take cell phones to a break room or other private space if a call is likely to be protracted. Also consider letting voicemail take a message and return the call from a landline. One of the worst breaches of office etiquette is those people who make long, loud personal calls at their cubicle desks instead of stepping outside (or into a more private area).
6. Listen to any music over headphones, not loudspeakers. Music listening in the office is increasingly acceptable, but remember that one person's music is another's noise. If it is frequently necessary to hear colleagues entering your office while listening to music, use "open air" type headphones, or even a single earbud, rather than one in each ear. Don't hum or sing along to the music.
7. Use Instant Messaging. IM is also becoming commonplace in the office. Do you really need to go have a verbal conversation with a colleague or would a brief IM do just as well, or maybe even better.
8. Don't make unnecessary noise in the office. Gum-cracking, coffee-slurping, ice-chomping, pen-tapping and, most offensive of all, full-bellied belching potentially annoy all of your neighbors. A cubicle is a public area, and those working inside should act as they would in any other public area.

