

It's a Matter of Balance (Excerpt)

**The following is an excerpt from the Herman Miller Research Summary:
It's a Matter of Balance: New Understandings of Open Plan Acoustics (©2004).**

“Since the introduction of open-plan workspaces over 30 years ago, individual work areas have become progressively more compact even as work styles have evolved toward increasing collaboration. As the ASTM (American Society of Testing and Materials) Subcommittee on Open Plan Spaces has pointed out, in exchange for the improved communication afforded by these open-plan offices, organizations have had to face new challenges in acoustical privacy: “No one likes to sit in an office, trying to concentrate on critical words or numbers, with a racket coming from adjacent areas.”

In fact, office workers who participated in a 2002 study on privacy related issues conducted by Herman Miller cited overheard conversation as their biggest gripe. Respondents by and large agreed with the statement, “When I am working in my workspace, I’m distracted by conversations of my immediate neighbors.” By contrast, fewer people in the study agreed with the statement, “When I am working in my office, I am distracted by background noise from machines, printers, etc.”

The more acoustical experts learn about how to minimize the effects of “adjacent racket” in the open-plan office—in short, how to achieve good speech privacy—the more confusing it gets for everyone else, mostly because of all that technical jargon they use: “interzone attenuation,” “sound transmission class,” “noise reduction coefficient.” Once that language barrier is surmounted, however, it’s easy to understand why controlling the acoustics of the open-plan office is such a challenge.

Rule of Threes

Controlling open-plan acoustics is difficult, the experts have discovered, because they’re never dealing with just one thing. As Michael Wodka, a product designer and consultant who’s been involved in open-plan acoustics since the late 1960s, puts it, “There isn’t just one problem, but three; and there isn’t just one tool to use against those problems, but three (or four, depending on how you count); there isn’t just one optimal solution, but at least three, involving combinations of at least three design elements. It takes a systems approach to sort it all out.”

Sorting it all out requires starting with the problem—or rather the problems. Regardless of the particulars, the experts have determined that controlling open-plan acoustics always comes back to controlling the same three acoustical problems: sound level, speech intelligibility, and sound paths.”

For the complete text of this research summary, please CONTACT Thomas Interior Systems.