A Noisy Office Is a Nuisance – And A Business Opportunity

Forbes | Jena McGregor | June 28, 2024

After years of remote work, post-pandemic employees are struggling with office distractions. The solutions run from in-office phone booths to libraries to, surprisingly, adding more sound.

Illustration by Philip Smith for Forbes

Chad West doesn't go into his London office more than once a week. As a vice president of marketing at crypto smart wallet Argent, West shows up for strategy or creative meetings. But when he's just trying to get work done, the distractions and noise at Argent's open plan office make him 40% less productive than at home, he estimates. Music escaping from coworkers' headphones and coworkers' voices pull at his attention while the sound of software engineers banging away at their keyboards grates on his nerves.

"I don't know if it's just because we've all become a bit more psychopathic, or maybe it's always been in us, but I pick up on everything now," says West, 33. "If someone has the audacity to take a phone call in a smallish office where people are trying to work, it grinds my ears."

More than four years after the pandemic prompted most office workers to log on from home, many have returned to the office, whether because of employer mandates, a desire to spend time with colleagues or a need to escape from roommates or family. About 27% of paid workdays in the U.S. were done from home in May, down dramatically from some 60% at the pandemic's peak, but up from less than 10% before Covid-19.

As people have returned to the office either full- or part-time, complaints about a long-standing frustration—the noise and distractions of open-plan designs—have escalated. Workers are taking more Zoom meetings from the office, often speaking louder in those video calls. Bosses

encourage office days to be spent "collaborating" and developing social bonds, but that boosts the chatter echoing in the space.

Compounding the problem: At companies that have downsized their real estate to take advantage of fewer people being onsite, conference rooms and private spaces fill up fast–with the first to claim them each day staying put. "It's human behavior," says Melissa Strickland, a principal and managing director at design firm HLW. If meetings run back-to-back, "why would I [switch rooms] when I could just take all my calls with some convenience [in this room by myself]?"

At Intuit Mailchimp's new Atlanta office building, there are five "library" spaces throughout the building, several of which are wood-paneled, lined with books and housing roomy tables with task lighting that evoke the feel of a modern university library.

Photo via Intuit Mailchimp

In a Sept. 2023 survey by workplace research firm Leesman, noise levels were rated among the 10 most important features of the office—ranking between functioning toilets and an IT help desk. Yet only about 32% of employees are satisfied with noise levels in an average office, another Leesman survey (released this past April) found, and only two issues had lower satisfaction numbers in those offices: Access to nearby "leisure facilities," and the rate of people walking past workstations.

The response to all these complaints presents a business opportunity, with vendors successfully selling everything from phone booth-style pods to "soundscaping" services that use a "biophilic" approach to help muffle voices with sounds found in nature. Furniture makers and interior designers are adding more acoustic-friendly materials and designing "libraries" for quiet places to work. Some employers are doling out noise-canceling headphones and even building tools to help workers alert colleagues when they need to focus.

"This is the nail that every organization is trying to hit the head of," says Leesman founder Tim Oldman. He sees designers moving toward "re-cellularization" of interior space—more huddle rooms, private offices or quiet rooms many workers crave. "If we want employees to willingly return to offices, we have to provide space that supports those moments where they need distinct acoustic and visual privacy."

Office distractions are more than a minor annoyance. A 2021 study published in the Journal of Management & Organization found that in experiments with controlled environments, typical noise levels of open plan offices caused increases in physiological stress indicators such as higher heart rates, as well as more facial expressions of disgust and reports by workers of negative moods.

"We don't habituate to noise," observes Libby Sander, an assistant professor at Bond University in Australia who worked on the study. "We have this idea that oh, you'll just get used to it.…But physiologically and psychologically, your body doesn't."

The desire for more control of office noise is one reason for the growth of companies like Finland-based Framery, one of the biggest makers of office "pods"—essentially, fully enclosed, modern looking glass-walled phone booths that start at about $8,700 for a compact single. (Some booths seat up to six people, making them more like enclosed conference rooms.) In 2022, Framery's global revenue hit $164 million, up from $86 million in 2020 and $101 million in 2021. While sales fell slightly in 2023, dinged by market uncertainty, inflation and higher interest rates, cofounder and CEO Samu Hällfors said he expects rapid growth again this year, though he declined to share forecasts.

In March, the company added a new line of pods that not only insulate sound for users seated within the booths, but have a "sound masking" system that emits pink noise-like sound into surrounding areas. In doing so, the booths raise the ambient noise in nearby spaces, with an aim to make office chatter less intelligible. "The noise level itself? Yes, that's kind of a problem, but the real problematic thing about noise is when your brain catches a familiar word," says Hällfors.

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Photo via Framery

That’s why designers and entrepreneurs are adding sound into spaces, which can be a way to address concerns about either too much noise or too much silence. After working for others in the sound space for more than a decade, Evan Benway launched London-based Moodsonic in 2022. He now works with companies like SAP, GSK and Steelcase to create “responsive soundscapes” that use sensors to generate background sound that adapts in real time to how distracting or stimulating the environment is.

In effect, Moodsonic helps companies address one of the ironies of the post-pandemic workplace: People are distracted by sound in the office, but it’s often because it’s too quiet, rather than too loud. Instead of having 60 people in an open office where a hum of many conversations happens in the background, “now maybe you have 15 people, and when one person speaks, everyone hears everything that they’re saying,” Benway says. “It’s perfect speech intelligibility”—and the issue that bothers people most.

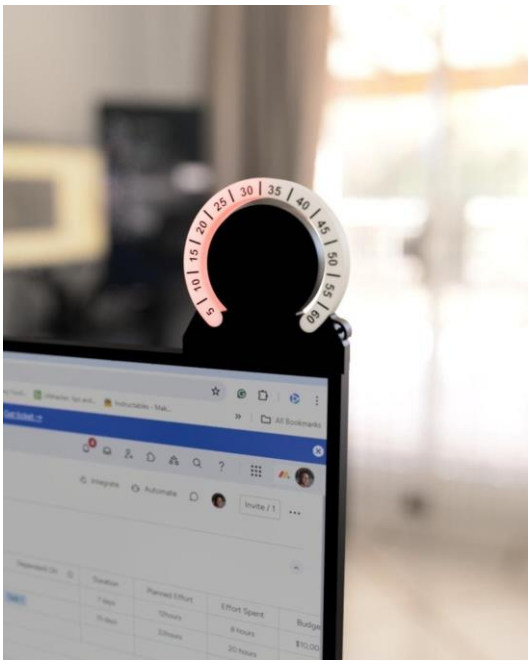
Moodsonic’s sensors pick up sound levels and adjust the “soundscapes,” which include nature-inspired subtle birdsongs or babbling brooks, depending on the ratio of loud sales calls to focused work or whether it’s a quiet Friday or bustling Tuesday. Benway won’t disclose revenues, but says the company is working with 30 of the 500 largest U.S. companies and is

already profitable; in its second year it tripled the square footage where it provides soundscapes and grew subscriptions by 150%.

Others are finding success tapping into not just office workers' need for privacy, but remote-based workers' similar desires. Prominent venture capitalist Fred Wilson, the cofounder of New York-based Union Square Ventures, and his wife Joanne, an angel investor, are launching the second location of Framework, a coworking space in New York, this fall at the Refinery at Domino, a revitalized landmark industrial building that once housed a major sugar factory. The two got the idea after recognizing that in cities like New York, entrepreneurs, creatives and other remote workers have little space of their own and don't necessarily want to be in "one of these places where there's all of this shared nonsense," Joanne says, referring to coworking spaces with group seating and little privacy.

IKEA is rolling out a new line of office furniture that's designed in part to address sound and noise annoyances, adding a wood fiber material, normally used in the construction industry for insulation, to acoustic screens that are wrapped in fabric.

Photo via Ikea



At the Wilsons' first location in Brooklyn's Clinton Hill neighborhood, members pay anywhere from $755 to $860 per month, depending on lease term, for their own sound-insulated pod in the airy Framework space, complete with its own mini-fridge, kettle and French-press. Initially designed as a way to socially distance people during the pandemic, the booths now draw members for different reasons. "It's quiet, and they don't have to listen to their neighbor talking to their friend or wife or whatever," Fred Wilson told Forbes. The original location has a waiting list of about two dozen people.

Furniture and interior designers, too, are building more acoustic-driven protection into their spaces. Zintra Acoustics, a line of wall panels, space dividers and ceiling fixtures that help absorb sound, has seen "surging" demand for acoustic solutions, said Kirsten Grosman, product marketing lead for the brand, which is owned by Australia-based Baresque Group, in an emailed statement. "Noise has become the top grievance among employees," she said.

Meanwhile, the Swedish company IKEA, which has been in the office furniture business for 40 years, is rolling out a new line (known as MITTZON) that's designed in part to address sound and noise annoyances. For example, it has added a wood fiber material, normally used in the construction industry for insulation, to acoustic screens that are wrapped in fabric. IKEA also worked with suppliers to quiet the mechanism that controls an electric standing desk's height with a button press. "The role of the office has changed," says Ikea product design developer Philip Dilé. "A majority of people told us they wanted to come back [to the office] to find focus and less distraction."

Ikea's new line, with its acoustic screens, is one example of a broader move to offer more solutions that don't require lots of private offices or rooms, which arguably defeat the purpose of having people come into the office to collaborate. "Why would I want to come into a whole bank of pods or Zoom booths, and that's my experience for the day?" asks Tracy Wymer, vice president of insights & inspiration at Teknion, which makes booths itself. Wymer notes that his firm is working on a new product that provides "visual cues to whether you're available or whether you're in focused work," but said it's too early to offer details.

Software firm monday.com is piloting a device made by an in-house "Makers" team that's positioned on the corner of workers' computer monitors; users can set it to show coworkers how much time they need to focus.

Monday.com

One employer experimenting with visual cues is monday.com, an Israel-based project management software firm. It has a group of "Makers" on staff who've designed an Internet of Things (IoT) device called "FocusTime" that's positioned on the corner of workers' computer monitors. It looks like a dial that shows how much remaining uninterrupted time the user needs—and acts as a physical enhancement of the Slack or Teams status icons people are accustomed to seeing onscreen.

The idea originally came from a monday.com employee who struggled with colleagues' interruptions as she returned to the office; an early version was simply a flag that could manually lift when someone shouldn't be disturbed before becoming a device users could just tap on and off. It evolved into the current gadget, which users can set to show coworkers how much time they need to focus—the time window is copied to calendar apps—or if time for quiet work is blocked on a digital calendar, it will appear on the device.

Saron Paz, leader of the Makers team, says about 20 employees are taking part in a pilot using the prototype gadget; a company-wide test is in the planning stages and then, potentially, it could become a product it commercializes. (In September, monday.com plans to display the device at a customer conference in London and New York.) At the very least, Paz hopes the devices "start a conversation between people about what they need in terms of noise or other pain points," he says, noting "we are still hard-wired for things that are physical."

Other companies are handing out noise-canceling headphones as back-to-office perks or adding more quiet spaces into designs. When Intuit's Mailchimp division designed its new offices—a sleek, modern space along Atlanta's popular walking and biking BeltLine path—acoustics were a priority. The old space had a sea of desks in a converted warehouse with only six phone booths or "drop-in" rooms; the new one has more than 60, says project executive Colin Hughes. Staffers are given the option of ordering noise-canceling headphones free of charge.

In this "innovation hub"—as Intuit calls the new Atlanta office–acoustic-friendly panels were used on walls, ceilings and as dividers to separate office "neighborhoods." There are five "library" spaces throughout the building, several of which are wood-paneled, lined with books and housing roomy tables with task lighting that evoke the feel of a modern university library. People tend to work there silently, says Hughes: "If you see there's books on the walls and it looks like a library, you're going to behave that way."

One driving factor behind creating more spaces for quiet work has been greater awareness about the needs of neurodiverse workers, such as those with ADHD or sensory processing challenges. External research shows that 15% to 20% of employees are neurodivergent, says Salesforce executive vice president for real estate and workplace services Relina Bulchandani. That prompted the software giant to design floors in its new Chicago tower with "meditation rooms" for quiet breaks and "library" spaces equipped with double monitor screens requested by software engineers.

While labeled as libraries, there are no signs to keep quiet, says Bulchandani. She notes that as people have spent more time in the office, they've grown more comfortable with taking calls at

desks in open office areas, and Salesforce has urged people to do more of that—within reason—to keep small huddle rooms from booking up. “We're encouraging folks that you can take calls at your desk, but just be mindful—you don’t want to be all day on video calls at your desk.”

Still, the paradox of many such solutions for office distractions isn’t lost on Argent’s West. If everyone simply had the choice of where they want to work—rather than having to report to an office—some of those solutions wouldn’t be needed. “All a company should really care about is efficiency,” he says. “If you’re delivering what’s expected of you, knock yourself out.”