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The Environmental Acoustics Magazine

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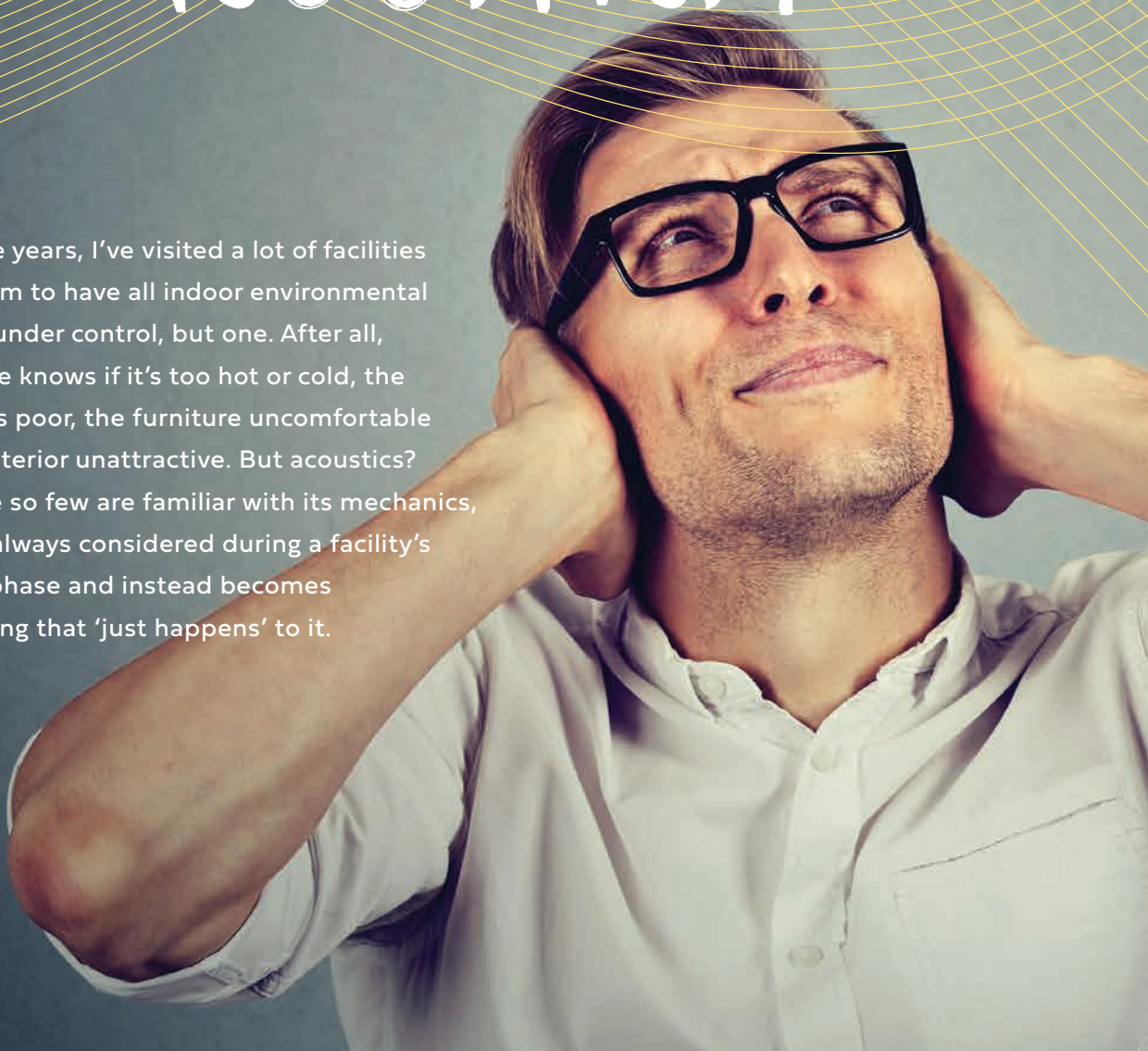
Premiere Issue

WHY ACOUSTICS?



Over the years, I've visited a lot of facilities that seem to have all indoor environmental factors under control, but one. After all, everyone knows if it's too hot or cold, the lighting's poor, the furniture uncomfortable or the interior unattractive. But acoustics? Because so few are familiar with its mechanics, it's not always considered during a facility's design phase and instead becomes something that 'just happens' to it.

That's certainly been the trend over the last decade, a period that's seen organizations steadily increasing occupational density while simultaneously eliminating many methods of acoustical control. Many of today's commercial interiors also favor wide open areas over the partitioned workspaces that once provided a measure of isolation between employees, coming to redefine what we mean by 'open plan.' Noise and lack of speech privacy top the list of distractions and discomforts flushed out by post-occupancy evaluations. I've also read countless incensed comments and blogs posted by those struggling with the fact that their workplace doesn't support their tasks, or donning headphones in an attempt to shut everything—not to mention, everyone—out.

Short-term economic pressures can also lead organizations to minimize the cost of their physical space, with acoustic treatments often first to feel the chop of the fiscal axe. After move-in, occupants quickly become well-acquainted with the detrimental effects—whether they're an office worker trying to focus, a banking client requiring confidentiality, a hospital patient needing to recover, or a hotel guest wanting sleep. When the complaints begin, the organization is faced with the daunting question 'Now what?' only to find they have fewer budget-friendly choices and little to no opportunity to capitalize on the ways in which acoustic treatments can complement one another.

On the flipside, initiatives such as LEED and WELL are successfully shifting attention towards indoor environmental factors like acoustics. And research supports this approach. For instance, Gensler's *What We've Learned About Focus in the Workplace*—based on a survey of 90,000 employees—found that most employees still spend more than half their time on individual work that requires concentration, and a further 20 percent on the telephone or in conversation within their workspace. They also discovered that offices designed to support focus work actually rate better for collaboration than those specifically designed to promote it. Future designs need to be informed by these types of studies or we risk creating workspaces that are less rather than more effective.

Thankfully, the tide seems to be turning, but it's also evident that more education and direction are needed, an issue amplified by the time it's taking for building guidelines and standards to catch up to technological advancements like those in the sound masking field. Many still believe they can tick the box next to 'Acoustics' simply by implementing one type of solution, but just as your car's horsepower isn't the only determinant of how fast it goes, the acoustical performance of a space doesn't come down to an individual product or method. Rather, it's the combined effect of all of the design—and, of course, behavioral—strategies used within it.

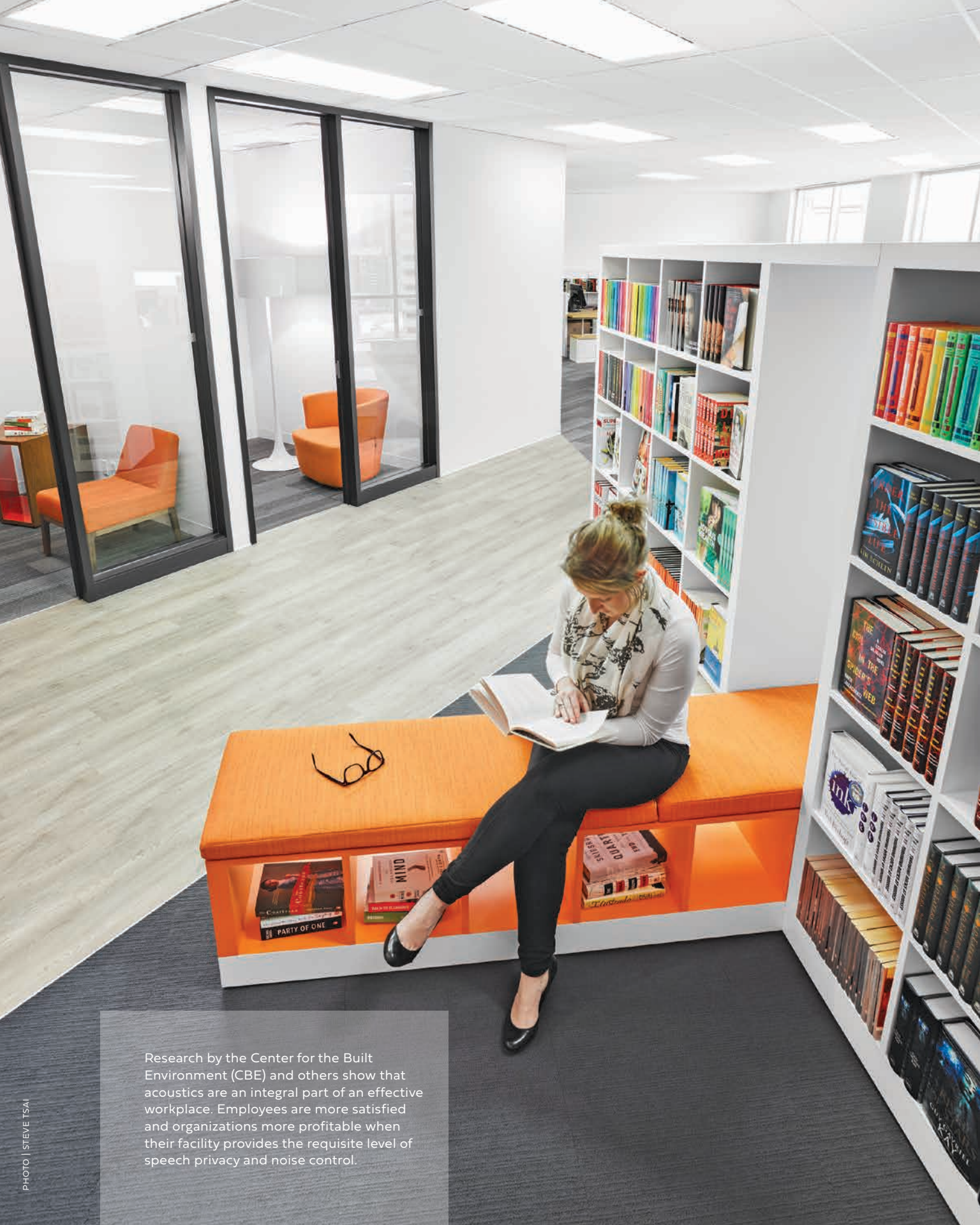
'Open-plan' and 'collaborative' don't have to be dirty words. With the evidence-based research and extensive product selection we have at our fingertips today, we can create environments that support the balance needed between focus and teamwork and also allow occupants to talk without feeling as though everyone can overhear them. While that risk is merely an embarrassing prospect for some, for others—such as those in healthcare—privacy is a serious matter. But if we take a moment to shift our perspective from the people talking to that of those unintentionally listening, it's evident that confidentiality isn't the only thing at stake, making acoustic privacy broadly relevant to a variety of workplaces.

If a workplace has poor speech privacy and noise control, chances are the occupants aren't too happy with their environment, no matter how good the lighting, perfect the temperature or wonderful the decor.

In fact, understandable speech is the single greatest source of disruption in open plans—the type of environment in which many people now work. Simply hearing someone speaking can disturb your concentration, but this problem is greatly magnified when you can clearly understand a conversation, making it much harder to ignore. No wonder a worldwide survey of more than 65,000 people conducted by the Center for the Built Environment found lack of speech privacy to be the top workplace complaint. Other types of noises can have the same disruptive effect and, depending on the nature of the task, studies show it can take up to a quarter of an hour to refocus your thoughts.

It might be easy to dismiss the importance of acoustic privacy in some settings, but it's difficult to justify increasing disruptions. Diminished focus has the proverbial snowball effect, reducing productivity, teamwork, workplace satisfaction, attendance, customer service and even reputation. In other words, design choices that result in poor acoustics have a lasting impact on an organization's bottom line. That's why nickel-and-diming this aspect of design eventually costs far more than you save, particularly given that 'people costs'—recruitment, salaries, training—far outweigh those of facilities in most markets.

If a workplace has poor speech privacy and noise control, chances are the occupants aren't too happy with their environment, no matter how good the lighting, perfect the temperature or wonderful the decor. That's the textbook definition of the 'weak link'—the one shortcoming that reduces the benefit of the rest. So, I'll conclude with a simple call to action: make sure your space sounds as good as it looks!

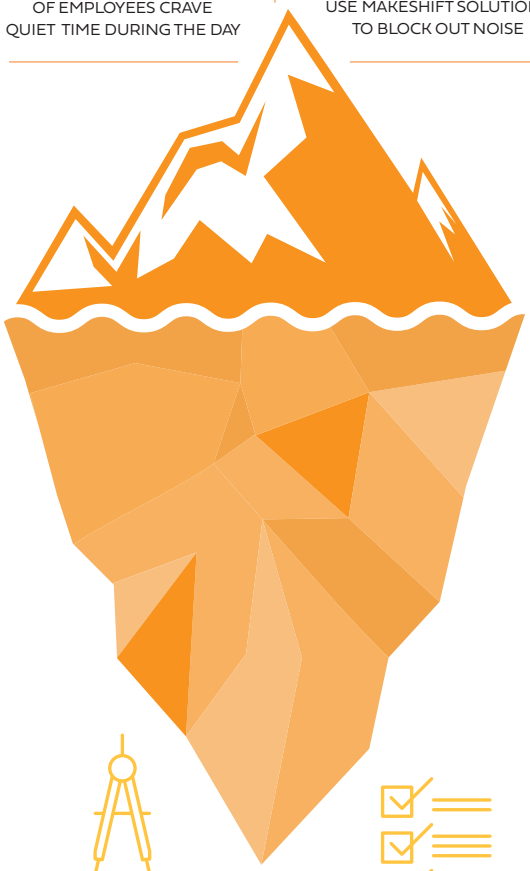


Research by the Center for the Built Environment (CBE) and others show that acoustics are an integral part of an effective workplace. Employees are more satisfied and organizations more profitable when their facility provides the requisite level of speech privacy and noise control.

PHOTO | STEVE TSAI

THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

Poor acoustical design negatively impacts occupants' focus, speech privacy and comfort, which in turn affects the organization for which they work—by reducing productivity, confidentiality, collaboration, attendance, customer service, and overall workplace satisfaction. You might see employees donning headphones, ducking into privacy booths or out the door to work from home, but the true impact—and cost—of poor acoustics lies below the surface.



#1

LACK OF SPEECH PRIVACY IS THE GREATEST SOURCE OF EMPLOYEE DISSATISFACTION

55%

OF EACH DAY IS SPENT ON INDIVIDUAL FOCUS WORK

69%

OF EMPLOYEES ARE DISSATISFIED WITH NOISE IN THEIR PRIMARY WORKSPACE

88%

SAY FOCUS WORK IS THE MOST CRITICAL ASPECT OF THEIR JOB

OVER 3/4

OF EMPLOYEES CRAVE QUIET TIME DURING THE DAY

NEARLY 1 IN 2

SAY WORKPLACE DESIGN HAS A STRONG IMPACT ON RETENTION

42%

USE MAKESHIFT SOLUTIONS TO BLOCK OUT NOISE

9 IN 10

MILLENNIALS WANT THEIR EMPLOYERS TO FIX NOISE AND DISTRACTION ISSUES

86 MINUTES

AVERAGE AMOUNT OF PRODUCTIVE TIME LOST PER DAY DUE TO NOISE DISTRACTION ALONE

5 TO 10%

DECLINE IN COGNITIVE PERFORMANCE WHEN EXPOSED TO NOISE

70%

SHIFT FROM FACE-TO-FACE TO ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION AFTER MOVING FROM CUBICLE TO OPEN SPACE

3 HOURS

TIME IT TAKES FOR STRESS HORMONES TO INCREASE WHEN EXPOSED TO OPEN OFFICE NOISE

Sources: Bernstein, E, Turban, S "The Impact of the 'Open' Workspace on Human Collaboration" in the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B; Evans, GW and Johnson, D, "Stress and Open-Office Noise" in the Journal of Applied Psychology; Kim, J "Workplace satisfaction: The privacy-communication trade-off in open-plan offices" in the Journal of Environmental Psychology; as well as various studies by the Center for the Built Environment, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Gensler, Haworth, JLL, Oxford Economics, and Sapio Research.

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