

NOISE ANNOYS



WHITEPAPER



Why acoustics could be the missing part of the productivity puzzle



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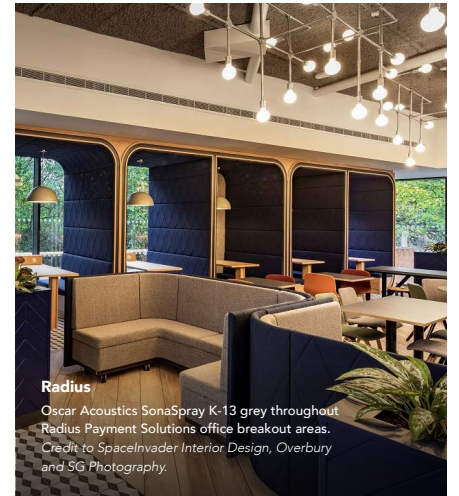
Introduction

Noise Annoys



Pre-pandemic, work environments tended to focus more on aesthetics than meaningful places of work that promote wellness and productivity.

Now, with the introduction of hybrid working, we've seen how impractical and unappealing our offices are – often noisy and short of quiet spaces. Whilst working from home has allowed greater autonomy and improved work-life balance, it's also placed a spotlight on office culture. Employers now need to consider how staff interact with the workspaces around them and how their expectations have changed. After months away, it's imperative they achieve the same level of focus and concentration in the office as they do at home.



Radius

Oscar Acoustics SonaSpray K-13 grey throughout Radius Payment Solutions office breakout areas. Credit to SpacelInvader Interior Design, Overbury and SG Photography.



For employers, it's become more difficult to create and maintain company culture, where employees feel a positive sense of belonging. Less face-to-face interaction is making it harder to create a sense of purpose, where creativity can flourish. And it's more important than ever – long periods of remote working have led to widespread exhaustion and the 'The Great Resignation' has seen millions quit their day jobs. A Microsoft [study](#) estimated 40 percent of the global workforce were considering leaving their employer in 2021.¹

Part of the challenge of retaining staff involves enticing workers back to offices. Yet as our research has shown – excessive noise remains a major sticking point, affecting returning workers' ability to concentrate, resulting in heightening stress. From previous research we know that excessive office noise was stopping them from doing a good job, over three quarters said so. It also caused inter-personal tension – nearly a third reported 'snapping' at a colleague due to undue commotion.

In today's digital age we're competing with external interruptions, impacting our ability to concentrate. After lockdown the situation is worse than ever. In his book, *Stolen Focus*, author Johann Hari outlines how our deteriorating focus has been super charged by technological distractions and that the solution goes deeper than individual action – our attention crisis is systematic. Importantly, adopting solutions, such as acoustically balanced rooms, hone our attention spans and are key to a happy life, clear thinking and successful problem solving – elements that every employer should encourage. Those who choose this path opt for the 'four 'C' model' – a strategy that allows workforces to flourish.



Excessive noise remains a major sticking point, affecting returning workers' ability to concentrate.





The 'Four 'C' Model'



Collaborate

Inspire employees to innovate and cocreate



Communicate

Allow employees to connect, build relationships and communities



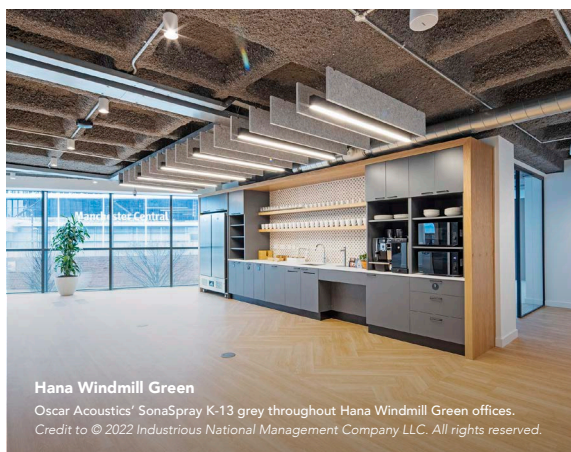
Concentrate and focus

Quiet places dedicated for work that requires concentration and silence



Chill

Rooms to rest, meditate or pray



Hana Windmill Green

Oscar Acoustics' SonaSpray K-13 grey throughout Hana Windmill Green offices.
Credit to © 2022 Industrious National Management Company LLC. All rights reserved.

Beyond this also lies financial gain. HM Revenue and Customs [reported](#) a decline in the demand for commercial office space.² With a growing number of workspaces lying empty, it's higher quality workspaces that command a premium on rents and leasing. By opting for clever design, employers will see it as an investment helping to retain staff and boost productivity.

According to the Chartered Institute for Personal Development, three quarters of employers now offer hybrid working, which is why we wanted to find out how business leaders, employees and specifiers are finding it. It's in this whitepaper that you'll find the results.

Missed Opportunity

Noise Annoys



The findings from our employees' survey highlighted a range of challenges as a result of hybrid working – particularly in regards to noise.

These results are important for employers looking to improve efficiency within teams, especially those considering a four-day week – the impact is significant, affecting focus, productivity and even mental health. Employers will be concerned to learn that one in seven even report hearing loss and a quarter of workers say they are stressed and delivering poor quality work.

Overwhelmingly, employees find excessive noise a tough obstacle to overcome – over half of those surveyed reported that their offices were noisy. Their main bugbear? Colleagues.

People's colleagues are the biggest noise creators. Many of us have now become accustomed to quiet life at home but the nattering of work mates is leaving us with little patience – one in seven find noisy co-workers troublesome. The most annoying trait is office banter, affecting four in ten. With the take up of video conferencing at desks, over a third admitted they found it difficult to concentrate as a result. Hearing a meeting from the other side of a room is a common irritation and can be significantly reduced with the right acoustic solution – such as a sound absorbing acoustic spray.



Over half of those surveyed reported that their offices were noisy



1/4 of workers say they are stressed



89% Millennials expect employers to be proactive around environmental responsibilities in the workplace



1 in 7 workers report hearing loss



Missed Opportunity

Noise Annoys



Eating your lunch at a desk at home may be a daily routine but for a fifth of workers, 'al-desko' dining is a no-go, finding it 'off putting'.

The same can be said for humming, singing and other bodily sounds like breathing and scratching. Too much noise is also fraying office relationships – the heart of any successful business. For some, the situation can become so bad that they have raised internal grievances or have resorted to passive aggressive notes as way to turn down the volume. It's the reason why a fifth of co-workers have had a breakdown in a relationship with a co-worker.



Strike a chord

Incredibly, in some of the most extreme cases, sky-high noise levels have even led to physical violence, showing the toll it can take on mental health. With the potential for physical outbursts, it makes a clear case for why calmer surroundings are vital to progress.

Yet most office workers are handling things in a less extreme fashion and find ways of avoiding office commotion all together – a fifth opt to work from home, as well as moving desk or wearing headphones to block out sound.

The root cause

Employers are also feeling the strain – a quarter of bosses say that working in the office is difficult due to noise and a fifth also found that other workers aren't able to moderate their volume, making it 'too noisy'.

What is prominent in the research is how poor workplace design is exacerbating problems. Younger bosses said that a lack of quiet work spaces is a challenge to their day jobs. Perhaps this isn't surprising given that just 13% have seen significant consideration to acoustic design in the wake of hybrid working by their companies. Interestingly, a quarter of bosses said that 'not much' acoustic design consideration had been given within their office, despite the fact that over half said it was important to their organisation.



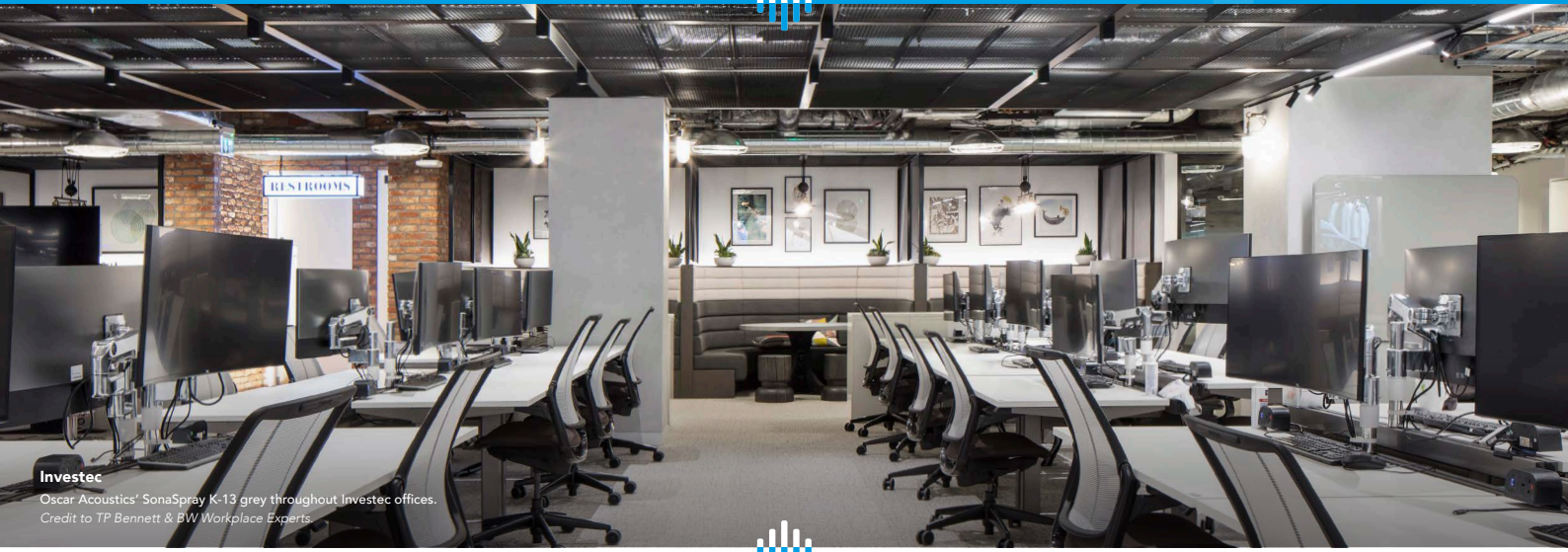
End user health falls short of the mark

In 2021 we asked specifiers and architects how important office design had become in their building projects. The points previously mentioned reflect their own experiences. Despite offering professional guidance, nearly one in two architects said that many of their clients 'aren't interested in end user health'. They saw a lack of awareness from employers during briefing stages with other design areas, such as sustainability, taking priority.

They also faced financial barriers – the biggest challenge when reducing noise pollution is small design budgets, showing a greater need for further financial consideration around acoustic design. Fixed partition walls were also cited as the greatest limitation, which may explain why limited space was a major obstacle.

Missed Opportunity

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Investec

Oscar Acoustics' SonaSpray K-13 grey throughout Investec offices.
Credit to TP Bennett & BW Workplace Experts.

What improvements are being made?

Unfortunately, it's clear that acoustic design simply isn't getting the attention it deserves.

Around just one in ten architects had been approached about acoustics and how to improve sound levels. Nearly all of them agreed that although a healthy workspace is important to the clients they work with, the high-cost of excessive sound is very much under-played and awareness around its effects on mental health and neurodiversity is low. This includes creating additional challenges for those who are aren't 'neurotypical' such as those with ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia or Tourette syndrome.

That isn't to say health-focused design measures aren't being implemented as it's clear that design for movement had been thought about, encouraging people to move regularly but also limiting the potential for exposure should a team member fall ill. The most frequently specified or retrofitted improvements are 'facility flow' and 'circulation areas' to help maintain social distancing. Architects also confirmed acoustic measures had been introduced in some areas to reduce noise levels and improve productivity as well as a rise in contactless entry to doors – a clear sign of the Covid-conscious workspaces we now operate in.

The survey also revealed that the most popular acoustic solutions for office noise reverberation are acoustic wall panels. Whilst these are effective methods, they fall foul to the same types of issues as suspended acoustic ceiling tiles – they must be ripped out or altered when reconfiguring a work space. Acoustic sprays on the other hand can be directly applied to the metal or concrete above and allow for complete flexibility during this process.

Opting for wall panels, could suggest they were chosen as an afterthought, revealing a lack of planning in the design stages and a lack of awareness of other acoustic options.

What's clear is a lack of acoustic design directly impacts a workforce's ability to concentrate. It's disheartening to hear that only a third of architects say such measures are used in just 0-30% of projects, however, understanding the scale of the issue is the first step on the road to recovery.



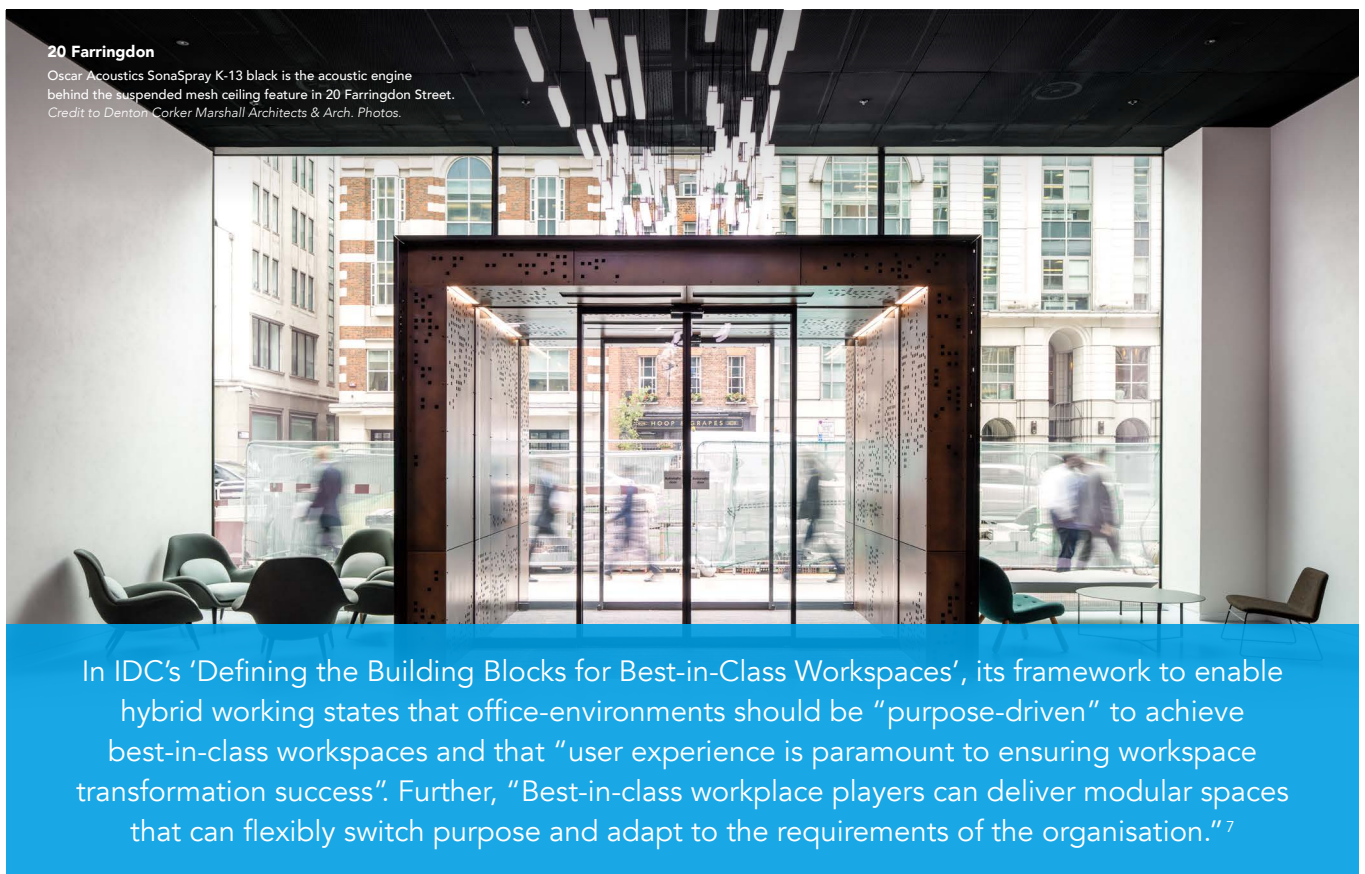
What good looks like

When identifying why offices are becoming 'sonic battlefields' – we should ask ourselves, what does good office design look like?

Firstly, it starts with employees, putting them at the core of design and recognising their needs. Second, will require a significant shift in how we think about office design – adding in as much reconfigurability and flexibility possible. This is in response to the rising demand for focus areas, for distraction-free calls and where hybrid meeting zones allow staff to gather and collaborate. In short, having flexible, open-spaced offices can serve a varying number of employees and their diverse needs to help them reach their best performance.³ Rachel Hoolahan, Architect at [Orms](#), explains that this mindset "begins with designing all new materials to be suitable for future reuse"⁴ and

that "we must transition away from chemical fixing methods such as gluing towards mechanical methods, such as screwing bolting and clipping".⁵

Charles Bettes, managing director architectural practice [Gpad London](#), highlights similar sentiments. "We have to invest in creating adaptable spaces that allow for flexibility and ease of implementation in years to come. Likewise, the spaces we create need to be flexible enough to accommodate the way people work today, which often includes co-working environments, private spaces, break out areas and cafes".⁶



20 Farringdon

Oscar Acoustics SonaSpray K-13 black is the acoustic engine behind the suspended mesh ceiling feature in 20 Farringdon Street. Credit to Denton Corker Marshall Architects & Arch. Photos.

In IDC's 'Defining the Building Blocks for Best-in-Class Workspaces', its framework to enable hybrid working states that office-environments should be "purpose-driven" to achieve best-in-class workspaces and that "user experience is paramount to ensuring workspace transformation success". Further, "Best-in-class workplace players can deliver modular spaces that can flexibly switch purpose and adapt to the requirements of the organisation."⁷



The rise of 'hotelification'

That isn't to say that aesthetics isn't important – the latest workplace trend of 'hotelification' is about creating workspaces that look and feel so good that staff want to be in the notification office, creating "beacons of warmth and hospitality".

As Béatrice Guillaume-Grabisch, Head-Global Human Resources & Business Services at [Nestlé SA](#) puts it: "It's an exciting time for workplace culture...the office has got to mimic places that aren't offices. More like a home you have left but return to." Providing perks that pamper staff can also be seen as a reward to the time and cost implications associated with daily commutes.

However, Stuart Oldridge, principal at global architecture and design practice [CallisonRTKL](#), makes the point that is just the start; "Savvy organisations will straddle the residential, hospitality and workplace sectors and recognise it is less about catering to hybrid work and more about servicing the hybrid lifestyle to attract and retain talent." Eventually, this could lead to speciality "enhanced collaboration rooms" where employers or landlords can provide equipment or places that are not available at home, "such as 3D

printers or virtual reality rooms." He also mentions that "good ergonomics and biophilic design will contribute to the holistic health of the workforce, as well as natural light, quality filtered air, and acoustic comforts."

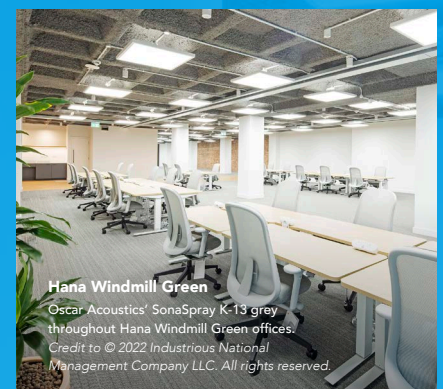
Ben Hancock, Managing Director at [Oscar Acoustics](#) is also seeing this filter through to job requests: "We've seen this first hand, pre-pandemic our brief was to create zen like office spaces, now we do this for areas that need focused work. Increasingly we're getting requests to create areas where there's a buzz, similar to the hospitality briefs we get where people want to hear a comforting hubbub which is energising."

Other companies involved in office design are also seeing an influx. Case in point is [Optima Systems](#). Working with beautifully designed glass partitions and doors, they have seen a spike in requests for high-end finishes. Allan Wood, Managing Director of Optima Contracting says: "Companies want to move beyond traditional open-plan offices with row-after-row of desk banks and create 'wow-factor' workplaces that maximise productivity and help improve employees' state of mind."



Understanding the role of sound

Whilst we know that furniture design elements are key, without the right acoustics solutions to support this changing functionality, employers will continue to find productivity hindered by excessive noise. Real-life examples show big players in the corporate world are adopting new practices in line with hybrid working. Telecommunications firm, BT, have used the return of workers as a catalyst for changing habits and behaviours. To ensure offices sound as good as they look, they have used seamless, sound absorbing acoustic sprays on the ceilings for maximum impact. The same can be said for offices at Radius Payment Solutions, where acoustically balanced rooms support yoga areas and calm break out spaces.



Hana Windmill Green
Oscar Acoustics' SonaSpray K-13 grey throughout Hana Windmill Green offices.
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Top five ways to create an office that works for you:

1 Don't overlook acoustic impact

From our research we have learnt that office acoustics, if left unchecked can be detrimental to staff welfare and productivity. Companies looking to 'level up' their workforce should consider acoustic sprays which allow for complete flexibility when reconfiguring workspaces.

2 Flip and reverse it

Open plan offices now need to work differently. Meeting spaces will need moveable boundaries whilst enclosed spaces such as pods or enclaves will become magnets for individually focused work. Invest in innovative, flexible furniture that can merge and adapt as work patterns change and allow for easy-access to tech. Focused workspaces will also need visual and acoustic privacy.

3 Consider office space fluidity

Companies are now assessing their space needs, which is why it's vital to see furniture as fluid rather than fixed. Be open to the idea that areas may be meeting rooms in the morning but a café at lunch.

4 Together and then apart

"Effective collaboration happens when there's an ebb and flow of people coming together to work as a team and then moving apart to focus individually".⁸ Allowing solitude for workers as well group meetings will get the most from your employees.

5 Putting employees first

When designing offices, put the needs of employees first and work backwards. As the focus is increasing on work activity, decide what this will look like – identify needs and repurpose space as needed. This includes physical spaces where tech seamlessly integrates.

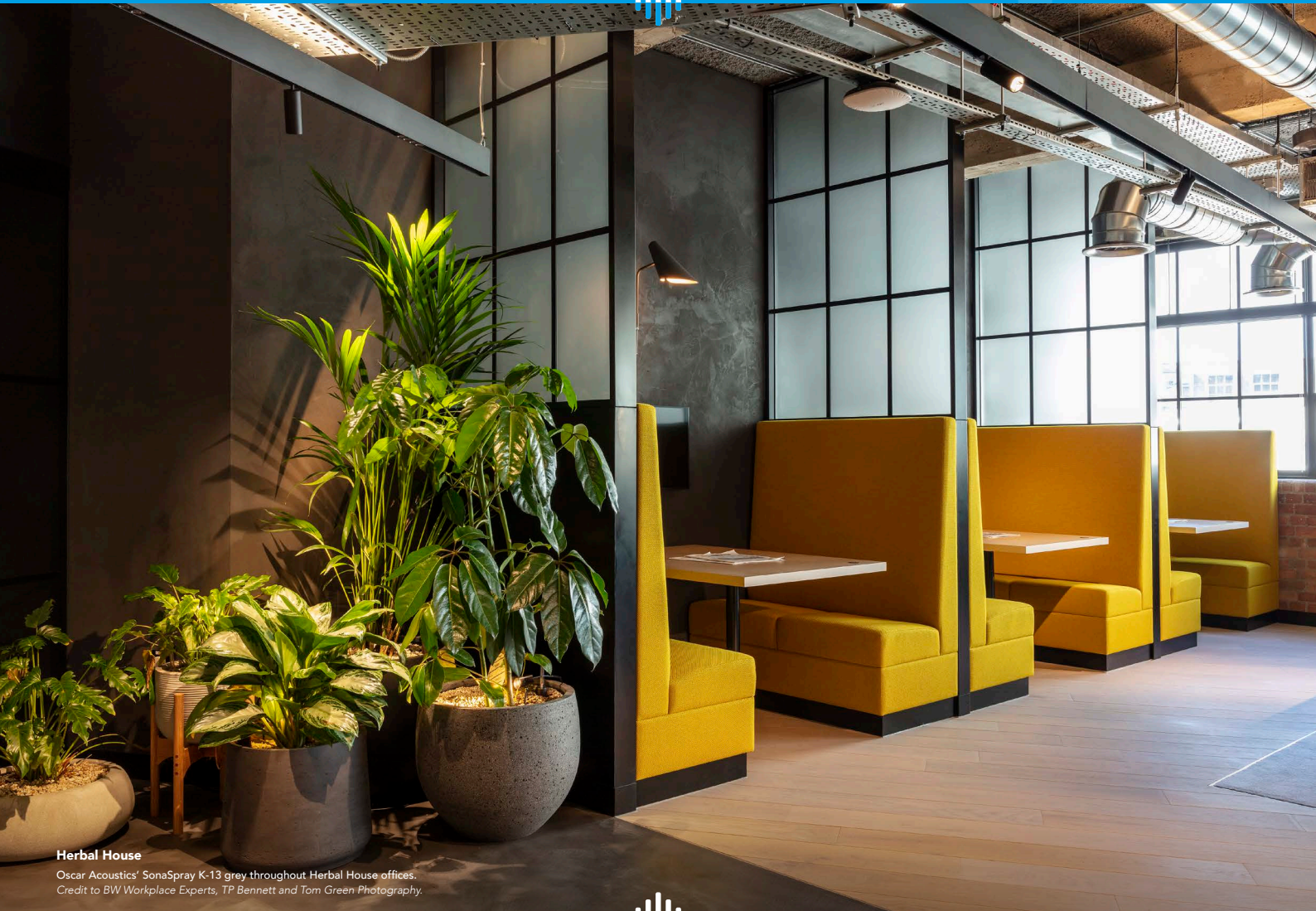
Office acoustics, if left unchecked can be detrimental to staff welfare and productivity.



Investec

Oscar Acoustics' SonaSpray K-13 grey throughout Investec offices.
Credit to TP Bennett & BW Workplace Experts.

OSCAR
acoustics



Herbal House

Oscar Acoustics' SonaSpray K-13 grey throughout Herbal House offices.
Credit to BW Workplace Experts, TP Bennett and Tom Green Photography.

There's no escaping that work and office culture has changed forever

For employers, those who fully embrace the needs of this new trend will see success – not in just in a wider business sense but also on an individual level. Yet if we're to do this, we must address the long-standing issue of excessive sound.

Knowledge and awareness around the subject in regards to workplaces are worryingly low – over a third of the employers surveyed didn't understand their responsibility when it comes to the Noise at

Work Act and only 40% knew 'roughly'. The problem also stretches beyond just productivity – it can have a serious impact on health and in today's post-covid world, it's an area we should take seriously.

Shockingly, just two thirds of office managers were aware that hearing damage can occur when exposed to excessive levels of noise and on average just 7% knew that it could lead to heart attacks, strokes, heart disease and diabetes.

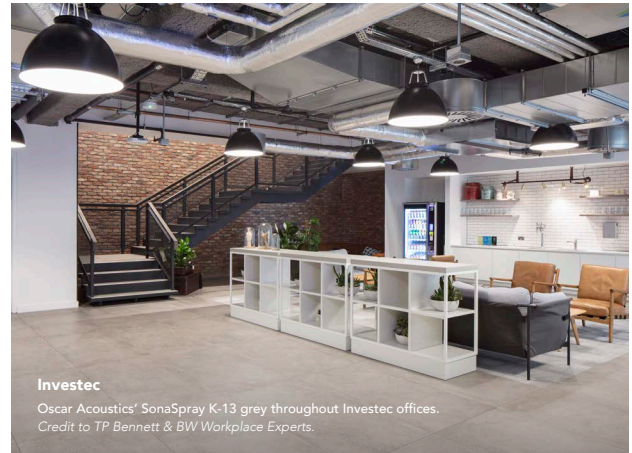
Conclusion

Noise Annoys



Boosting profits

The underlying financial opportunities should also be a motivator – the increasing trend for the reconfiguration and repurposing of office spaces is still taking place and companies are willing to invest in modern offices that offer Cat B fit-outs as a flexible, long-term solution. This marks the next generation of working environments as more consideration is given to employee wellness – from visual appeal to acoustic comfort. Those that recognise this early, will serve to reap the financial rewards as this type of thinking becomes more mainstream.



Investec

Oscar Acoustics' SonaSpray K-13 grey throughout Investec offices.
Credit to TP Bennett & BW Workplace Experts.



111 Buckingham Palace Road

Oscar Acoustics Oscar Elite acoustic plaster throughout reception area of 111 Buckingham Palace Road.
Credit to Eric Parry Architects, Collins Construction & Tony MacLean photography.

Sustainability in mind

In today's world we must also consider the longevity and sustainability of our office space. Rigid design methods mean that often, office furniture is simply scrapped at the end of its lifecycle. This simply isn't good enough in light of today's climate emergency.

There's also potential for 'material passports', where components of existing buildings can be tagged, so that when they are dismantled, they can be more easily reused. The idea is that we view our buildings as material banks – composed of valuable components that can be easily reused like Lego blocks. It's a strong indicator of where the industry is heading and this way of thinking is becoming increasingly important to employees – a recent study by LinkedIn showed that 89% of Millennials expect employers to be proactive around environmental responsibilities in the workplace.⁶

It's important to remember that the office is still the hub of the company – and whilst it's needs have changed, it still remains an important factor to both companies and their workforce. People may be able to carry out tasks remotely but a successful office is a place where people connect, build a healthy culture and ensure the wellbeing and motivation of teams. We now have an opportunity to transform these spaces and create offices that we'd all love to be a part of for generations to come.



With over 40 years of sound business, Oscar Acoustics has built an unrivalled reputation for the reliability, quality and performance of its acoustic products. It's why they've become synonymous with the changing face of the office landscape, working with businesses of all sizes to reduce noise, improve focus and boost the happiness and welfare of staff.

They're also the leading provider of acoustic solutions for buildings throughout Great Britain, home to the most extensive range of recycled, seamless, acoustic decorative finishes for the control of noise reverberation in buildings, offering superb acoustics without having to compromise on design.

If you'd like to find out more about how Oscar Acoustics can help transform your workplace, reduce excess noise or make your office or building space more profitable, contact our sales team:

mail@oscar-acoustics.co.uk

01474 854902

References

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⁸ <https://content.yudu.com/web/448yz/0A448zd/FMUKJul2022/html/index.html?page=12&origin=reader>

Photo Credits

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Oscar Acoustics SonaSpray K-13 black is the acoustic engine behind the suspended mesh ceiling feature in 20 Farringdon Street. Credit to *Denton Corker Marshall Architects & Arch. Photos.*

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Investec

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Mabledon Place

Oscar Acoustics Oscar Elite acoustic plaster throughout reception area of One Mabledon Place – The Halo Building. Credit to *Steffian Bradley Architects & Gary Britton Photography.*

Radius

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22 Bishopsgate

SonaSpray fxc in 'The Market'. Credit to *DesignLSM, Adnitt Acoustics and Andrew Meredith photography.*

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