

# Demand for quelling office noise booms

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## Acoustical Privacy Pro is hearing more calls for ‘sound conditioning’

Isn't it funny how a problem becomes more important once it affects the boss?

Noise is a big headache for cube dwellers, and employers have rarely addressed the issue.

But David Button, who specializes in acoustical privacy for open office space, says his services are now in demand as more managers get booted from private offices into commoners' coops.

“My business these days is being driven by executives going into open-plan offices,” says Mr. Button. “My message is about comfort, productivity and stress relief.”

AT&T Broadband in Irving found that even its private offices weren't all that private. Confidential conversations bled from one office to the next and leaked into the adjoining open area.

“I said, ‘Can you imagine if the executives are having problems, what's happening to the folks in the open space?’ ” Mr. Button says. “We wound up doing the entire office for about 200 people.”

The answer lies in “sound conditioning,” he says, which integrates ceiling, carpeting, furniture and acousti-

## IDEAS AT WORK



**CHERYL HALL**

cal technology to create a less disruptive environment.

We've all heard about white noise — dull hums that drown out clatter.

His Plano company, Button Group LLC, creates “pink noise” that targets conversation to make it less intrusive.

You see, our brains are programmed to home in on chitchat. When we overhear a co-worker talking on the phone, we automatically try to process it.

## Noise generator

Mr. Button talks about raising the ambient background sound underneath higher-pitched speech — but I'll spare you that.

In essence, pink noise is lower-frequency sound that masks higher-frequency conversation.

The result is an unintelligible drone that the brain ignores.

The system is a noise generator, amplifiers and speakers.

## Privacy pro says demand for quieter offices is booming

It costs about a buck a square foot and improves privacy on average by 30 percent, Mr. Button contends. A self-contained unit for a private office runs \$300 to \$400.

Mr. Button has installed systems at Texas Instruments Inc., Perot Systems Corp., Bank of America Corp. and the First Baptist Church in downtown Dallas.

Brian Miller of The Beck Group helped design the architecture and construction firm's new 50,000-square-foot domain that has no walled offices. The company wanted to increase collaboration yet give its executives privacy.

"We've been successful with all of that," says Mr. Miller, who worried that workers might find the pink noise too overbearing. "It turns out people really appreciate it. They can still have conversations, yet they don't hear every little thing around them."

You don't want the system in a conference room, warns John Swicord, manager of building operations for Lennox International Inc., which has sound conditioning in

### Surroundings

Mr. Button's business is also getting a boost from the trend of hard surfaces, no ceiling panels and wide-open space.

"Looks great. Functions terribly," he says.

"Some companies call and say, 'We thought this was cool, but man, what can you do?'" he says. "We have a speaker that looks like a small disc that we can hang from the joists."

Sometimes, companies exacerbate the situation with high-performance ceiling and furniture systems that reduce background sound, allowing conversation to travel even farther.

"Acoustics and privacy are often the last things people think about when designing space," Mr. Button says. "But if companies integrate it into the initial planning, we can do some value engineering so that the ceilings and furniture are working in concert with the sound conditioning."

The technology, developed by Dynasound Inc. in Norcross, Ga., has been around for more than 20 years, but many companies still don't know it exists.

Sales often depend on word of mouth — both spoken and not.

Southwestern Bell Mobile Systems was Mr. Button's first installation six years ago when he shifted his practice from architecture to acoustical consulting.

The company once turned off the sound conditioning system in its call center so that visitors from Sterling Software Inc. could hear the difference.

"All of a sudden, 500 people realized that something had changed," Mr. Button recalls. "Their conversations started bouncing all around. When we turned it back on, they applauded."