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## Privacy at work and the rise of the 'quiet space'

How much noise is too much in the office? As workers have returned to their desks, managing sound levels has become an art — and a science



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Emma Jacobs YESTERDAY

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Employees at Levenfeld Pearlstein, a Chicago law firm, are getting ready for an office move in January — from the middle of the city’s business district to the riverside — by getting rid of the work detritus on their desks and taking home their personal possessions. Not only will the new workspace be smaller (from 53,000 square feet to about 37,500) but there will also be fewer assigned offices.

It’s a move that Kevin Corrigan, the chief operations officer, anticipates might trigger upset. “Some people are going to feel ‘I’ve worked hard for my office, I’ve come up the ranks. Now you are going to reduce the size of the office. I might not even have one.’ It’ll be a change for people.”

This is not just a matter of ego. The firm wants to encourage staff back into the office part-time, as like many employers it is embracing hybrid work, a mix of working from home and the office. Typically, time at home is earmarked for focused work, while the workplace is the destination for collaboration, in-person meetings and socialising. Advertising company McCann, for example, has opened new offices in the City of London, and sees them as a centre for

“creativity, collaboration and connection” with hack rooms, pitch rooms and creative zones, according to Lucy d’Eyncourt-Harvey, its building operations director. However, she says, there are also quieter areas in the new workspace.

This is because working days are inevitably not always easy to divide into focused and collaborative time, and so the office will also need spaces that are private and quiet. In any case, for some, the office is a refuge from distractions at home — employees with young children or living with an elderly family member, or those in flat shares and cramped conditions. Kristin Cerutti, senior designer at Nelson Worldwide says: “You can’t generalise. A lot of people need the office for focus work.”

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**What we’re hearing from HR departments is that people are hypersensitive to their environments**

Jeremy Myerson, emeritus professor, Royal College of Art

Corrigan says Levenfeld Pearlstein will still provide offices, though the overwhelming majority will be unassigned so that staff — secretaries as well as lawyers — can get their heads down and concentrate in between meetings, training and mentoring sessions.

After two years of lockdowns and remote working, many white-collar workers are finding it harder to concentrate in open-plan offices. Jeremy Myerson, emeritus professor at the Royal College of Art and co-author of *Unworking: The reinvention of the modern office*, says: “When you’ve spent two years alone, you become very sensitive to noise. What we’re hearing from HR departments is that people are hypersensitive to their environments.”

Moreover, the proliferation of Zoom calls means that people are more likely to be holding a distracting meeting at their desk rather than tucked away in a room out of earshot. Levenfeld Pearlstein’s Corrigan says a great deal of attention has been paid to acoustics in the new office. However, some people are going to have to be encouraged to close their office doors and use headsets rather than having conference calls on loudspeaker. “We can build the infrastructure but need to encourage people to use it.”



Lucy d'Eyncourt-Harvey, building operations director at McCann, says that offices are a centre for 'creativity, collaboration and connection' © Charlie Bibby/FT

Acoustics is one of the biggest challenges, says Mark Kowal, British Council for Offices' president. "Pink noise" is an increasingly popular option to mask the background noise — in fact, he uses it in his own workplace, an architecture firm. He describes it as "an artificial jumble of frequencies, it masks what you can hear [and] adjusts to the number of people in the space".

This is not just a matter of delicate sensibilities following the pandemic. Even before lockdowns, workers were facing squeezed space in open-plan offices. According to the British Council for Offices, in 2001 there was about one desk per 15 sq m in UK offices and in 2018 it was 9.6 sq m.

In response to Zoom demands and pandemic sensitivity, some designers and employers are creating quiet areas, away from the hubbub of the open-plan floors. At co-working group WeWork, its global head of design, Ebbie Wisecarver, says they will provide two types of quiet spaces. Pop-in areas will be available for the transient members who come for the day or hour. For the corporate members, there will be private amenities: dedicated spaces with interior offices, meeting rooms, lounges and kitchens. "Co-working may not traditionally be equated with privacy, but as more organisations rethink their real estate footprints quickly — especially in industries such as law, healthcare,

financial or data services that typically demand more formal, private settings — we’re seeing the growing need,” Wisecarver says.

This is not quite the revival of the cubicle, created in the 1960s by Robert Propst at design company Herman Miller. Conceived as a flexible, individual workspace affording employees privacy, a departure from rows of heavy desks, it soon became a symbol of alienated white-collar drones, Nikil Saval writes in his book, *Cubed: The Secret History of the Workplace*. The writer Douglas Coupland described the cubicles in *Generation X* (1991) as a “Veal-Fattening Pen: small, cramped office workstations built of fabric-covered disassemblable wall partitions and inhabited by junior staff members. Named after the small preslaughter cubicles used by the cattle industry.” Propst himself became disillusioned with the way the cubicle was interpreted: “Not all organisations are intelligent and progressive,” he is reported to have said in 2000. “Lots are run by crass people. They make little, bitty cubicles and stuff people in them. Barren, rathole places.”

This means a proliferation of phone rooms, huddle spaces, or private offices that are either shared or unassigned. Microsoft, the tech group, recently created a new prototype for the [Flowspace Pod](#), a cocoon-like fabric-lined pod designed for focused work.

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At Cisco, the tech group, which describes offices in the post-pandemic era as “talent collaboration centres”, designers anticipate employees using different areas that suit their work throughout the day, including huddles (rooms for three people) or quiet rooms (for one to two people). Bob Cicero, smart building lead at Cisco, says: “When we rebuilt the space [during the pandemic] we were very

sensitive about acoustics.” That meant creating walls that go from the floor to the ceiling and sealed door frames that prevent sound leakage. “We measure ambient noise everywhere.” That even includes filtering out “the crying baby, barking dog, leaf blower at home: we’re filtering out that noise for the remote

participant so we can have a productive meeting.”

Janet Pogue McLaurin, global director of workplace research practices, sees more demand for workplace libraries “creating quieter tech-free zones like the quiet car on the train. In this zone, it might be no talking or no tech. A library has lower lighting. It allows people to switch gears from a group meeting to deep focus.”

However, like so much about the workplace such rooms need endorsement from the top. Anne-Laure Fayard, chaired professor in social innovation at Nova School of Business and Economics, speaks of one company that had made great play of their library room but could not understand why employees were not using it. “We started talking to people and asking: they said: ‘We’re an innovations company, we have to be in the room, in the energy. It doesn’t look good to be there too often.’” It turned out senior management never used the room either.

Fayard believes there is a lack of imagination when it comes to design. At a recent meeting she was depressed to hear of plans to install phone booths for privacy. “Imagine the office of the future is sofas and phone booths. Wow, that is not what we were envisaging creatively.”



A rendering of the Levenfeld Pearlstein café at their new offices. The Chicago law firm will move into the new space in January © Levenfeld Pearlstein, LLC