

LUNCH AND LEARN | 1 HOUR



Quiet Is Not Private

Speech Privacy and Sound Masking in Law Firms and Courthouses

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About the Numbers in This Course

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Course Description

Law firms love glass, open collaboration space and quiet, polished finishes, and those choices can let privileged conversations carry to reception, adjoining offices and public corridors. This course explains speech privacy as a relationship between speech and background sound, introduces the Absorb, Block, Cover framework and its ratings, and applies them space by space to law firms and courthouses. Participants will learn where speech leaks, how design supports the duty to make reasonable efforts to protect client information, and where fixed and adaptive sound masking help or never belong.



AUDIENCE

Architects, interior designers,
engineers, owners



LEVEL

Introductory to intermediate



FOCUS

Law firms, courthouses, prosecutor
and defender offices

Learning Objectives



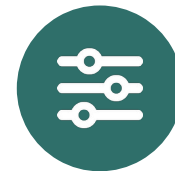
Explain why speech privacy depends on the relationship between speech level and background sound, and why quiet, modern spaces are often less private.



Apply the Absorb, Block, Cover framework and interpret the ratings behind it (NRC, AC, STC, SPC, Privacy Index) to protect occupant well-being.



Identify where privileged and confidential conversations leak in law firms and courthouses, and select design strategies that support reasonable efforts to protect client information.



Evaluate where fixed and adaptive sound masking should and should not be used in legal spaces, including courtrooms, sidebars and recorded rooms.

Our Hour Together

Part 1

How Speech Privacy Works

Signal and background, the ABCs, the ratings, and how masking is tuned

25 min

Part 2

Legal, Space by Space

The duty of confidentiality, courthouses, where speech leaks, and the quick fix

25 min

Wrap Up

Takeaways and Questions

Design meeting questions and open Q&A

10 min

PART 1

How Speech Privacy Works

The physics, the tools, and the numbers behind them

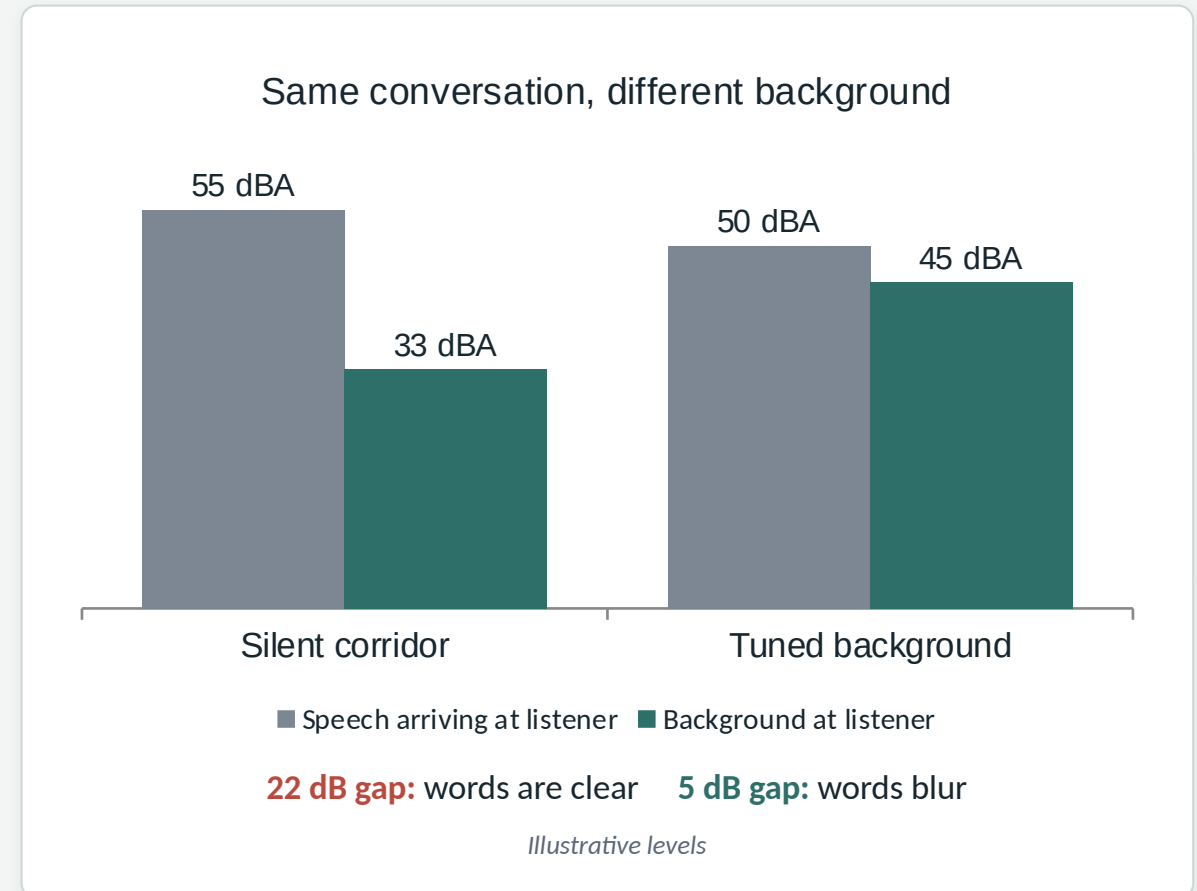
Quiet Is Not Private

Privacy comes down to one relationship at the listener's ear:

- How loud is the conversation when it arrives?
- How loud is the background where the listener stands?

When speech rises well above the background, the listener understands it. When the background is close to the speech, the words blur into sound the brain stops decoding.

Two ways to improve privacy: reduce the speech that arrives, or raise the background in a controlled, comfortable way.



What Changed in the Buildings We Design



Open plans

Fewer walls, more shared and flexible space.



More glass

Visual connection, with acoustic leaks at joints and doors.



Quieter buildings

Efficient HVAC and equipment removed the old background sound.



Higher expectations

Clients expect privileged strategy to stay behind the door.

Each is a good design decision. Together, they let speech travel further and stand out more.

Conversations Are Information

The question is not "Can someone hear something?"

It is "Can someone understand something they were never meant to hear?"



Legal

Privileged strategy,
settlements, client matters



Financial

Balances, loans, estates



Healthcare

Names, diagnoses,
medications



Corporate

HR issues, strategy, deals

What the Research Shows

~50% vs 18%

of open-plan occupants dissatisfied with sound privacy, compared with people in private offices

42,764 survey responses from 303 office buildings. The "ease of interaction" open plans promise did not make up for the lost privacy.

Kim and de Dear, Journal of Environmental Psychology, 2013

40% fewer

attempts at an unsolvable puzzle after three hours of low-level open-office noise

Stress hormone levels rose. The workers did not report feeling more stressed. The noise cost them without their noticing.

Evans and Johnson, Cornell University, Journal of Applied Psychology, 2000

Speaking the Language of Sound



Decibel

A logarithmic scale. About +10 dB sounds twice as loud. A 3 dB change is just noticeable.



A-weighted level

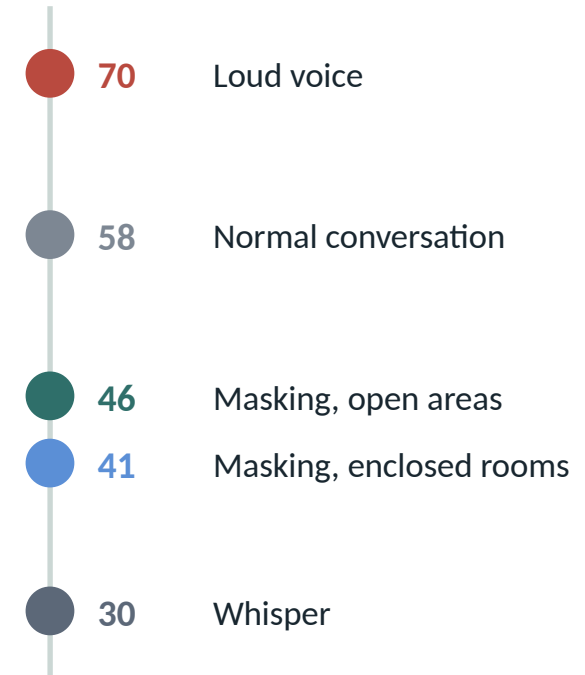
One number weighted the way human hearing responds. Masking is specified in dBA.



One-third octave bands

The frequency slices of a sound. One dBA number can hide a harsh or rumble spectrum.

Typical levels (dBA)



Masking values from GSA Sound Matters targets. Conversation and whisper levels are typical approximations and vary with distance and effort.

Privacy Is Not One Thing

Freedom from distraction

Nearby conversations stop pulling attention. Some speech may still be understood.

Open work areas, lobbies

Normal privacy

You can tell someone is talking and may catch a word, but can't follow it without effort.

Offices, service points

Confidential privacy

Conversations are essentially unintelligible to anyone outside the group.

Closed consult rooms

Speech security

Information is protected by regulation or contract; a motivated listener may try to overhear.

Secure and accredited spaces

How Privacy Is Measured

Open plan spaces: ASTM E1130

Rating	Articulation Index	Privacy Index
Confidential	0.05 or less	95% or more
Normal	0.20 or less	80% or more
Poor	Above 0.20	Below 80%



A Privacy Index of 80% is normal privacy, not confidential. That distinction trips up a lot of marketing material.

Closed rooms: ASTM E2638, Speech Privacy Class

SPC	Category	A listener outside can expect
70	Minimal privacy	Speech frequently intelligible
75	Standard privacy	Occasionally intelligible
80	Speech security	Very rarely intelligible
85	High security	Essentially unintelligible
90	Very high security	Unintelligible, essentially inaudible

SPC adds the room's level reduction to the background outside, so it captures the speech-to-background idea directly.

SPC categories per Gover and Bradley, National Research Council Canada. Other SPC tables use different listener assumptions; name the table you cite.

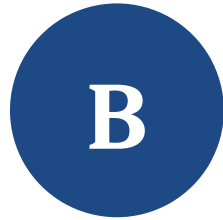
The ABCs of Speech Privacy



Absorb

Reduce the speech that reflects off ceilings and hard surfaces toward a neighbor.

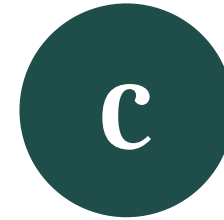
Ceilings, wall panels, soft finishes



Block

Stop sound from passing between spaces, and seal the paths around the barrier.

Walls, doors, glass, plenum barriers, seals



Cover

Raise the background at the listener with a tuned, comfortable masking sound.

Engineered sound masking

Take away any one and privacy drops, because each tool covers a gap the others leave. (The framework behind GSA's Sound Matters guidance.)

Absorb: Start With the Ceiling



Where absorption does the most good

The ceiling first. It is the largest surface and the main reflection path. GSA calls for NRC 0.90 or higher over open office ceilings.

Ask for AC in open plans. Articulation Class describes how well a ceiling limits speech reflected between workstations.

Walls at speaking height in meeting rooms, glass offices and corridors.

Wood, stone and glass finishes: use discreet absorptive ceilings and fabric-wrapped panels inside conference rooms.



Absorption traps

Treating NRC as the whole story. Ask for the full coefficient table.

Foam finishes without fire testing. Foam plastics typically need NFPA 286 room-corner testing under the IBC.

Expecting it to stop sound through walls. That is blocking.

Over-treating. A room that is too dead makes people raise their voices.

Block: The Weak Links Decide



Doors
Undercut or ungasketed doors are often the weakest element in the room.



Walls that stop at the ceiling
Sound goes up, across the plenum, and down next door.



Ducts and transfer grilles
Shared returns act like speaking tubes.



Glass and mullions
Gaps at joints and doors rarely match the adjoining wall.

STC is a lab number. Rooms perform in the field.

Partition STC	Typical experience next door
25 to 30	Speech easily understood
35 to 45	Loud speech audible, less clear
50 to 55	Normal speech generally private
60 to 65	Loud sounds barely audible

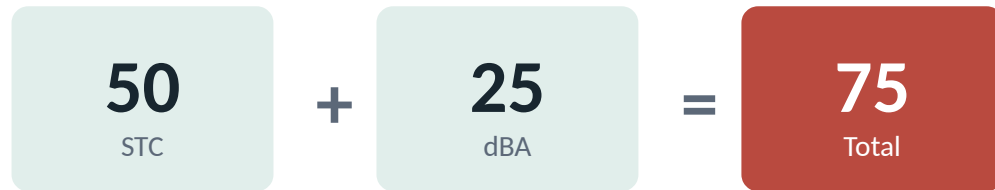
Descriptions assume a quiet background and a well-built room. Field ratings (ASTC, NIC) often land several points below lab STC once flanking paths are included.

STC descriptions adapted from Riverbank Acoustical Laboratories guidance. STC per ASTM E90 and E413; field ratings per ASTM E336.

Why Blocking and Covering Work as a Team

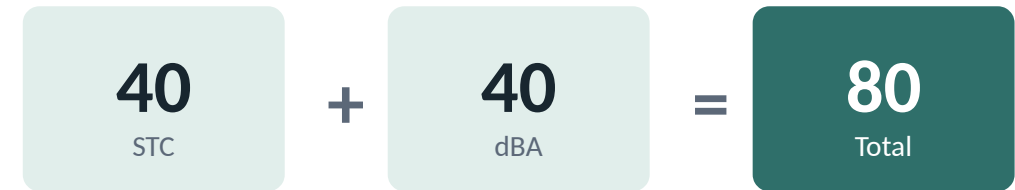
Wall STC + Background dBA at the listener ≈ 75 for basic speech privacy

An expensive wall, a silent corridor



Barely reaches the target. Any leak at the door or plenum and it falls short.

A standard wall, a tuned background



Beats the heavier wall, and the corridor background protects every room along it.

A consultant rule of thumb for screening, not a design method. It ignores flanking paths; critical rooms need a design and field test.

Cover: What Sound Masking Is, and Is Not



Sound masking is

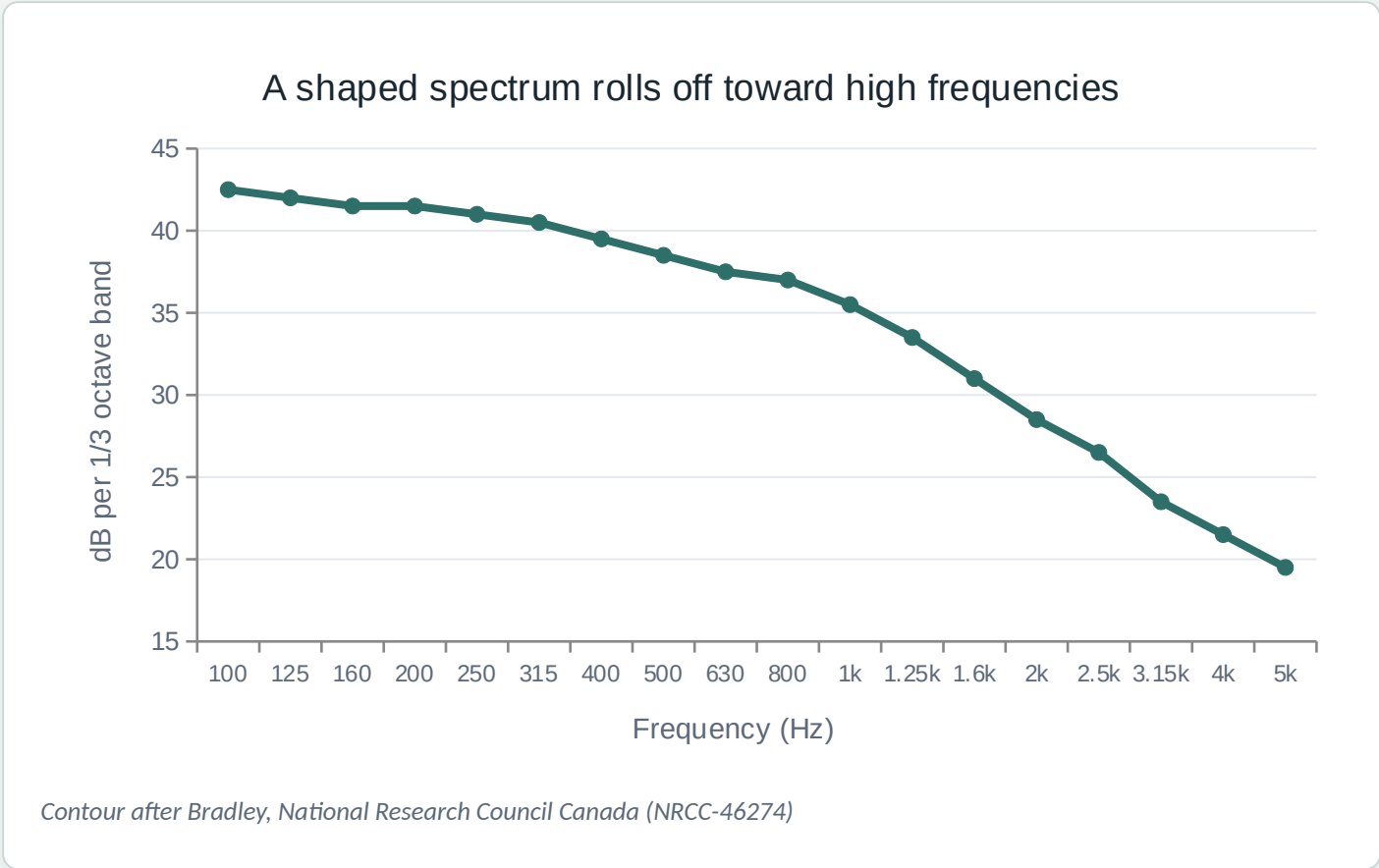
- An engineered background sound played through a network of speakers
- Shaped across frequency bands to cover the sounds that carry speech
- Tuned zone by zone and measured (ASTM E1573)
- Heard as soft, even airflow when done well
- A way to shrink the distance at which speech is understood



Sound masking is not

- White noise, which is harsh and hissy at privacy levels
- A way to reduce echo or reverberation (it adds sound)
- A replacement for walls, doors and seals
- A fix for loud or tonal HVAC noise
- Confidential privacy in an open plan on its own

Tuned, Not Just Turned On



Typical design targets

- 45 to 48 dBA**

Open work areas
- 40 to 42 dBA**

Enclosed offices
- Tuned on site**

Reception, corridors and the office side of conference rooms

Specify tolerances for overall level and each band, zone by zone, and verify by measurement. An average that hides quiet spots leaves privacy holes.

Open and enclosed targets from GSA Sound Matters. Measurement and reporting per ASTM E1573.

Where Masking Should Not Go, or Needs Great Care



Classrooms and lecture rooms

ANSI/ASA S12.60 limits classroom background noise to 35 dBA so students can hear. Mask the offices instead.



Courtrooms, depositions and recorded rooms

Judges, jurors, reporters and recordings need clear speech. Mask the corridor, not the room.



Conference, video and courtrooms

People inside need clear speech and microphones pick up masking. Mask the corridor outside.



Anywhere life safety depends on hearing

Masking, music and paging should mute when the fire alarm or mass notification activates.



Spaces for people with hearing loss

Added background sound can make conversation harder: senior living common areas, audiology suites.

Rule of thumb: put masking where the listener is, not inside the room you are trying to protect.

Design It, Tune It, Measure It

Plenum-mounted

Speakers above a suspended ceiling; the plenum and tiles diffuse the sound. Hardware stays hidden, but results depend on plenum depth, obstructions and tile performance.

Direct-field

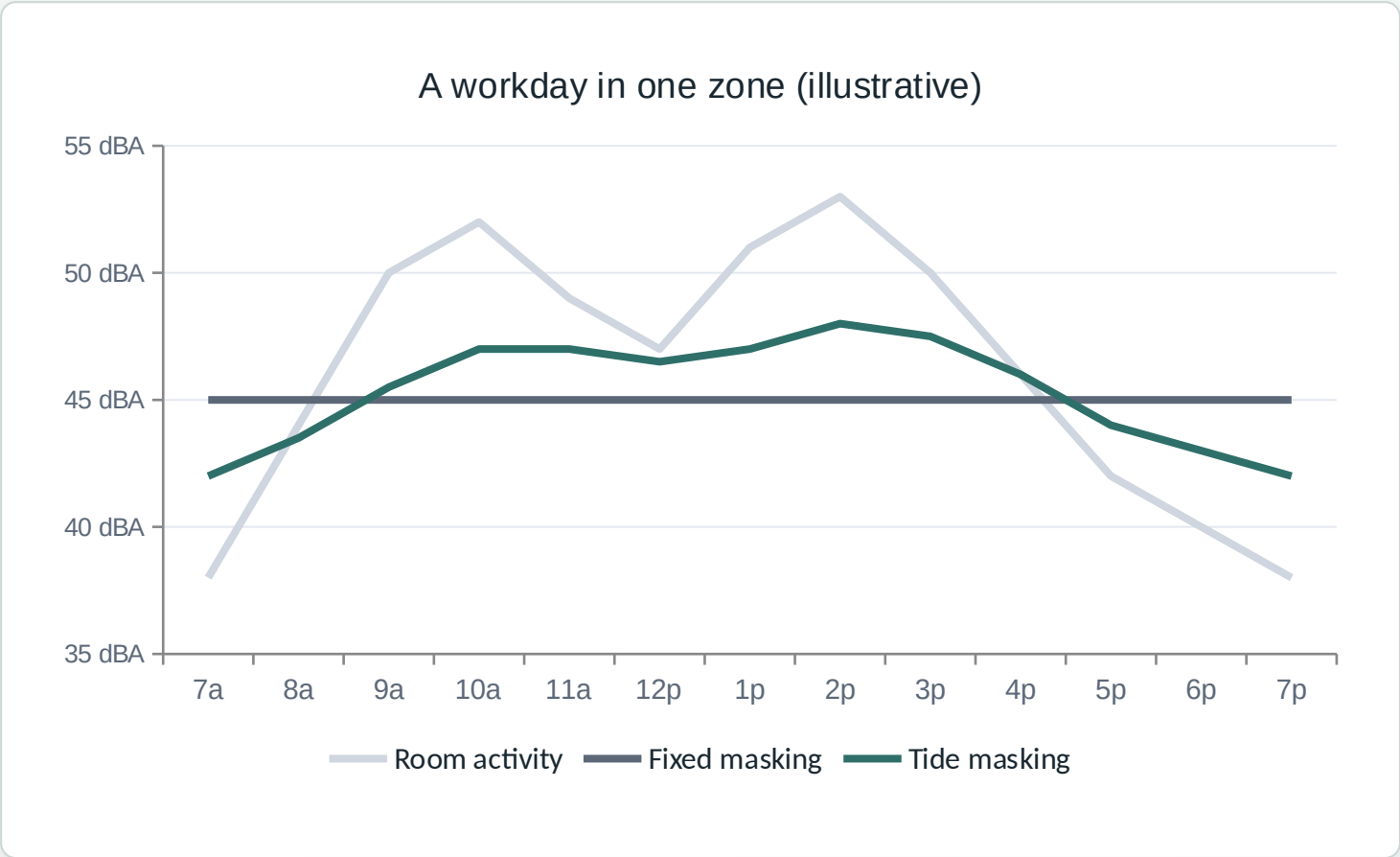
Small speakers in or on the ceiling plane facing into the space. Generally more uniform and controllable, and works with open ceilings, with visible devices.

The right choice depends on the ceiling, architecture, budget and the uniformity required.

Commissioning checklist

- ✓ Measure the background with masking off, so everyone knows what HVAC contributes
- ✓ Tune each zone to the target spectrum, not just the dBA number
- ✓ Check uniformity near walls, columns and transitions
- ✓ Listen: if you can locate a speaker by ear, adjust
- ✓ Ramp up gradually over days or weeks in occupied spaces
- ✓ Document by zone and revisit after occupancy

The Tide Principle





Quiet morning
Settles low, so no one notices it.



Busy afternoon
Rises so conversations stay covered.



Always in bounds
Inside set limits, changing too slowly to hear.

Getting the Tide Right



Sense each zone

Sensors measure ambient conditions where people actually are, not one reading for the whole floor.



Set the shoreline

A floor and a ceiling around the design target, for example 42 to 48 dBA around 45.



Move slowly

Changes of a small fraction of a decibel per second, so occupants never hear a shift.



Verify and log

Measure it like any fixed system, and keep a history to see how zones behave over time.



Done poorly, a system that chases every noise becomes the distraction. Clear limits and slow rates are what make it disappear.

The Most Expensive Myths



"Quiet is private."



Silence makes speech easier to understand.



"Masking is just white noise."



It is a shaped, tuned, measured spectrum.



"Masking reduces echo."



Reverberation is controlled with absorption.



"We'll just use the HVAC."



It varies with load, has the wrong spectrum and often tones.



"STC 50 walls guarantee privacy."



Not with an undercut door, a shared plenum and a silent corridor.



"Privacy Index 80% is confidential."



Under ASTM E1130, 80% is normal. Confidential is 95%.

PART 2

Legal, Space by Space

Law firms and courthouses: what is at stake, where speech leaks, and the quick fix

Two Jobs: Protect Confidences, Protect the Client Relationship



Confidentiality

ABA Model Rule 1.6(c)

A lawyer shall make reasonable efforts to prevent the inadvertent or unauthorized disclosure of information relating to the representation of a client. Adopted in some form by most states.

ABA Formal Opinion 498 (2021)

On virtual practice: unless it is assisting the practice, disable the listening capability of smart speakers and virtual assistants while discussing client matters.



Client trust

Glass sells transparency

Glass conference rooms along reception say modern and successful. They can also let waiting clients follow a privileged discussion.

Privilege depends on confidence

Depending on the facts, a conversation held where others can overhear invites arguments that it was never confidential.

ABA Model Rules of Professional Conduct, Rule 1.6(c); ABA Formal Opinion 498. State rules vary; not legal advice.

Confidentiality Rules and Acoustics: The Straight Facts



What the rules do

- Require reasonable efforts to prevent inadvertent or unauthorized disclosure of client information
- Weigh reasonableness by factors like the sensitivity of the information and the cost and difficulty of safeguards
- Recognize everyday listening risks, like smart speakers during client conversations



What they do not do

- Set decibel levels, wall ratings or any acoustic metric
- Require soundproof rooms or guarantee nothing is ever overheard
- Make a glass office private because the door closes

Design is part of "reasonable efforts." The more sensitive the conversation, the more the room should do.

ABA Model Rule 1.6, Comment [18] (factors for reasonable efforts). Not legal advice; confirm your state's rule.

Courthouses Are Different



Mask here

- Public corridors outside courtrooms
- Outside attorney-client conference rooms
- Outside jury deliberation rooms
- Clerk counters and self-help centers
- Judges' chambers suites and staff offices



Keep masking out

- The courtroom well and gallery
- Jury deliberation rooms themselves
- Hearing rooms that are recorded
- Rooms with assistive listening or interpreters in use



Sidebar conferences: many courtrooms use a switchable noise system at the bench so the judge and attorneys can confer while jurors and the gallery cannot follow. It is on only during the sidebar.

WHEN THE CASE IS CLASSIFIED

CIPA and secure facilities

Under the Classified Information Procedures Act, classified material in federal cases is handled through the court's security officer and reviewed in accredited secure facilities, not in a firm's own conference room. Those spaces follow ICD 705 construction and acoustic rules.

Cleared counsel still need ordinary offices that protect privileged strategy.

Classified Information Procedures Act (18 U.S.C. App. 3). Courthouse acoustic criteria vary by jurisdiction and design guide; confirm with the court and acoustician.

Anatomy of a Law Firm: Where Speech Leaks



Simplified composite plan for discussion

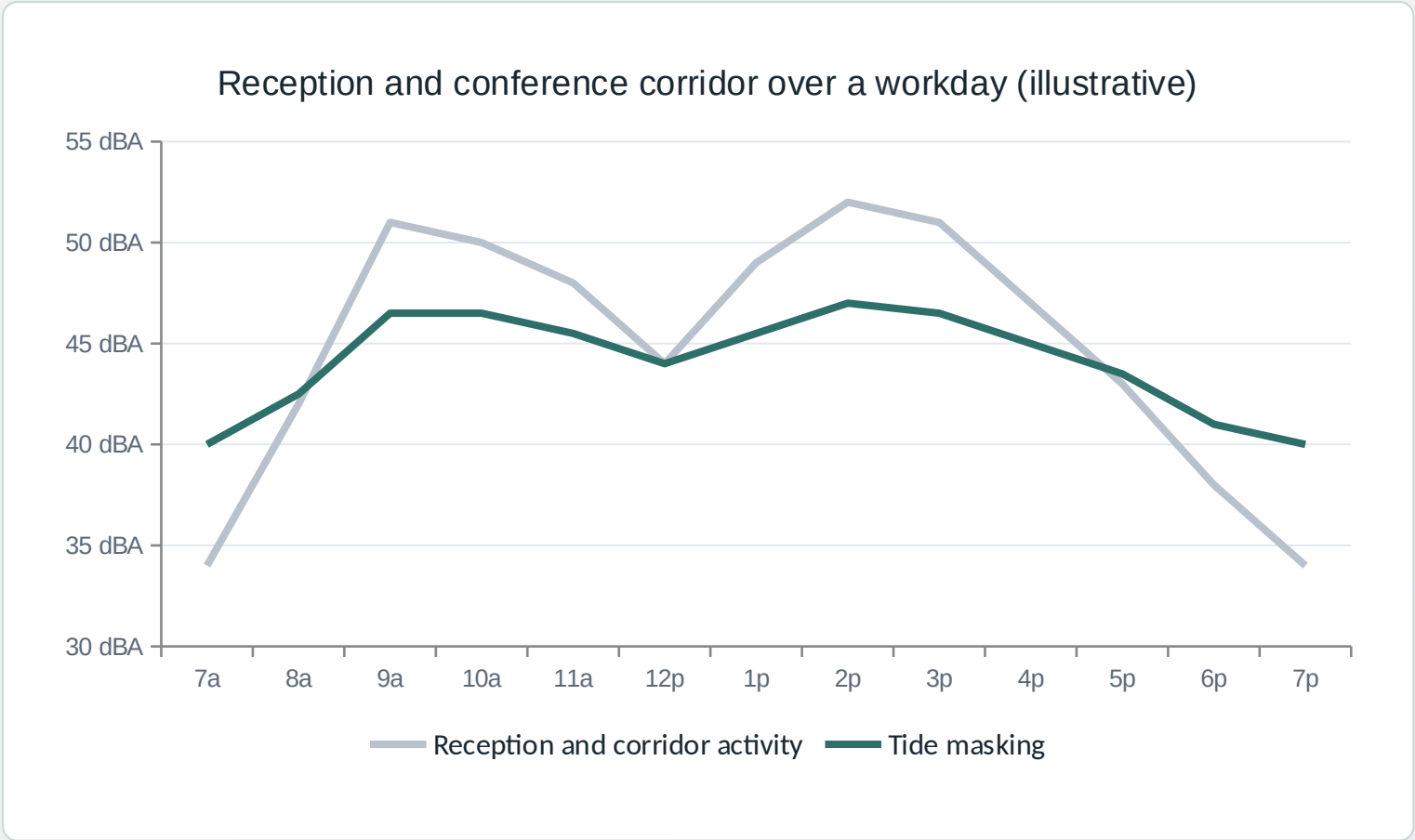
Character, Flaw and Quick Fix

Space	Character	The flaw	Quick fix
1 Reception and waiting	Clients from different matters sit together in a quiet, polished room	A silent room makes waiting clients the audience for everything nearby	Absorptive ceiling, masking over seating, and conference rooms kept off the reception wall where possible
2 Receptionist calls	Names, matters and appointment details confirmed out loud	Every waiting client hears who else is a client, and why	Position the desk away from seating, add absorption, mask the waiting area
3 Glass conference rooms	Showpiece rooms along reception or the main corridor	Leaks at mullions, door gaps, and the plenum above a wall that stops short	Tested glass with sealed joints, walls to deck, gasketed doors, masking on the listening side
4 Attorney offices	Private offices on a shared corridor, often with walls to the ceiling	Shared plenum and undercut doors carry calls to the next office	Plenum barriers or walls to deck, solid gasketed doors, masking in offices and corridor

Character, Flaw and Quick Fix

Space	Character	The flaw	Quick fix
5 Paralegal and assistant area	Open workstations handling client documents and calls	Client names and case facts carry across the floor	High-AC ceiling, panel absorption, masking tuned for the open area
6 Mediation and deposition rooms	Opposing parties in adjacent caucus rooms; recorded testimony	A caucus overheard next door can change a negotiation	Closed-room construction between caucus rooms, mask the corridor, no masking in recorded rooms
7 Phone and video call rooms	Small booths for confidential calls	Fans inside, air paths out, placed next to busy areas	Tested booths or built rooms, sealed doors, masking outside, located away from reception
8 Staff workroom and copy area	Casual conversation about matters over the copier	Often shares a wall or door with reception or conference rooms	Separate it from client areas, solid door, absorption inside

The Tide in a Firm: A Day of Meetings



9 am client arrivals

Reception fills; masking rises so waiting clients are not the audience.



Afternoon meeting block

Holds near its upper limit around the conference rooms.



Evening prep

Settles to its floor, still covering the late call from the partner office.

The Quick Recipe for Legal Speech Privacy



Map the conversations

Which rooms host privileged discussions, and what is on the other side of each wall and glass front?



Absorb

Absorptive ceilings everywhere, discreet panels inside conference rooms.



Block

Conference and partner offices: walls to deck, tested glass, sealed doors.



Cover

Masking in reception, corridors and offices around conference rooms.



Let it tide

Adaptive masking with set limits around reception and the conference corridor.



Respect the exceptions

No masking in courtrooms or recorded rooms; switchable sidebar noise at the bench.

Traps We See in Legal Projects



Believing glass offices are private because the door closes

Check the gaps: mullions, door bottoms, transoms and the plenum above.



Masking inside courtrooms

Judges, jurors, reporters, recordings and assistive listening all need clear speech.



Overlooking the reception desk

Receptionists confirm names and matters out loud to a room full of clients.



Forgetting listening devices

Smart speakers and always-on assistants in offices and conference rooms create their own exposure.

From the Field: A Denver Law Firm



The situation

A firm moved into a sleek office full of glass-walled conference rooms. Sensitive case discussions could be heard in adjacent offices and by clients waiting nearby.

The change

Masking was designed for the areas around the conference rooms, the surrounding offices and corridors, so the background on the listening side supported the glass. Light music was added to the waiting area on its own zone.

The result

"The partners said they could have candid discussions with clients again, and that it added to the professionalism of the office."

WORTH KNOWING

Mask the listening side

The conference room itself needs clear speech for the people inside and for remote participants. The privacy comes from the construction plus the background in the offices, corridor and reception on the other side of the glass.

SPC for a glass room improves when the corridor background improves.

Questions for Your Next Legal Design Meeting



Which rooms host privileged conversations, and what is on the other side of each wall and glass front?



Do glass systems have tested ratings, sealed joints, and walls or barriers to the deck?



Can a client in reception hear the receptionist's calls or the nearest conference room?



Are mediation caucus rooms separated by closed-room construction?



In courthouse projects, are courtrooms and recorded rooms excluded from masking, and is a sidebar system included?



Which zones should tide, and who will verify performance after move-in?

Key Takeaways



Quiet is not private

Privacy is the relationship between the speech that arrives and the background at the listener.



Use all three tools

Absorb, Block and Cover work as a system, and the ratings tell you whether they are working.



Know where the firm leaks

Reception, glass conference rooms and attorney offices on shared corridors need attention first.



Mask the listening side, and let it tide

Masking around rooms, never inside courtrooms or recorded rooms, rising and settling with the day.

Questions?

Thank you for spending the hour with us.

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LET'S TALK

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Email Alex

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Book a lunch and learn for your team.