Defining the Acoustic Environment of (semi-)open Plan Offices

Acoustic Measurements leading to Activity Based Design for retrofit Buildings

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ABSTRACT

Before creating a new activity based design in retrofit buildings the existing acoustic environment is being carefully measured. Not only the acoustic conditions of the existing building are being measured on the field of room acoustics and building acoustics (according to ISO 3382 for room acoustics, ISO 3382-3:2012 for room acoustics in open plan offices and NEN 5077 for sound insulation), as a very important input for defining the acoustic environment the actual behaviour of people is being measured as well. During a representative week of working hours, the sound levels are being monitored at different locations in the open plan office. To gather information about the character of the sound, sound fragments are as well being recorded based on a trigger level.
Defining the acoustic environment of (semi-)open plan offices based on measurements provides a good starting point for redesigning a diversity of office environments. Often the new design leads to activity based office plans, where the different activities are carefully projected in a (semi-) open plan office. Practical measurement data of office noise levels are being presented and analysed.

1. INTRODUCTION

Working in an office environment includes many different activities. Communication on the phone, social interaction and meetings produce not only sound, but are also in need of a good speech intelligibility and therefore in need of good room acoustics. Difficult performance tasks implicate different acoustic conditions. Areas with a more silent environment are needed so there's a minimised level of distraction from surrounding activities. In the same office environment there is also a need for areas with a high level of interaction for the purpose of teamwork. Because the different activities ask for specific acoustic conditions, the existing acoustic environment is first being mapped before creating a new office environment in an existing retrofit building.

2. STATE OF ART

The ISO 3382-3 [1] norm provides guidelines for measuring building characteristics for open plan offices. An important statement is that concentration and privacy start to improve rapidly where the speech transmission index falls below 0,50. The negative effects of speech on work performance disappear if the STI is below 0,20. This statement is reinforced by Jahncke, Hongisto and Virjonen where the effects of speech intelligibility have been studied for different office tasks. This work demonstrates that attempts to minimize speech intelligibility will yield increases in cognitive performance with a varying degree, depending on the type of focus task.

The corresponding distance to a STI below 0,50 is defined as the *distraction distance* r_D. The corresponding distance to a STI below 0,20 is defined as the *privacy distance* r_P. This distance is the distance between the receiver and the speaker. The distraction distance is defined based on STI measurements combining the receiver levels of speech $L_{p,A,S}$ and the levels of background noise levels $L_{p,A,B}$. The built environment of the office without the existing background noise levels can be defined by the spatial decay rate of A-weighted SPL of speech $D_{2,S}$. The roomacoustic properties of an open plan office can be defined by measurements as well as by predictions using computer modelling , Error: Reference source not found. Keränen and Hongisto present a regression model for predicting the spatial decay. Their research has shown an acceptable prediction accuracy for most practical purposes.

2.1 Office noise levels

However, the actual behaviour of people and how many people are talking at the same time is often not taken into account in defining the acoustic environment. The effects of unattended speech of performance and subjective distraction have recently been studied by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health and the University of Turku . The speech conditions differed in terms of the degree of absorption, screen height, desk isolation and the level of masking sound. The actual sound level of the unattended speech is not taken in account as such, but can be regarded as varied in the distance to the receiver (2 to 6 meter). For all situations the distraction was rated higher for the nearby speech as opposed to the speech heard from a further distance. However, this result has to be seen as a combination of a level increase and an increase of intelligibility and cannot be used as an evaluation of purely the effect of the sound levels. In 2005 Chigot presented an overview of 11 abstracts on the topic of effects of sound in offices - subjective experience versus objective assessment . Besides parameters as 'satisfaction with privacy' the sound level is often mentioned in relation to an increase of subjective workload and a decrease of cognitive performance in memory tasks . As an important comment on the research of Tang , Chigot mentions that $L_{A,eq,\,5\,min}$ correlates the best with human auditory sensation.

In 1978, interesting information was published about office noise levels in the Acoustical Designing in Architecture . A comprehensive survey of the noise in several thousand locations was conducted by the Bell Telephone Laboratories in order to determine typical noise conditions indoors and outdoors. The noise levels are a combination of three broad classifications: people, machinery and outdoor sources. For 45 per cent of the business locations people were the predominant source of noise, followed by machinery in 25 per cent of the locations and outdoor sources in 30 per cent of the locations.

2.2 Office types, acoustical conditions and performance

Modern day offices or not designed and used according to a standard format with fixed workplaces in cellular offices. Because of new ways of work, based on more flexibility, new office environments are being realised in existing buildings as retrofit projects. These days it is seldom found that new offices are being built, so new office environments can be created from scratch. In The Netherlands a lot of the existing office buildings are made ready for refurbishment within the retrofit building. The pattern of the office lay-out and the use of workspaces is no longer set as a regular pattern with fixed working spaces within cellular offices.

De Croon, Sluiter, Kuijer and Frings-Dresen state in that conventional and innovative office concepts can be described according to three dimensions: 1. the office location (e.g. telework office versus conventional office), 2. the office lay-out (e.g. open lay-out versus cellular office), 3. the office use (e.g. fixed versus shared workplaces). A systematic review of

literature between 1972 and 2004 provides strong evidence that working in open workplaces reduces privacy and job satisfaction. Limited evidence is available that working in open workplaces intensifies cognitive workload and worsens interpersonal relations. Close distance between workstations intensifies cognitive workload and reduces privacy and desk-sharing improves communication.
In 2009 the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health and the University of Turku in Finland performed a longitudinal study during relocation on the effects of the acoustic environment on work in private office rooms and open plan offices . The aim was to determine how the perceived work environment - especially acoustic environment - and its effects differed in private office rooms as opposed to open-plan offices. The article states that the results suggest that the open plan office is not recommended for professional workers.

3. EXPERIMENTS

3.1. Equivalent sound levels in modern day offices

In nowadays offices we have collected a lot of data of noise levels in our measurements in open plan office floors. During a representative week of working hours, the equivalent noise levels $L_{A,eq,5min}$ have been measured in different buildings with different types of workplaces. All measurements were conducted in open plan offices (> 10 desks) for one working week from 9 to 5. The data for offices with mixed tasks was collected from 8 different office buildings with 2 or 3 monitoring positions per building (in total 20 measurement positions). The remaining data in the histogram was collected from 1 or 2 buildings for the specific office tasks (engineering, programming, governmental advisors) with 2 or 3 monitoring positions per office building.
To make a comparison of the sound levels through history the measured data is presented in figure 1. We conclude that the levels of modern day offices are substantially lower compared to those in the seventies of the twentieth century. The old fashioned loud typing machinery and hard acoustic environments will probably have a cause in this.

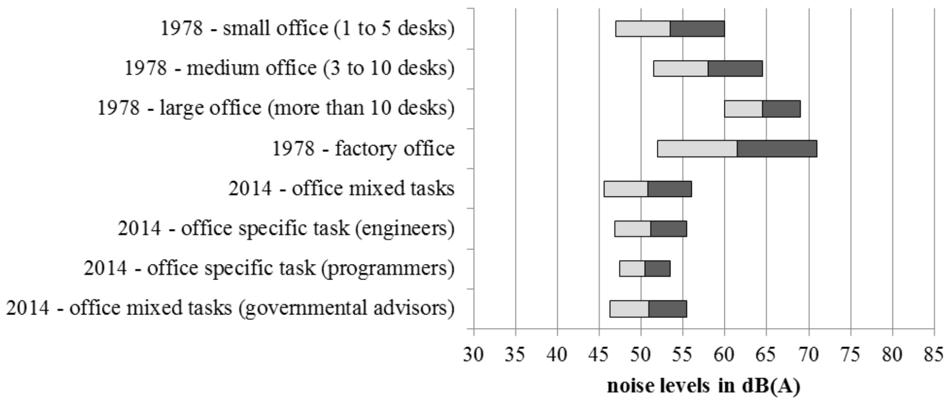

Figure 1. Noise level data (mean value -/+ standard deviaton), comparison data 1978, United States of America, D.F. Seacord [1] and data 2014, The Netherlands, M+P

In figure 2 the noise levels in modern day offices in The Netherlands measured by M+P are presented in a histogram. The curve of the histogram shows the curve of a normal distribution. The main characteristic is that all measurements have a mean value of 50 to 51 dB(A). The difference is especially noticed in the standard deviation. Specific office tasks like computer programming and engineering tasks show a smaller standard deviation (3-4 dB) compared to the mixed tasks (5 dB) as shown in figure 1 and 2 for modern day offices.

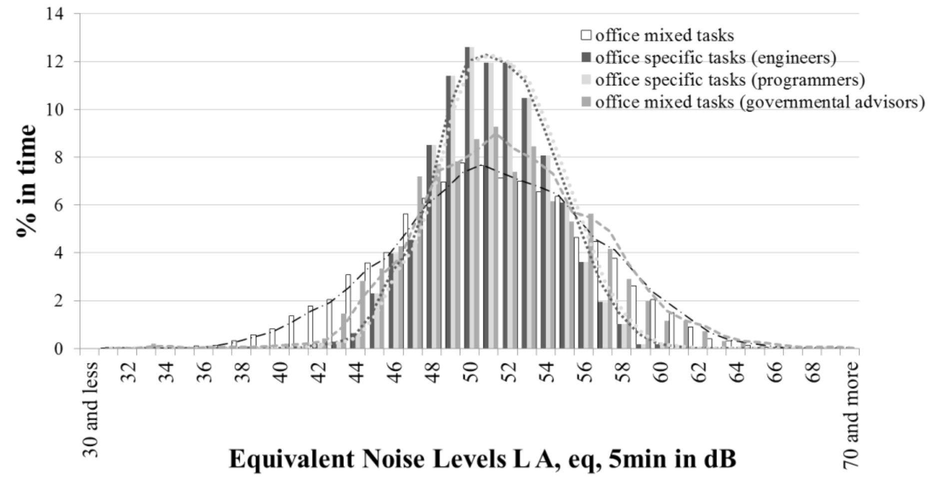

Figure 2. Histogram noise level in modern day offices measurement data M+P

3.2 Designing (semi-) open plan offices in retrofit buildings

It is important to define the existing office environment before starting a new office floor design. The variation can be found in office design, room acoustics and building acoustics and the activities of the workers. In table 1 variations with associated parameters and choices are stated for defining the (acoustic) environment based on the experience of engineering of M+P for Dutch offices.

Table 1. Defining the variations with associated parameters for defining the (acoustical) environment

	Variation	Choices	Acoustical parameters
Office design	LAY-OUT	open / semi-open / closed	-
	USE	permanent versus flexible (desk-sharing)	-
	TYPE	mixed or activity based	-
Measurements room acoustics and building acoustics	ABSORPTION/ AVOID REFLECTIONS	ceilings, wall panels, furniture, interior elements	reverberation time T spatial decay $D_{2,S}$ STI
	ROOM INSULATION	walls, ceilings, floors, facades, doors, windows	sound insulation $D_{nT,A}$
	SCREENS	screens, walls, rooms, cabinets	spatial decay $D_{2,S}$ STI
	INSTALLATIONS	ventilation principles, masking systems	background noise $L_{p,A,B}$ STI/SNR
Measurement behavioural acoustics	-	-	sound level (L_{max}, L_{eq}) recording wave-files (defining sound source, type of sound)

Based on the measured noise levels in modern day office buildings the needed distances have been calculated for the design of new office environments. Supposed are a background noise level of 40 dB(A), a signal to noise ratio for speech of 3 dB and a spatial decay of 8 dB. These values are set as quite representative for modern Dutch office design as seen as in figure 3.

Figure 3.Modern modern day office in The Netherlands (semi-open, activity based)

4. RESULTS

For open plan office environments we recommend a semi-open structure which provides some screening and divides different areas in the working space. This results in a corresponding spatial decay of about 8 dB assuming that acoustic absorption is provided in ceiling and/or wall absorption. Another possibility is to create zones varying from silent to more interactive. Activity based work provides the possibility of reducing the design distance between work departments (working groups) as seen in figure 4. The bars corresponding to specific office tasks show a smaller standard deviation. Because of this a much smaller design distance is required. To achieve a distraction distance r_D (STI < 0.50 for 98% in time, a design distance is needed of about 23 meters in a mixed tasks office. In a specific task office this distance decreases to about 17 meter.

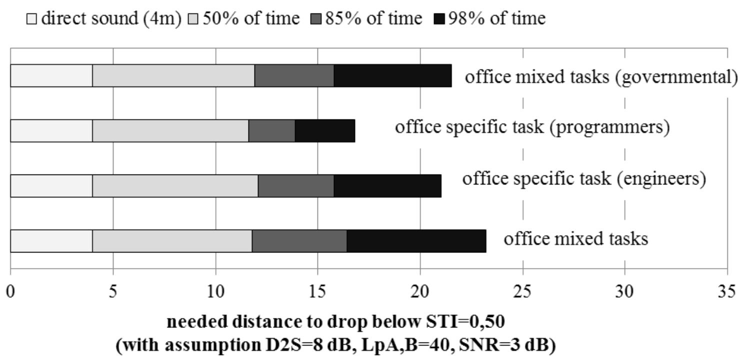

*Figure 4.Needed distance for STI to drop below 0,50 (distraction distance r_D) for different design criteria (98% of time corresponding to mean value+2*st.dev. 85% of time corresponding to mean value+1*st.dev. or 50% of time corresponding to the mean value of measured noise levels)*

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