

Sound Masking FAQ

How does sound masking work?

If you recall your high school physics class, sound energy travels in waves and is measured in frequency (Hz) and amplitude (dB). By pressurizing a space with frequencies the same as those of human speech, the sound waves of speech are jumbled and conversations outside an immediate radius become unintelligible.

How does sound masking differ from white noise?

Audio engineers have categorized different types of sound with color. White noise contains all audible frequencies and includes many of the sounds we hear on a daily basis — but not necessarily the pleasant ones. White noise tracks have a static-like hissing quality.

Pink noise is similar, but its amplitude decreases at a steady rate as frequency increases. This noise pattern sounds like a “Sshhh,” which many listeners find to be more balanced and pleasant than white noise.

Traditional office sound masking systems from the 1970s used white noise, thus creating the connection between the two. Today, most sound masking systems use variations of pink noise as it is far more targeted to mask human speech.

Does listening to sound masking all day have negative health effects?

Modern sound masking systems that use pink noise (or similar) at a reasonable decibel level do not have negative health effects. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) sound guidelines warn against prolonged exposure to sound of 85 dB or more, which sound masking systems should never reach.

For reference, a whisper is 30 dB, city traffic is 90 dB, and a rock concert is 120 dB. Human speech hovers around 60 dB, and most office managers set their sound masking systems at a similar level.

Not only is sound masking not detrimental — it’s beneficial. Studies have shown that engineered noise can actually improve memory and concentration in addition to acoustic privacy.

How should I introduce sound masking to my office and employees?

Before your installation, take note of key noise metrics throughout the office. For example, from how many feet away can you hear your coworkers’ conversations? This will be important in providing proof of efficacy to your employees.

For some individuals, change is unwelcome — even if it could be helpful in the long run. For best results, schedule your sound masking installation before a holiday, or for a Friday afternoon. When employees enter the building Monday morning, they will only hear a slight difference in the overall sound of the office. To many individuals, a new sound masking installation sounds like the HVAC system is running a little louder than usual.

Some employees will adjust immediately, while others may report that the noise is distracting. For the latter, recall for them the previous lack of acoustic privacy in comparison to the current set up. Has the distance from which you can hear a conversation decreased? Monitor your sound masking for 30 days to fully assess its efficacy. Sound masking systems are adjustable; Reach out to your installer with any questions.