

Open Offices & Speech Privacy

Why a balanced approach of absorption, blocking, and masking is essential.

Customer resource • factual guide • Vancouver / BC commercial project context

Key takeaway: Open-office privacy is not created by one product. Speech privacy depends on reducing how far intelligible speech travels through a balanced mix of absorption, blocking, layout, and sound masking.

Why speech is different from general noise

Speech carries information	Even moderate-volume conversations can be distracting when words are understandable. The goal is usually not silence; the goal is lower intelligibility at normal working distances.
A quieter room is not always more private	Adding absorption can reduce overall noise and improve comfort, but it may also make distant speech easier to notice if the background sound becomes too low. That is why masking is often paired with absorption.

The ABC approach

A — Absorb	Use ceiling absorption, wall panels, baffles, soft furnishings, and absorptive finishes to reduce reflected speech and overall buildup.
B — Block	Use workstation screens, partial-height barriers, enclosed rooms, doors, seals, and layout distance to interrupt direct sound paths.
C — Cover / Mask	Use a professionally tuned sound masking system to add a consistent, comfortable background sound shaped around speech frequencies.

Design priorities

Zoning	Separate open office zones, focus areas, meeting rooms, reception, corridors, and support spaces. Different areas can require different masking levels and spectra.
Ceiling strategy	Open ceilings, hard lids, acoustic tile ceilings, exposed ductwork, and low plenum heights can lead to different masking speaker approaches.
Behaviour and policy	Small rooms for calls, etiquette guidance, and adjacency planning remain important. Acoustics reduces risk; it does not replace operational policy.

Useful checks before material selection

1	Identify which conversations must remain private and from whom.
2	Review workstation height, ceiling type, carpet or resilient flooring, exposed surfaces, and HVAC noise.
3	Confirm whether meeting rooms need isolation, masking outside the room, or both.
4	Coordinate masking zones with the reflected ceiling plan, IT/audio infrastructure, and furniture plan.
5	Commission masking gradually and verify levels after occupancy conditions are understood.

Use note: This guide is intended for customer education and early coordination. It is not a code ruling, engineered specification, or substitute for field measurements where a numeric performance target is required.