

Offices humming to the sounds of silence

MICHAEL LALLO

IT SEEMS like a normal office: fluorescent lights, thin walls and the hum of an airconditioner.

But at the Victorian AIDS Council, that hum has nothing to do with whirring fans. It comes from a \$12,000 "sound masking" system comprising ceiling speakers in each room.

"Before we installed it, there was lots of whispering and 'Please Be Quiet' signs everywhere," says counselling manager Christine Barca. "It could be very unnerving for clients if they heard someone else's voice. It makes them worry about the confidentiality of their own sessions."

The demand for "white noise" systems is booming, driven by new offices with eco-friendly — and silent — cooling technologies. And existing buildings, such as the AIDS Council's South Yarra headquarters, are retrofitting the systems to enhance privacy.

"You don't even notice when it's switched on," Ms Barca says, "but you certainly notice it when it's off because it feels quite strange. Then you turn it back on and you realise it's actually very soothing."

Some say it sounds like a fan, others like an untuned FM radio. Either way, it's only perceptible when you stop and listen.

The value of white noise is well known: it helps drown out other sounds and prevents eerie silences. Many clock radios now include white noise effects, as do dozens of iPhone applications.

As various studies show, we're

most irritated by intermittent sounds, so we can tolerate whirring fans but not barking dogs or pen-tapping colleagues. Even if the annoying noise is still present, however, adding white noise makes it less distracting.

Until recently, heating and cooling systems unwittingly did this in open-plan offices.

Sound-masking works by pumping a general hum into a room from multiple speakers, three to five metres apart, either

in the ceiling or under the floor.

ters in Docklands, where it fitted 4000 speakers. The City of Melbourne's Council House 2, lauded for its sustainable design, uses a silent "chill beam" technology and heavy external glazing to minimise power consumption. Which can make it disconcertingly quiet inside.

"It's the same as when you work late in the office and the air-conditioning shuts down," says acoustics consultant John Alekna, who worked on Council House 2. "Suddenly, you can hear your colleague on the phone and you become aware of all these other noises."

The glass, metal and concrete interiors of newer buildings add to the problem.

"If somebody wants to stand there and eavesdrop, it won't stop them," says Gregory Storer, of Southern Life in Sandringham. "But it does make it harder to hear, which is important for our counselling services."

Soundmask manager Megan Short expects growing demand from cost-cutting businesses.

"We see all these companies going 'Wow, it's so much cheaper to have open-plan offices,' but there are these issues with distractions and privacy," she says.

But Julian Treasure, a Britain-based sound expert, suggests companies consider natural sounds — birdsong or running water — rather than an artificial one to create privacy in workplaces.

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in the ceiling or under the floor.

Graham Alderman, managing director of Australian Sound, says sound-masking systems are increasingly being included in building specifications.

"Most now appear to be in green buildings... previously they've been in courts and anything to do with the legal fraternity, where they try to mask conversations," he said.

This year, Mr Alderman's company won an industry award for its work at the ANZ headquar-