ACOUSTIC PRIVACY FOR PROFESSIONAL OFFICES

Your closed door is not enough.

Speech privacy is about intelligibility, not volume — a listener doesn't need to hear every word to follow a confidential conversation. Here is what it is, how it's measured, and how to fix it.

WHAT SPEECH PRIVACY ACTUALLY IS

It is the degree to which speech in one room cannot be understood in a nearby space — distinct from soundproofing, and harder to achieve than most assume in offices built with lightweight partitions and open-plan layouts. The goal isn't silence; it's to make any speech that escapes the room unintelligible.

How it's measured — the UK & European standards

Speech Transmission Index (STI)	A 0–1 score for how intelligible transmitted speech is, given background noise, level and reverberation. Lower = more private: ~0.6+ is clearly intelligible, ~0.2 and below approaches confidentiality. Defined by **IEC 60268-16 / ISO 9921**.
BS EN ISO 3382-3:2022	Measuring open-plan office acoustics. Introduces the **distraction distance** — where STI falls to 0.5 (target under ~5 m) — plus comfort distance and spatial decay of speech, $D_{2,S}$.
BS ISO 22955:2021	Acoustic quality of open offices — sets the targets a space should meet for decay, reverberation and occupied sound level.
BS 8233:2014	The supporting UK guidance layer for sound insulation and noise within buildings.

Distraction distance < 5 m · $D_{2,S}$ ≥ 7 dB general / ≥ 8 dB collab · Reverberation 0.5–0.8 s · Occupied 48–55 dBA · Masking 300 Hz–4 kHz

WHY MODERN OFFICES FAIL

As buildings grew quieter — quieter air-con, open-plan replacing cellular rooms, carpet replacing hard floors — the background sound that always covered speech was removed, while partitions were rarely upgraded. With little noise to mask what passes through a lightweight partition, the STI between spaces stays high and speech stays intelligible.

WHY YOU CAN'T TUNE IT OUT

Research across 36 office floors and 426 occupants (Yadav & Cabrera, Routledge Handbook of Ergonomics) confirms intelligible speech is the greatest source of office distraction. Speech fluctuates at roughly **4 Hz** — the syllabic rate — triggering an involuntary attentional response your brain can't ignore. Lower the STI and it stops locking on.

THREE WAYS TO IMPROVE IT — ALL LOWER THE STI

01 · PARTITIONS

Block more sound

Full-height partitions, acoustic door seals and careful glazing. The most permanent fix, but the most disruptive and costly — rarely practical to retrofit.

02 · ABSORPTION

Calm the room

Panels, ceiling tiles and soft furnishings cut reverberation and help speech decay faster. Improves comfort, but won't fix the partition gap alone.

03 · SOUND MASKING

Close the gap

A calibrated background sound (~40–48 dBA, shaped to speech) narrows the gap and lowers STI directly. Usually the most practical retrofit — fitted in a day, no building work.

Figures shown are indicative design guidance drawn from the cited standards (several of which are paywalled) and the referenced research, and should be validated against the standards themselves for a specific project. General information about workplace acoustics.