

Shaping Future-Ready Workspaces for 'The Great Return to the Office'

10 months ago



As [Oscar Acoustics](#) has released a new whitepaper, *Shaping Future-Ready Workspaces for 'The Great Return to the Office'*, Oscar Acoustics' Ben Hancock discusses some of the paper's key findings along with some of the highlights from the recent Sound Strategy Roundtable Event.

Q: What was the most unexpected insight you took away from the roundtable discussion?

Ben Hancock: The introduction of 'The Flourish Model' was certainly a highlight. It's an approach to workplace design with three essential pillars: environment, emotion, and economics. For me, it was refreshing to see a model based on a multi-sensory approach to design.

In essence, it's all about creating a space that responds to people's needs. Naturally, the concept of 'Acoustic Zoning' stood out, considering how well our SonaSpray solutions support this model by absorbing sound energy instead of reflecting it. That's crucial for creating environments where both collaboration and focus can thrive. We've recently produced an infographic on this, which explains how the model works.

Q: From the study underpinning the whitepaper, was there a key takeaway that stood out to you the most? Or perhaps one that surprised you from previous studies?

BH: The sheer scale of employee dissatisfaction with current office environments is quite stark. The reported emotional and health impacts of noise in the workplace were eye-opening, even for me.

Our 2025 survey revealed that over half (56%) of corporate workers find their office noisy. A figure that has barely changed in five years (59% in 2019).

Worryingly, only 29% of employees say their office supports productivity or their return to work. Yet, only 3% of companies are actively looking to redesign these spaces.

All this, despite the ongoing efforts of large corporates encouraging 'The Great Return of the Office'.

That's a major disconnect. And companies need to think again.

Not least, this lack of support seems to be affecting employee retention. From our survey, two in three workers aged 25-34 say they would consider quitting if forced to return to the office full-time.

What also struck me was the toll on neurodiverse individuals, who make up over 15% of the UK population.

A significant majority of people with conditions like ADHD, autism, dyslexia, and dyspraxia report their office as noisy. According to our survey respondents, loud spaces can impair concentration (47%), be irritating (36%), and stressful (30%). So, there's an urgent need for inclusive design to avoid sensory overload.

Q: Around 70% of employees in your study said that their return to the office and optimal productivity weren't supported by their employer. Do you have any further views on this or a solution to bridge the gap?

BH: In my view, forcing people back into poorly designed environments after years of flexible, quiet homeworking is likely to be counterproductive.

Lara Milward summed it up neatly during the roundtable: It shouldn't be about mandating a return; it should be about motivating it. And explaining the benefits – collaboration, connection, creativity – then producing an environment that genuinely supports those things.

How? First, understand what your team needs to do their best work, then design your environment around that. Whether it's creating quiet zones, breakout spaces, or collaborative pods, these are small investments with big returns.

Q: How has the whitepaper influenced your perspective on the future of 'The Great Return to the Office'? Any predictions you can share?

BH: It's reinforced my belief that workplace health, particularly acoustic well-being, has been ignored for far too long. But that's changing. People are now far less tolerant of disruptive noise. As we've seen in the hospitality sector, people are talking with their feet and walking out of noisy restaurants. The same thing is now happening in workplaces.

29% of employees are now calling for better acoustic design, and I think this demand will only grow – 1 in 14 (7%) employees we surveyed reported hearing damage due to excessive workplace noise.

If businesses continue to ignore acoustics, they'll see the consequences in poor levels of performance, retention, and recruitment. Every office renovation is an opportunity to tackle the issue.

Q: What do you think is the key to creating an office environment where employees feel motivated to remove their headphones and actively collaborate?

BH: The key is in creating acoustically balanced spaces, giving people choice – places to concentrate, to meet as a team, spaces to unwind and recharge.

However, too many offices still force everyone into the same loud environment. As the data shows, people end up working from home to escape the racket (36%), or retreating into their headphones, which stifles collaboration and team cohesion. Headphone use has nearly doubled – from 23% in 2022 to 41% today. It's also detrimental to more junior staff who need to stay in the loop and are at the stage of their careers where they thrive off mentorship and on-the-job coaching.

The goal should be to make the workplace feel supportive, with 'home-from-home' touches.

Q: Since the roundtable, have you observed any real-world examples of your team successfully transitioning from virtual meetings to in-person collaboration? Any win cases?

BH: Absolutely. Eleanor's point about avoiding 'collaboration in isolation' really resonated.

Since we've moved into our new HQ, we've seen improved communication, fewer missed details, and better problem-solving. Team members who were previously mainly working remotely are now choosing to come into the office several days a week.

Our team is more engaged – you simply don't get that same energy on a video call.

Q: What do you wish specifiers and architects better understood about acoustic design?

BH: I wish architects and designers would fully grasp that acoustics aren't a 'nice to have' – they're fundamental to workplace health and well-being. Architects have a huge opportunity to educate clients about the long-term benefits of sound design. Too often, it's treated as an afterthought. But it matters as much as lighting or ventilation.

Ignoring acoustics is a false economy that can lead to poor morale, higher employee turnover, and lower productivity. On the flip side, integrating acoustic solutions early on creates environments where people want to stay, be productive, and advance their careers.

Importantly, acoustic treatments need not compromise aesthetics. Our [SonaSpray range](#) of acoustic sprays blend seamlessly to complement any design. We've worked on retrofits where acoustics were left out of the initial spec. Thankfully, it's never too late to fix, but it's always better to get it right from the start.

Q: What one piece of advice would you give to employers looking to improve their office sound environment?

BH: Prioritise acoustic design from day one. Don't wait until after move-in day when people start

complaining. Take acoustics seriously as a fundamental element of workplace health and well-being.

Excessive noise exposure has significant long-term health implications and severely impacts efficiency. Developers and operations managers need to look at the bigger picture and invest in acoustic solutions.

Our SonaSpray product can be fine-tuned to absorb just the right amount of sound, creating spaces that feel comfortable- not silent or echoey, but just right. It's an investment in your people and in the long-term success of your business.

Oscar Acoustics' latest whitepaper, Shaping Future-Ready Workspaces for 'The Great Return to the Office, ' is available now. [Download your copy here.](#)