PLANTRONICS®
World Leader in Communications Headsets

NOISE REDUCTION

Reduce noise in the Office

The European Directive (2003/10/EC) on the minimum health and safety requirements regarding the exposure of workers to the risks arising from physical agents (noise) will be implemented nationally by Feb 2006 and will replace existing legislation such as the UK Noise at Work Act 1989.

The primary impact for contact centres and offices with staff regularly on the phone is a change to the permitted daily personal noise exposure. Both upper and lower action levels drop by 5dB, with the lower action level reduced to 80dB(A).

These levels are separate and distinct from acoustic shock & acoustic startle levels. It is still permissible to allow short-term sound that exceeds these levels significantly, as long as the average for the day remains within the specified guidelines.

Research* has shown that on average, 21% of the contact centres currently exceed 80dB(A), whilst 43% fall within 5dB of this level.

So – it is clear that there is a need to resellers to be educating and informing their customers about this new legislation – but where do you go from here?

*Health & Safety Executive (HSE) research in 2001

NOISE ISSUES

Within a Work Envirnoment

The first step required by the Directive is to conduct a risk assessment, and a range of companies provide services which can help do this. It is a specialist measurement process and the result will determine what action, if any, is required within an environment.

If such a risk assessment indicates an agent's average daily noise exposure is too high, a wide variety of actions can be considered. It is unlikely that a single approach will be sufficient; rather a combination of actions is likely to be most effective. This can include reviewing ceiling and flooring materials, desk screening and lighting.

However, background noise level is one of the single most influential factors in overcoming such issues, both by contributing directly to the daily personal noise exposure and by requiring telephone headsets to be used with the volume turned up high to ensure that callers can be heard. Ensuring that background noise is at a sufficiently low level is likely to be an appropriate first action.

In contact centres, and office jobs that are highly phone dependent, it is obvious that a significant source of sound comes via headsets. As such, new products that automatically monitor and limit daily noise exposure from the headset are being introduced.

It is important to fully evaluate such products, due to the complexities of providing such control without negatively impacting speech quality. This is because a typical conversation routinely includes short-term sound level peaks much higher than 80dB(A) or 85dB(A). Unnecessarily limiting such peaks can severely restrict the quality of conversations, leaving calls sounding too quiet or volume levels which seem to 'wander'.
Such *automatic-limiting* products can be an important and very effective tool as part of an overall plan for ensuring compliance.
However, they only control the exposure to noise via the headset. With other sources of sound contributing to daily sound exposure, such products alone won't necessarily guarantee compliance with this legislation.
It should also be noted that such *automatic-limiting* products are not a requirement of meeting this new legislation- it is perfectly feasible to comply with the legislation with existing, direct-connect headsets or existing adapters, combined with appropriate measurement and control of the noise within the environment.
Businesses need to understand these separate issues and evaluate alternative approaches to manage risks.
In terms of the upcoming changes to legislation, it is important to evaluate current noise exposure levels and develop a plan to achieve compliance with the new limits by February 2006.

For further information, please contact your Plantronics Reseller.