

WHITEPAPER

Date: September 2022

FIS ROUNDTABLE 2022

AGILE MEETING PODS: IS ACOUSTIC PERFORMANCE THE X FACTOR?

Until recently, partitioning has been the most popular method of structuring and spacing the office in a desirable layout. An alternative to permanent separating walls, partitioning provides a relocatable substitute.

However, the market for agile meeting pods has rapidly gained traction since the advent of Covid-19. A larger, more practical structure than the office phone booth, the pod is proving itself to be a worthy contender of partitioning. The 'room-in-room' solution provides workers with a refuge for private meetings, phone calls, video conferences, or a private space for tasks which require concentration, or health and wellbeing concerns.

With the growing popularity of pods, it is imperative for manufacturers, specifiers and the market alike to define the motivation driving pod adoption. Was this decision driven by Covid-19, or have employers realised they need to offer a range of spaces for employees to work effectively? The level of acoustic performance required will depend on the answer.

A panel chosen by the Finishes and Interiors Sector (FIS) including acousticians, specifiers, and Design and Build (D&B) contractors, from the relevant sectors came to gauge views on the shift to agile meeting pods in a post-Covid environment and the significance of acoustic performance in the selection of the pod.

- **What is the priority of acoustics amongst other factors when specifying a pod?**
- **In terms of acoustic parameters, how important is sound insulation and speech privacy when specifying and purchasing?**
- **Would a lack of clear acoustic data on a pod affect the decision to specify it?**

Chaired by Joe Cilia, Technical Director of the Finishes and Interiors Sector (FIS), a panel of leading industry representatives came together to discuss these themes, including:

- Nigel Boreham – Owner, Showcase Interiors Ltd.
- Ros Lambert-Porter – Regional Manager/ Principal Associate, Hawkins and Associates
- Peter Long – Divisional Fire and Certification Director, Optima Systems
- Mark Randall – Managing Director, IOR Group
- Ben Southgate – Principal Acoustic Engineer, Sandy Brown
- Phill Banks – Principal Consultant, Spectrum Acoustic Consultants

Introduction from the Chair

Joe Cilia is the Technical Director of the Finishes and Interiors Sector. The highly lucrative sector is worth approximately £10 billion. FIS unites the supply chain by representing manufacturers, distributors, and
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contractors, and supports specification within the sector. In its lifetime, a building could have as many as 30 fit-outs. Therefore, FIS recognises the importance of manufacturing and specifying products correctly the first time to ensure the comfort, wellbeing and productivity of all involved. With the rising popularity of pods, Joe Cilia emphasises the importance of understanding why and how pods are being used within spaces, to ensure the right product is being specified.

Joe began by saying: “The objective today is to really understand whether our view of the market is right, and have we actually correctly identified that there is an issue with specifying pods? We’ve got a great mix of people here today, and I’m looking forward to hearing all of your insights.”

Ben Southgate, Principal Acoustic Engineer at acoustics consultancy Sandy Brown, co-chaired the roundtable. Also representing acousticians; Ros Lambert-Porter specialises in acoustics, having worked previously for manufacturers, and is now a consultant at Forensics and Investigation group, Hawkins and Associates. Phill Banks is a Principal Acoustic Consultant at Spectrum Acoustic Consultants, bringing a wealth of acoustics experience, having been involved in a wide variety of projects covering building and environmental acoustics.

Nigel Boreham, Owner of Showcase Interiors approached the roundtable from a specifier’s perspective, with an interest in finding a way to hold the furniture, fixtures and equipment (FF&E) sector to account in regards to testing and policy. Mark Randall, Managing Director of IOR Group Design and Build (D&B) came with a similar perspective, gained from his business interactions with furniture manufacturers. Peter Long, Divisional Fire and Certification Director at partitions manufacturer, Optima Systems, approached the topic with his knowledge of compliance, and a desire to align the market with this.

The post-Covid office landscape

Joe began the discussions with the topic of the pandemic. “I think that it’s important to first examine the experiences of people moving into pods. Is this something that has been driven by Covid, or does it go beyond that?”

Nigel Boreham, Owner of Showcase Interiors argued that the trends of office design are dictated by the changes in culture. He suggested that the conventional office was driven by hierarchy, but the relaxation of traditional structures led to the ‘open-plan revolution.’

“Prior to COVID, we saw a call for change within real estate teams, about how much there have always been distractions occurring. And that’s about the way people work. It’s the way younger members of the team need to get information. And the fact that you’ve been encouraging people to work anywhere. So, before COVID there was already some discussion around whether employers are providing enough semi-private spaces.”

He continued that throughout the early stages of the pandemic, pods gained popularity due to the fact that they made refurbishments and fit-outs easier. “It was seen as a ‘furniture solution’ which was mobile and didn’t require any construction. A mechanical and electrical (M&E) consultant can plug it in and it’s really quick and easy.”

He also highlighted the shift toward remote and hybrid working. “Since Covid, we have hybrid working and teams are now separated. It might be one week where you are all together, but people are regularly on Teams sessions. So, all of a sudden pods become a method of delivering that private space within an office space that can be dropped in and moved easily.”

Mark Randall at IOR Group added that in his experience, customers are cynical of compliance when buying pods. “We encourage people to look at more than one, because there are two types. One that’s a telephone box, and one that’s basically a room. I think the people are cynical about any sort of ratings these days, given what we’ve been told about carbon emissions in cars and those sorts of things. Because people are pretty cynical, we say, ‘let’s try it, see what you think is going to work for you and then do it that way.’”

Joe Cilia suggested that verification of test data is essential. He asked Mark whether his team test to ISO standards themselves and then present this evidence to the client. Mark replied: “It’s a mixture of the two. Sometimes they’re saying, you want a partition, sometimes you want them in an ideal setting, and you might have to show them some data. Generally, it just comes out with the design brief, but it’s without doubt the fastest growing element of our offer. And in terms of furniture, I would say it’s now become essential to spend.”

Nigel Boreham added that the challenge he faces with clients is that although pods are an integral part of modern office design, clients are not prepared to pay. “I don’t think the race to the bottom in that world has really occurred in the same way as it has for a desk and a chair; and the client will tell you within a tenner what they’re paying for it. And then you have to explain the value of acoustic pods.”

The discussion revealed that despite the steadily growing market for pods, customers do not necessarily understand why they need it, and do not correlate quality with price, which is part of the larger issue of their being cynical of compliance.

The multiple use cases of a pod: how important is acoustic design?

In order for the market to truly understand the value of a pod, its use case must first be defined, to understand which characteristics of the pod offer value, including its acoustic design.

Despite the attention given to acoustics, Ros Lambert-Porter suggested that pods have many uses which are not necessarily sound-oriented. “The majority of what we do is open plan design. What I’m finding increasingly with pods is their use in neurodiversity, and they’re being designed in this way. I’ve done a couple of projects now where we’ve installed specific kinds of pods based on this,” she explained.

“Not only are the acoustics important, but the type of lighting within the pod is becoming important. People like to be able to change the light and the soundscape within the pod. The pod becomes a means of escaping the work environment, and taking neurodiversity within the workspace into account.”

She continued to explain that the research suggests that extroverted people work better in a high-stimulus environment, whereas introverted people require a low-stimulus environment to produce their best work.

Joe added, “With hybrid working, people are being told ‘stay at home to concentrate, come to the office to collaborate’. I don’t know anybody that can work like that. My working day is filled with a whole mixture of things and some things you want privacy and for some things, you don’t need privacy for.”

Ros replied, “Exactly; sometimes you need to collaborate and then you might do a task that involves arithmetic and short-term recall, and then an admin task. For admin, research shows you actually work quite effectively in quite a high noise environment. But anything related to short term recall of words or numbers, will be negatively impacted by noise.”

She expressed the importance of a landscaped approach, so that there are allocated areas for specific tasks rather than allocated areas for specific people, as with traditional office design.

Ros also shared a story about a call centre that she had worked with. “This is an extreme case, but employees were actually spending break times in their car because they needed to get away from it all. So, it’s not just about providing soundproofing; but pods can actually be a safe haven to provide emotional comfort. Sound insulation isn’t necessarily important to those clients, they just need a private space.”

It is apparent that office design has now shifted away from rows of bench desks to a more curated landscape which takes into account the needs of the workforce, where sound design is just one of many factors which play a part in a productive work environment.

The problem with specification

Joe highlighted the heightened concern of compliance and specification, and the ambiguity surrounding acoustic test data.

Ben Southgate strongly agreed with this. He explained: “It was not really until I started getting involved with these products that you realise how different the data is out there. For a project we worked on for a big bank, we were looking at a range of products, and all these different manufacturers had all the data on lighting and sound and on site. There were some pods that said 20 dB, some that said 30dB, or 50dB and others were somewhere in between.”

He continued, “So I’ll start to go around the different showrooms. And you say ‘how does it perform?’, and they’ll tell you ‘36dB’. Okay, 36dB what? That’s if you’re lucky. Sometimes you might get ‘soundproof’, or ‘eliminates sound’ or it’s ‘Class A noise cancelling’. What does that mean?”

Ben went on to express the issues with test standards: “I did some more digging, and some are done in the lab, some are an onsite test, and some are something else. The problem we’re finding is because there hasn’t been a standardised test that works across the industry people have had to resort to doing it their own way and coming up with their own method of testing and they’re perfectly valid, but they’re not comparable. So, I’m comparing apples with an Apple Mac.”

He continued that with the competitive nature of the industry, manufacturers test differently to provide an advantageous result for their product, which presents a significant issue.

Joe acknowledged this, and asked the panel who the customer is. “Is the customer a Facilities Management (FM) company? Are they the architect or the interior designer, or electrical consultant?” He explained that this is vital in providing consistency to the market.

Nigel Boreham replied, "It's all of them. I think the challenge that you've got is that partitioning manufacturers are quite used to being held to be accountable for the claims they make, because of the audience they have. With this formal performance, you know they have tested it but the manufacturers are really good at providing data around the rules."

Peter Long, at Optima Systems added: "These things absolutely need approval and sign-off, but the issue is the difference between a very specific performance and a feel. As Ros mentioned, a sense of wellbeing within a space is a very different product criteria."

Phill Banks at Spectrum Acoustics contributed, "It must be important for the client to have a language or a qualitative understanding of what it is that they want to achieve. And possibly this needs to be made confidential or private, so that their expectations are met rather than having a numerical quantifier. In my experience, people on the outside of this don't have a very good understanding of what it is they need."

Nigel Boreham replied: "No, you're absolutely right, but they use the numbers as a gauge in comparative terms – 'well, that one performed at 30dB and that one did 40dB. We can afford to go for the 40 within our budget', but whether that actually delivers a performance, is a different question altogether."

Phill Banks also suggested that the type of specification needs to be well-considered and clearly defined. "Because I've worked on supplier side, rather than client side, I've seen lots of different specifications. And whether it's an attempt at a performance specification or material specification, you always want to help your client who's a supplier comply with that, but you're often left thinking 'they haven't thought this through.'"

Phill continued, "There are so many parts to discuss: noise out, noise in, reverberation and privacy, and all of those things are combined in peoples' perceptions. But in order to be able to properly analyse and specify to provide these things, they do have to be separated."

Acoustics as a purchasing factor

Ben Southgate asked the panel what part acoustics plays as purchasing factor, and whether it is a main driver, or simply a 'nice-to-have'.

"It depends on the product that's being tested. A telephone pod, for example, people will see acoustics as being really quite important. If I'm being technical, they want to jump in on the lighting in that pod. Other things are probably less relevant because they perceive it as being something you can just jump in and fix quickly as a 10-minute job, but it needs to perform. It needs to perform, and it's a bonus if people aren't able to hear me." Nigel Boreham explained.

He continued, "Also, clients' perceptions of pods and meeting rooms are starting to change a bit. There's more talk about the noise separation between spaces and zones and accepting that there's background noise, so that level of ambient noise is becoming acceptable to some clients."

Nigel went on to suggest that depending on the use case, clients' requirements will vary. For example, he explained that where health and wellbeing is the priority, clients consider ventilation to be the main purchasing factor, which creates a high level of ambient noise. Therefore, sound insulation is not necessarily their main driver.

However, Mark Randall answered that in his experience, the two main drivers in a purchasing decision are a noise level and privacy. “It’s somewhere quiet, essentially, to be able to perform that task, or maybe somewhere to get some personal time, or on a Teams Call sitting at the desk. But it’s absolutely the Wild West in terms of what the specification is.”

He elaborated on the issue: “You have a massively skewed end-situation in the furniture package, because at one end, you’ve got a chair. And let’s say that’s £350. On the other end you’ve got a pod, and that might be £20,000. And they said that you can put an alternative in, if you want. So, you can say, have one of £12,000 or one of £25,000. So, there are no parameters around anything to do with the pods, which makes them difficult to justify to the client.”

Mark also went on to explain that when visiting showrooms, clients often abandon their product criteria, and select products based on aesthetic appeal. Joe suggested that this is part of the wider issue of the lack of standardised testing and compliance, leading to clients choosing products that don’t perform as well.

The solution

Understanding use cases

Joe Cilia concluded the roundtable by stating that one of the biggest outcomes is that the performance of pods goes far beyond acoustics.

Nigel Boreham added: “The energy, the materials, lighting, and ventilation. They’re all important considerations.”

Ben Southgate summarised: “I genuinely think if there was a standard product guide, it’s the sort of thing that we would be propagating to the client and so that you need to look through this because we need to take a journey of understanding what the use cases are, and then the performance specification should really be lined up against this.”

Improving the market

The panel all agreed that there must be a consistent standard which all pods need to be tested to simplify specification.

Joe stated: “Three things came out of Grenfell. Firstly, the need to improve fireproofing and fire resistance. Secondly, the need to change the test environment – at the moment we test imperforate, without the perforations of pipes and ducts, which is particularly an issue for soundproofing. And thirdly, test information needs to be made widely available to improve the market. This will go towards solving the issue of compliance and the cynicism around compliance.”

Education

Joe also stated that the market needs better education. “You’ve got a group of people who are buying and making decisions on things without fully understanding what it is that they’re buying, or understanding how to evaluate the product.”

Summary

While acoustics has a part to play, it is one of many factors which play a part in a pod's performance. Understanding the different use cases will be integral to understanding which factors are relevant to specification.

- Acoustic capability is one factor of a pod's performance, alongside lighting, ventilation, technology, and energy usage
- There are a variety of use cases for pods
- The levels of ambient noise and reverberation become more important when the pod is being used predominantly as a conference booth or a silent workspace
- Although the current lack of acoustic test data does not deter customers from purchasing pods, they are not fully benefitting from products
- Customers are cynical of compliance; improving the verification of test data will help this
- A standardised test must be created to create a comparative benchmark for pods
- New test information needs to be made widely available
- The market needs to be educated on how to evaluate pods, in the context of the environment it will be used in

For further information or for any questions please contact the FIS at info@thefis.org or call 0121 707 0077

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Editor notes

1. FIS is the representative body for the £10 billion finishes and interiors sector in the UK. The FIS has more than 500 members drawn from contractors, manufacturers and distributors of ceilings, facades, partitions, plastering, drywall and specialist interior fit-out and refurbishment businesses.

FIS exists to support its members, improve safety, minimise risk, enhance productivity and drive innovation in the sector. As well as specialist publications, technical support and expert helplines, FIS is a dynamic network that brings the sector together through a range of events, awards and specialist working groups, all aimed at sharing best practice, setting standards and advising Government, that help its members to improve performance and win work. Members of the FIS are subjected to an audit and vetting process when they join and then again, every three years that underpins the values by which the organisation operates. To drive quality and ensure the future sustainability of the sector, FIS is dedicated skills and training team and works with a number of Approved Training Providers to attract new people to the sector and deliver a fully qualified and competent workforce.

FIS is dedicated to collaboration in construction and a proud member of BuildUK, the Construction Products Association and the Passive Fire Protection Forum.

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