Effect of reducing ventilation rate on indoor air quality and energy cost in laboratories

Numerous Computational Fluid Dynamic (CFD) studies have been performed to support innovative approaches to revising indoor air quality (IAQ) standards in laboratories. In a previous study,[1,17] the author demonstrates that a slot bench exhaust system can be an effective and energy saving strategy to control thermal comfort by removing the heat dissipation on the bench top and that this system has a negligible effect on the containment ability of a fume hood located upstream from the bench. In this subsequent case study concerning the ventilation requirement in a typical lab with a high cooling load, CFD is used to focus on assessing both the IAQ and the cost impact of the bench slot system versus a conventional ventilation system on IAQ when the number of ACH is reduced from the typical 12 ACH to 6 ACH. The ability of the bench slot exhaust system to remove airborne chemicals in the case of a bench top chemical spill is examined at the reduced ACH. This paper provides quantitative justification to support the concept that IAQ is not directly proportional to a reduction in ACH but rather is dependent on a combination of factors including the ventilation system design, the control of local conditions and the use of standard operating procedures specific to the laboratory operations. The results suggest that a lower ventilation flow rate can be used without remarkable impact on the air quality in the occupied zone, whether or not the bench slot exhaust system is employed.

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INTRODUCTION

Indoor air quality improvement in the working space has long been one of the most important subjects of the ventilation system designs.[2,3] The air quality in laboratories, in particular, has a profound effect on occupant health since many chemicals used in laboratories are hazardous to the occupants' health. Exposure to volatile chemicals constitutes one of the top health and safety hazards to laboratory workers. A fume hood is often the primary contaminant control device. Fume hoods are designed to capture and exhaust hazardous contaminants generated inside its enclosure by extracting air from the back of the hood to the out-

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side of the building. Well developed standard operating procedures (SOPs) for the use of flammable and toxic chemicals in the fume hood are essential in the laboratory setting. SOPs reduce the risk of laboratory worker exposure to these hazardous chemicals. Meanwhile, procedures involving non-toxic or low toxic chemicals are often carried out on the bench top. Some chemicals, although non-toxic, may cause physical discomfort of occupants such as skin or eye irritation, unpleasant smell, etc. If these chemicals are spilled accidentally on the bench top, they would evaporate and be dispersed in the room via convec-

tion and diffusion mechanisms. Good Laboratory Practice includes SOPs that address the handling of both toxic and non-toxic agents and what to do in case of an accidental spill. By incorporating safety procedures into SOPs identify the hazards that may be encountered and specify practices and procedures designed to minimize or eliminate exposure to these hazards. SOPs, in fact, can and should dictate the ventilation strategy of a new lab or optimize the efficiency of the ventilation system in an existing lab.

As most conventional laboratories are equipped with mixing ventilation systems, the airborne chemicals would be vented out through the ceiling exhausts. The ventilation system should be operated at a flow rate that can reduce the chemical concentration in the occupied zone to a reasonably low level.

Higher ventilation flow rates in general result in lower average contaminant concentration. In a well mixed condition, the average chemical concentration will be linearly reduced when the ventilation flow rate increases. In typical labs, however, this does not hold to be true

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since the concentration can be quite non-uniform as a result of room airflow patterns, laboratory conditions, contaminant quantities and properties. Using standard ACH recommendations can lead to a false sense of safety and increased energy consumption because some locations may have higher than predicted contaminant concentrations and exposure may depend on where a person is located within the lab following contaminant emission. Taking into consideration that the amount of chemical removed per unit mass of ventilation air can become smaller at higher ventilation flow rate, and that there is an increased cost associated with higher ventilation flow rate, this study examines the need for and the cost relationship of contaminant removal for high ventilation flow to improve air quality in the presence of a bench exhaust system compared to a conventional ceiling exhaust system without bench slot exhausts.

While the bench exhaust system was proved, in a previous study,[4,17] to be able to capture the heat generated on the bench top, and therefore improve the thermal comfort and reduce the annual cooling cost, it is also necessary to access its performance in removing airborne chemicals caused by spill at the bench top. The purpose of this study is therefore to quantitatively compare the removal ability of a typical laboratory ventilation system with and without bench top exhausts at different flow rates when there is an accidental airborne chemical spill at the bench top.

METHODOLOGY

Airflow and heat transfer in rooms are governed by the fundamental conservation law in the form of the Navier-Stokes Equations:

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial t}(\rho\varphi) + \text{div}(\rho\vec{V}\varphi - \Gamma_\varphi \,\text{grad}\,\varphi) = S_\varphi$$

Transient + Convection − Diffusion = Source

(1)

where ρ is the density; $\vec{V}$ the velocity vector; φ the dependent variable; Γ_φ the exchange coefficient (laminar + turbulent); S_φ is the source or sink term.

This set of equations is highly non-linear, second-order partial differential equations for which there is no analytical solution available. Numerical procedure is currently the only way to solve the equations. Among the numerical procedures, Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD) is the most widely used and very efficient methodology to investigate temperature and flow field in rooms where there are many parameters involved.[5–7] In addition, the output of the CFD simulation can be presented in many ways with the useful details of field distributions, as well as overviews on the effects of different parameters. Therefore, CFD is employed in this study,[8] and the turbulence is simulated with the k–ε model.[9,10] The k–ε turbulence model represents the most appropriate choice of model because of its extensive use in

other research applications, such as predicting mixing rate of a jet flow and modeling airflow in urban open space.[11,12]

Two approaches can be used to simulate chemical spill dispersion in a space: (1) the particle trajectory tracking approach, and (2) the concentration approach. The particle trajectory approach is generally applied when the chemical cannot be treated as gaseous. Zhang et al.[13] used this approach to study biological contaminant control strategies in a hospital operating room. This approach involves two phase flow modeling, i.e., the continuous phase (air) is determined by CFD, and the particles are treated within the Lagrangian framework as trajectories. The concentration approach has been used to study the convection and dispersion of gaseous contaminants. Kassomenos et al.[14] used this approach to evaluate indoor air quality in a polyvinyl chloride chemical plant by estimating occupational exposure and to design its ventilation system. Li et al.[15] predicted the flow field and resulting worker exposures when toxic airborne contaminants were released into the wake region of a mannequin. The concentration approach solved the fraction of the contaminant in each control volume using the conservation equation of fraction coupled with the temperature and velocity fields. This approach can provide the contaminant distribution throughout the entire calculation domain. In this study, the concentration
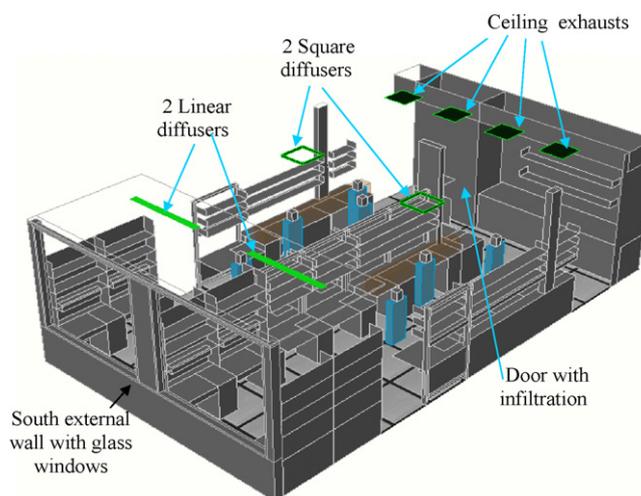
Figure 1. Laboratory layout.

Table 1. 10 Cases with Variation in the Ventilation System and Flow Rate.

Case Description	Total Supply Flow Rate CFM	Door Gap Infiltration CFM	Number of Ceiling Exh.	Total Ceiling Exh. Flow Rate CFM	Bench Exh. Flow Rate CFM
14 ACH	1670	200	4	−1870	0
14 ACH with bench exh.	1670	200	4	−1070	−800 (−200/bench)
12 ACH	1430	200	4	−1630	0
12 ACH with bench exh.	1430	200	4	−830	−800 (−200/bench)
10 ACH	1210	200	2	−1410	0
10 ACH with bench exh.	1210	200	2	−610	−800 (−200/bench)
8 ACH	970	200	2	−1170	0
8 ACH with bench exh.	970	200	1	−370	−800 (−200/bench)
6 ACH	730	200	2	−930	0
6 ACH with bench exh.	730	200	1	−130	−800 (−200/bench)
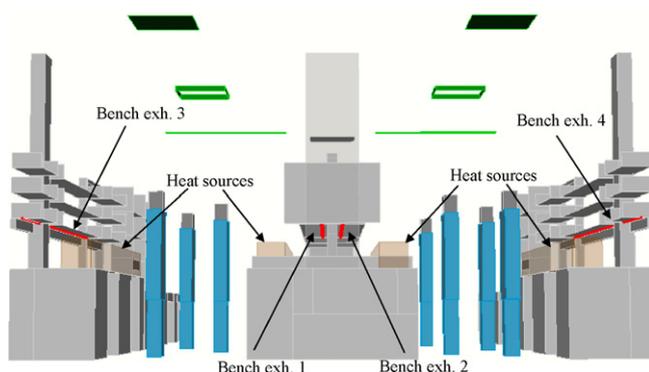
Figure 2. Locations of bench exhausts and bench heat sources.

approach was used since chemical evaporated from a spill at the bench is gaseous.

MODEL SET UP

A generic laboratory with a conventional air distribution system, shown in Figure 1, was used in this study. The same laboratory space was modeled with different ventilation schemes in 10 cases as listed in Table 1. There was no fume hood in this lab. The total heat generation from the bench devices, shown in Figure 2, was 5808 W. The lighting heat sources were 2275 W. There were 7 occupants in the room. The sensible heat from each occupant was assumed to be 80 W. Solar loading from south-facing windows on the external wall was divided as 1160 W transmitted into the room and 1273 W absorbed by the glass and the external wall section. The supply temperature was 11.1 °C (52 °F) for all cases. The

bench exhausts used in this study were continuous slots along the length of the benches, mounted beneath shelves of the bench as shown in Figure 2. Two occupied zones, the walking zone and the bench zone, were defined to compare the performance of different ventilation schemes. The walking zone covers the areas of aisles and the doorways from the floor to 1.8 m (71 in.) above, and the bench zone includes all benches from the top of the bench to 1.8 m high (71 in.), as highlighted in Figure 3.

This study considers, in a steady state condition, the ventilation system performance at different flow rates, with and without bench slot exhausts, in removing gaseous chemical from the room if there is an accidental chemical spill on the bench top. The chemical spill was modeled as a source located at the center of the affected bench, either at Location 1 or at Location 2, as highlighted in Figure 4. The chemical concentration was assumed to be 1×10^6 ppm at the top of the chemical source. The gaseous chemical from the source was dispersed in the room by convection and diffusion and the dis-
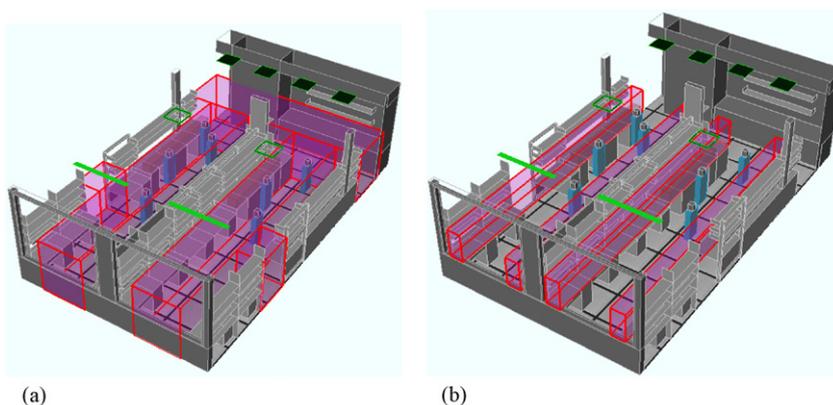
Figure 3. Two occupied zones. (a) Walking zone: defined as the volume of 1.8 m from the floor in the 5 highlighted areas. (b) Bench zone defined as the volume above the bench top to 1.8 m in the 4 highlighted areas.
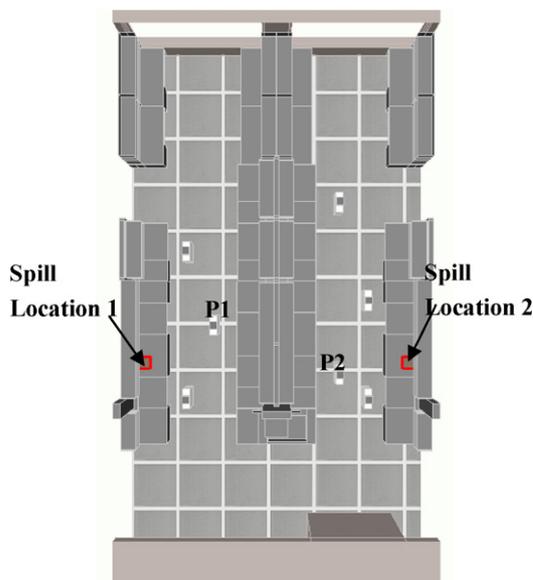
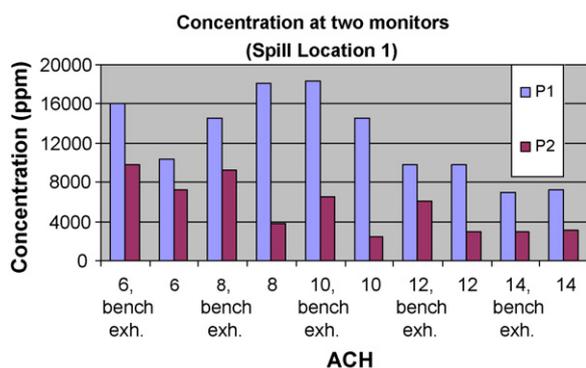**Figure 4. Locations of spill and the 2 positions being monitored.**

Figure 5. Concentration at breathing level of the 2 occupants with Spill location 1.

tribution of the chemical concentration was computed in the CFD simulations. The removal effectiveness of the ventilation system at different flow rates is evaluated and compared.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three parameters are used to assess the performance of the ventilation system at different flow rates in chemical removal: the concentration at selected occupants' breathing level, the average concentration in the occupied zone and contaminant removed by per unit mass flow rate of the ventilation air.

The concentrations at the breathing level in front of two occupants, as marked in Figure 4, are plotted in

Figures 5 and 6 concerning the two assumed spill source locations. The figures show that the concentration at the breathing level of the occupant

close to the spill was much higher than that of the one who was in an aisle away. Comparing 6 ACH and 10 ACH at Position 1 in Figure 5 and at Position 2 in Figure 6 reveals that the concentration was not necessarily lower when the ventilation flow rate increased. When using bench top exhausts in the presence of ceiling ventilation, a lower ACH did not appear to have a significant affect on contaminant removal at these two locations.

To compare the efficiency of the ventilation air in removing the bench top spills, Figure 7 presented the amount of chemicals being removed per unit mass flow rate of the ventilation air. The efficiency of the ventilation air as measured by chemical removal noticeably decreased when the flow rate increased. For example, at 6 ACH (without bench top exhaust) average kilogram of ventilation air removed 0.023 kg of chemical, while at 12 ACH, it only removed 0.014 kg of chemical.

In a perfect mixing condition, the chemical concentration in the room at steady state follows a linear decay when ventilation flow increases. In a transient process of chemical removal, the time required for a given removal efficiency (90%, 99%, and 99.9%) also linearly decreases with increase of ventilation flow rate.[16] However, this does not apply to all cases since perfect mixing is not typically achieved. The average concentration level in the occupied zones with the two spill locations is plotted in Figures 8 and 9. The average concentration in the occupied zone was generally reduced when the ventilation
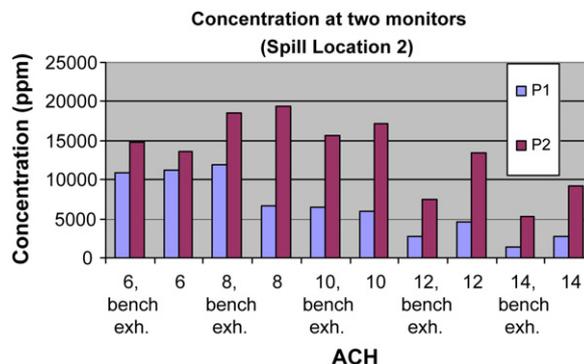

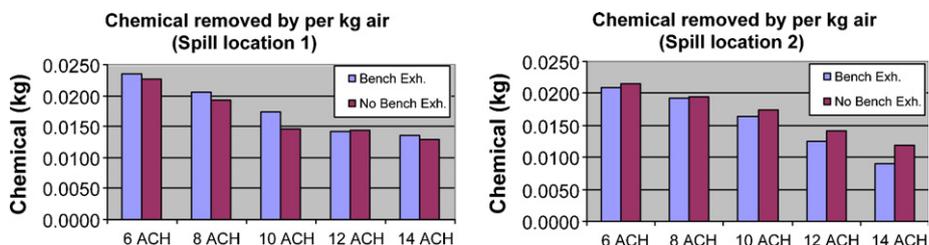**Figure 6. Concentration at breathing level of the 2 occupants with Spill location 2.**

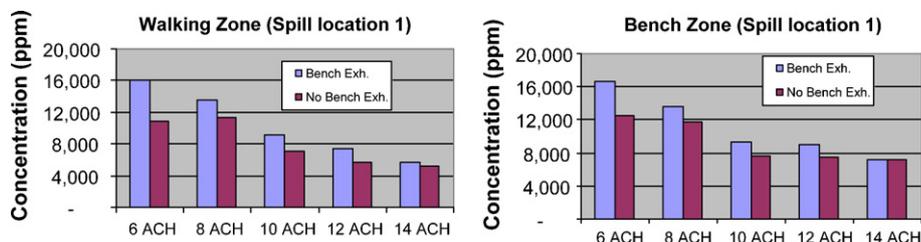**Figure 7. Amount of chemical removed per kg of ventilation air.**

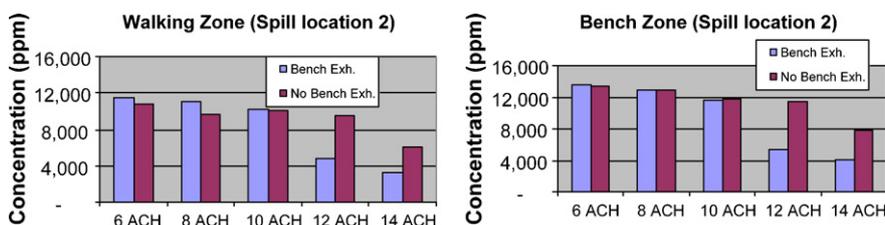**Figure 8. Average concentrations in the occupied zones with Spill location 1.**

Figure 9. Average concentrations in the occupied zones with Spill location 2.

flow rate increases. However, it was by no means linearly decayed with the ventilation flow rate increase, especially for the cases without the bench top exhausts. For example, with Spill location 2, the change of average concentration in the occupied area was unremarkable when the ventilation flow rate was doubled from 6 ACH to 12 ACH as presented in Figure 9.

Our previous study[1] shows that the bench exhaust system at 480 CFM flow had a negligible effect on the hood containment. It also demonstrates that the fume hood greatly reduced the concentration level due to bench top spills since gaseous chemical was less likely to re-circulate and be trapped in the room. It is true that the hood containment is not perfect, and there is always a very small fraction of contaminant mass that would leak from the hood to the room depending on the hood extract flow rate, the placement

of the contaminant source inside the hood, the sash opening size, the turbulence level around the sash opening, etc. However, the contaminant concentration due to the hood leaking decays quickly from the sash opening. Our previous study addressed a scenario in which a bench exhaust system has great potential to improve air qual-

ity by effectively removing airborne chemicals caused by a spill at the bench top. In this study, however, using bench top exhausts does not seem to be as beneficial in removing the chemical spill at bench top. This can be caused by the instability of the flow and the difference in thermal boundary condition assumptions of the two studies, which results in change in local flow pattern. It can also be due to the way the heat generation and the chemical spill were modeled in the two studies. As the bench exhausts were continuous long slots, they well covered the heat sources which were sized for the bench top. The chemical spill on the bench top was modeled as small rectangular surface, therefore, the useful section of
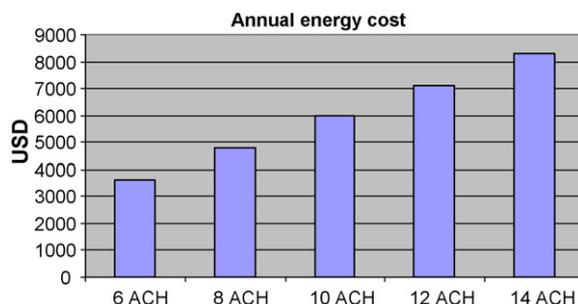

Figure 10. Annual HVAC energy cost for a typical laboratory located in Washington DC.

the bench top exhaust was only a small section close to the spill. In addition, the bench top exhausts could increase the local velocity around the source, resulting in a higher contaminant generation rate.

Figure 10 compares the annual energy costs of different ventilation flow rates for a typical 70 m^2 lab located in Washington DC area. When reducing ventilation flow rate from 12 ACH to 6 ACH, which does not seem to have significant impact on the chemical concentration in the occupied zones in case a bench top spill occurs, a 49% saving in annual energy cost can be achieved.

The main assumptions used in this calculation are listed below;

- The outdoor temperatures are taken from weather data in Washington DC.
- The percentage of outdoor air is 100% for both cases.
- Supply air temperature is 11.1 °C (52 °F) for cooling and 31 °C (88 °F) for heating. The Relative Humidity of supply air is assumed to be 50%.
- Cooling load per CFM is calculated as the difference in air enthalpy when entering and leaving the HVAC system. Perfect duct insulation is assumed.
- Heating load per CFM is based on Dry Bulb Temperature difference of air entering to and leaving from HVAC system. Perfect duct insulation is assumed.
- Humidification load is based on the difference in Humidity Ratio between leaving and entering air.
- Steam load for process applications is estimated to be 10,000 PPH. Plant steam required for generating humidification steam (untreated steam) is 1.33 times the humidification load.
- The cost of electricity is 0.1$/KWH, fuel is $8.0/MMBtu; chilled water generation efficiency is 1.0 KW/TON; fan efficiency is 68%.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering the fact that the chemical operated on the bench top is generally safe, the thermal comfort requirement

Considering the fact that the chemical operated on the bench top is generally safe, the thermal comfort requirement is, therefore, the main concern of a typical lab.

is, therefore, the main concern of a typical lab. Our previous study[4] suggested that, with bench exhausts, the ventilation flow rate could be as low as 6 to 8 ACH to meet the thermal comfort requirement in a typical lab. This system also had a negligible effect on the containment ability of a fume hood located upstream from the bench. This study shows that the reduced ventilation flow rate is also adequate for air quality concern in case a bench top spill occurs without the bench exhaust system. With carefully designed ceiling exhaust locations in the room, the concentration in the space should be sufficiently low to cause any health concern. When reducing ventilation flow rate from 12 ACH to 6 ACH, a 49% saving in annual energy cost for a typical lab in the Washington DC area can be achieved without having a significant impact on the chemical concentration in the occupied zones in the case of a bench top spill.

A bench exhaust system may be beneficial in certain circumstances as it has been shown to be effective in controlling the removal of local contaminants. However, it may not be cost effective in a situation where the use of non-toxic chemical spills are infrequent and the use of well designed SOPs are employed to handle these chemicals.[17,18] Accidents do happen and when they occur, the conventional ventilation design using ceiling exhausts and a fume hood, with 6 ACH proves to be an effective strategy to decrease contaminant concentration and reduce energy costs. Further

investigations may be required on the effectiveness of using bench top exhausts in removing bench top chemical spill. The evidence in this CFD study leans heavily towards using considerably lower ACH in a laboratory setting, specifically reducing the typical 12 ACH to much lower ACH. Using a conventional ventilation system without bench exhausts at 6 ACH provides a cost savings in both design and energy consumption, while also providing adequate contaminant control and thermal comfort for the occupants. Although the evidence demonstrates that the bench exhaust system improves thermal comfort and provides an energy savings, further study is needed to determine and optimize when the cost of a bench exhaust system justifies its use as a contaminant control strategy.

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