

Living WELL with Hearing Loss in the Workplace

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Approximately 18% of Arizonans have at least a 25 dB HL hearing loss in one or both ears. While the overall prevalence of hearing loss is 3.2% for 20-year-olds, hearing loss prevalence nearly doubles every decade of life from the 2nd through the 7th decades. Based on data from ACDHH, 1,145,166 adults, aged 20 or older, experience hearing loss that may be a factor in the workplace. Adults with hearing loss may face unemployment or underemployment. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show an unemployment rate of 42% among adults with communication disorders compared to 29.5% among adults without a communication disability. As an audiologist, I have met many individuals who stated that they retired early or otherwise left the workforce as a direct result of frustrations they experienced in their job. Others have worked in jobs that required skills that were less than their educational credentials or were overlooked for promotions and advancements in their jobs. There are also data that show that adults with hearing loss earn 40-45% less than the national average (Ruben, 2000). However, with an understanding of federal laws that prohibit employment discrimination and the use of Hearing Assistive Technology (HAT) that can provide communication accessibility, employees with hearing loss can be successful and thrive in their jobs.

Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) is a federal law that prohibits discrimination against a qualified individual with a disability in job application procedures, hiring, discharge, compensation, advancement, job training, and other conditions and privileges of employment. The ADA also requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations to a qualified individual, unless the accommodation would cause undue hardship to the employer. State and local governments and private employers with 15 or more employees must comply with the ADA. Reasonable accommodations may include the provision of auxiliary aids or hearing assistive technology and/or workplace modifications. Today the hearing assistive technology that is available to provide reasonable accommodations in the workplace is better than ever before and can make the difference in the success of the employee and reduced frustration in the workplace. However, most employers, including ADA specialists within their organization, are at a loss when it comes to finding reasonable accommodations because they may lack knowledge about hearing loss, knowledge about appropriate hearing assistive technology, and knowledge about how to interface the technology with the employee's existing hearing aids or cochlear implant. Consequently, when an employee makes a request for accommodation the outcome may be unsuccessful if the technology does not match the user's needs in the workplace or it is not a solution that is effective given the degree of the employee's hearing loss or it is incompatible with existing personal hearing devices. A poor match between technology and the user often leads to abandonment of the technology.

A hearing assistive worksite assessment by a qualified professional, preferably an audiologist, is essential in determining the needed reasonable accommodations. A worksite assessment is a comprehensive evaluation of the individual's workplace environment, the individual's job duties, and the communication demands in the workplace in order to determine the appropriate and reasonable accommodations to allow the employee to perform the essential job functions. Because the communication demands of the job and the communication needs and abilities of the employee with the hearing loss are unique to every situation and individual, this is an assessment that should not be overlooked.

In the workplace, hearing loss can affect job performance in one or more areas including difficulty using the telephone, difficulty participating in conference calls or webinars, misunderstanding work orders or directions made in person or via a radio, difficulty communicating face-to-face with customers and coworkers, difficulty hearing during meetings, difficulty using a stethoscope, and an inability or difficulty responding to emergency or warning signals. While this is not an exhaustive list, during the worksite assessment all communication demands and tasks unique to that job must be examined. Physical barriers to effective communication must be identified as well as any attitudinal or behavioral barriers. Information about the employee's hearing loss, as provided by an audiologic evaluation, should be examined to determine the individual's ability to utilize their residual hearing for speech recognition both in quiet and in noise. Finally, the information about the functional status and aided performance with any personal hearing aids, cochlear implants, or other personal hearing devices should also be available or examined. With sufficient knowledge about the essential job functions, the work setting, and the individual's hearing loss, the most effective reasonable accommodations can then be recommended. Importantly, any hearing assistive technology recommended should be tested in the workplace to ensure compatibility with existing equipment, the environment, and to determine its effectiveness for the employee. The employee and/or employer may also require training to use the recommended devices effectively. Additionally, sometimes sensitivity training is needed in the workplace to improve understanding and acceptance of hearing loss and other disabilities as well as to educate coworkers about effective communication strategies.

The depth and breadth of available hearing assistive technology to assist individuals with hearing loss in the workplace is beyond the scope of this article and there is no cookie cutter approach that can be applied to all settings and individuals. However, with the assistance of an audiologist, who is also a specialist in hearing assistive technology, effective solutions can be found. To quote Mary Pat Rorabaugh, "for most people, technology makes things easier. For people with disabilities, technology makes things possible."

The Hearing Loss Association of America Employment Toolkit is an excellent resource for employees with a hearing loss and their employers and is available on the HLAA website here:

http://www.hearingloss.org/sites/default/files/docs/HLAA_Employment_Toolkit.pdf.

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