

Hearing in the Workplace

By Heidi Lovato, Co-Leader, HLAA Arizona Working Adults Chapter

There are many ways hearing loss can impact your life, but your experience in the workplace is one of the more overlooked elements to living with hearing loss. Let's face it, we are at work (at times) more than we are home. Our co-workers often become our second family. Not only are we expected to know and do our job well, but there is also the social aspect with those we work with – the lunch invites or potlucks, after work get togethers, birthday celebrations, etc. It's a place where we network and make new friends – we connect! If you think these integral connections and your hearing loss won't affect your ability to move forward in your career, think again.

Let me share with you my experience in this arena and why you should not feel alone, as I once did. I lost my hearing during a time when my hard work was beginning to pay off - I was "climbing the corporate ladder" so-to-speak when I learned of my progressive hearing loss. I was only months into a new position (going through training), new work environment meant new noises to learn (exhausting!) and new co-workers to lead with very different personalities. Looking back, to say I was struggling is an understatement - I was drowning in grief and loneliness (hearing loss can be very isolating). I needed help, but wasn't sure where to begin or who to ask because I didn't know anyone like me, a person with hearing loss.

I was naïve to think that the answer to my success at work would lie with a simple request for ADA accommodations from the Human Resource department. What happened next is really what threw me over the edge. I was shocked to learn they were looking to me for answers to those questions! Sadly, I had no clue what I needed to be successful on the job - I was in uncharted waters. I quickly learned I was a great advocate for others, but not for myself - and after months of frustration, I ended up quitting the best job I ever had all because I didn't have the knowledge or support system in place. Through all that madness, one thing never changed about me and that was my passion for knowledge and my desire to connect with other people.

Fast forward 5 years later, after getting plugged into the hearing loss community, I am now a co-leader for the Arizona Working Adults Chapter, one of the many chapters of the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) – It's the nation's leading organization representing people with hearing loss. The Arizona Working Adults Chapter is a support group specifically for those with hearing loss who are in the workforce. Some of the topics we discuss are:

- How to be a better advocate for yourself at work
- Assistive technology
- Communication strategies in the workplace
- JAN (Job Accommodation Network)
- ADA in the workplace

Most of all, it's a place where you can find comfort in knowing you're not alone with hearing loss. If you've never been to an HLAA Chapter meeting, I encourage you to explore one. HLAA provides assistance and resources for people with hearing loss. If you're working, come join us as we meet the 2nd Saturday every other month (convenient for the working adult) starting May 13th from 10 am to 12 noon at the Tempe Public Library. It just so happens our next topic will be about connecting with people at work, "Communication Strategies in the Workplace" presented by Michele Michaels, the Hard of Hearing Specialist at the Arizona Commission for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing.

In closing, the most important thing I learned in my hearing loss journey is that you can have a quality life, you just have to regain your confidence by "connecting" by getting plugged into the hearing loss community and its resources and support that is available.

Let's Connect!

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