

Hearing Loss in the Workplace

By Peggy Staples, President, HLAA Arizona Working Adults Chapter, May 2020

Whatever degree of hearing loss you may have and whatever stage you are in with your career, navigating the workplace with a hearing loss can be quite challenging. In fact, it can run the gamut of emotions: anxiety, fear, uncertainty, doubt, frustration -- just to name a few.

As a person with a severe-to-profound hearing loss, my employment journey wasn't always easy. I have only worked full-time for two employers; first for a bank after I graduated from college in a noisy computer operations center. I didn't know the first thing about advocating for myself and bluffed my way through many conversations with my co-workers. I relied heavily on lip-reading and when necessary, asked to have certain things repeated. When I moved to Arizona, I began working as a state employee. During the first nine years of my career with the Department of Education, I worked in three different units and coasted by like I did with my first job at the bank. It wasn't until I began working with the Exceptional Student Services (special education) unit that I began to seriously advocate for myself. Because of the position that I was hired into, I had to learn how to ensure my needs were met in order for me to successfully do the job I was hired to do. I will admit though, it was easier to do so when working with a unit that supports students with disabilities. As a lead specialist I am required to act as a project manager, attend many meetings, present at trainings and conferences, and work with a dedicated team responsible for meeting federal data deadlines. The most challenging aspect of my job is attending meetings. On days where I attend many back-to-back meetings, you will find me taking breaks by talking walks outside. Some of the tools at my disposal are: caption phone for talking to constituents, FM system for small meetings, looped room for large meetings, and sign language interpreters for trainings and conferences (I learned sign language when I was in college). Thanks to the support of my supervisors, I am able to request the accommodations I need to perform essential tasks required in my role as a lead data management specialist. Although my hearing loss still presents its challenges, I have learned the art of advocacy to make it easier on myself and those around me in the workplace.

Hearing loss is often referred to as an "invisible disability," meaning that it is not necessarily apparent to others. It is your responsibility to know what works best for you and to communicate that to your employer. Anticipate problems and seek to minimize them. Do you struggle with talking on the phone? In conference calls? In meetings? In webinars and/or trainings? What can be done to make these situations less stressful?

Ignorance is usually due to lack of understanding. It may be helpful to educate your supervisor and/or your co-workers regarding your hearing loss. Don't expect the people you work with to know what you need. It is important to advocate for yourself to ensure that your needs are being met in your work environment. The more you practice advocacy, the easier it becomes.

In addition, don't forget to practice self-care. Work can be stressful and hearing loss on top of everyday stress just adds even more anxiety. Hearing loss exhaustion, also known as listening

fatigue, is REAL and because of this, it is important for people with hearing loss to find ways to combat by learning relaxation techniques that work for you (i.e., take frequent breaks, meditate, exercise).

Be sure to take advantage of the resources available to you, as there are many.

- *Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) Employment Toolkit:*
https://www.hearingloss.org/wp-content/uploads/Employment_Toolkit-2018.pdf
- *ADA National Network* (provides information, guidance, and training on the Americans with Disabilities Act): <https://adata.org/>
- *Job Accommodation Network (JAN)* provides free, expert, and confidential guidance on workplace accommodations and disability employment issues: <https://askjan.org>
- *Arizona Vocational Rehabilitation Services* provides a variety of services to persons with disabilities, with the ultimate goal to prepare for, enter into, or retain employment: <https://des.az.gov/vr>
- *Relay Conference Captioning (RCC)*, a free service provided by the Arizona Commission for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing (ACDHH) for Arizona residents with hearing loss and used only for multi-party teleconference situations:
<https://www.acdhh.org/telecommunications/relay-services/rcc/>

Lastly, I would like to take this opportunity to promote a resource that is very near and dear to my heart – the *HLAA Arizona Working Adults Chapter* – the first of its kind in the nation. While our chapter welcomes anyone with a hearing loss, our mission is to educate, support, and advocate for individuals with hearing loss in the workplace.

Our meetings are held in the Tempe Public Library in the TLC. This room is looped for people who wear hearing aids and/or cochlear implants that are equipped with a telecoil. Headsets are also available for use if telecoils are not an option. CART services are also provided. We meet on the SECOND Saturday every other month. We also offer social events to promote interaction for individuals with hearing loss. *Note that during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been meeting via Zoom with captions via a CART provider.*

You can find us on Facebook, <https://fb.me/azworkingadultschapter> and Instagram, @azworkingadults. If you are interested in becoming a member or if you just want to check us out a meeting, feel free to email us at azworkingadults@gmail.com.

In closing, the best advice I have to offer is that whatever degree of loss you have and regardless of your employment status, don't let hearing loss stand in the way of life, family or a successful career.