

Hearing loss - workplace tips for managers

Work environments can be adjusted to take the needs of a person with hearing loss into consideration. While specialised equipment is helpful, training the staff in deafness awareness is even more important. For example, most people are unsure of how to best communicate with a person who has a hearing loss. Communication will improve if staff members are shown what to do.

Explain hearing loss to staff

It would be a good idea if all staff members at your workplace are trained in deafness awareness. Professional advice on adapting the workplace and staff training is available from both government and community organisations. It will also help if you explain some of the basics, for example:

- All deaf or partially deaf people have different communication needs.
- People with a hearing impairment do not all feel the same way about their disability.
- Learning Auslan (sign language) is helpful, but its use is only appropriate for people who are completely deaf.
- Most people with impaired hearing will have some residual hearing, but there are no outward signs of how much they are able to hear. The amount they can hear may fluctuate depending on environmental factors and the individual's emotional or physical state.
- Most people with impaired hearing communicate orally. Their individual language levels may not be an indicator of how well they are able to hear.
- People who have had a cochlear implant usually cannot hear anything without the use of their speech processor.

Office set-up

Suggestions include:

- Make sure the office is well lit. Good lighting is essential, both natural and artificial, but avoid harsh lighting and glare. A person with a hearing loss needs to see the other person's face when having a conversation.
- Remove glass barriers, as they can muffle sounds.
- Keep close when speaking. Wide counter-tops and desks should be avoided.
- The person with a hearing impairment should be given an office or working space with minimal background noise.

Safety issues

Suggested changes to make the workplace safer include:

- Flashing lights should be fitted to audible smoke or evacuation alarms.
- Emergency flashing lights should be fitted in toilets and storerooms or areas where closed doors may obscure vision.
- The organisation's evacuation plan should include a 'buddy system', where employees leave the building in pre-arranged pairs.
- A 'visual alert system' such as a flashing light should be fitted on any device that could be a health or safety issue – for example, a light that flashes when machinery is operating.
- Make sure the workplace is well signposted.
- Any information that is given verbally should also be available in writing.
- Use SMS text messages on mobile phones, which are set to vibrate and ring, in emergency situations.
- Use vibrating pagers to alert employees in other parts of the building.

- Ensure that deaf and hearing impaired workers understand all evacuation procedures; it may be difficult to offer reassurance in an emergency.
- Use flashlights to guide deaf and hearing impaired workers from the building if electrical power fails or smoke affects visibility. Keep in physical contact with them until a safe area is reached.

Specialised equipment - the workplace

Suggested equipment in the workplace includes:

- **Telephone typewriter (TTY)** – this device is a small screen and typewriter that is used in place of the telephone handset. The conversation is typed rather than spoken. A person with a TTY can call people who don't have a TTY (and vice versa) by using the National Relay Service. An operator acts as a go-between and relays the conversation to each caller. This is a free service to hearing impaired people and people with no hearing impairment. The only charge is the cost of the phone call. TTY calls can also be made via a modem using a computer screen.
- **Email and fax** – the person could receive and send messages via email and fax rather than telephone.
- **Audio loop** – a wire loop that is designed to encircle a particular area (such as a conference room) and provide amplified sounds to the person via their hearing aid. 'Looped mats', designed to be placed on desks and counters, should be used in reception areas and interview rooms.
- **Volume-enhanced telephone** – this type of telephone has an adjustable volume control.
- **Teleflash** – a light fitted to the telephone that flashes when the telephone is ringing.
- **FM and infrared listening systems** – these have multiple personal receivers that can be fitted with headphones or 'neck loops' for hearing aid wearers. They are versatile and can be used in meetings, at lectures and in training sessions.

Specialised equipment for the hearing impaired person

Personal equipment that may be useful includes:

- **Hearing aid** – to amplify all sounds. This may or may not be helpful, depending on the workplace. For example, if the workplace is noisy, the hearing aid would amplify the background noise as well as people's voices.
- **Pager** – set to vibrate instead of ring. The person can then read the message.
- **FM system** – this portable receiver and headset amplifies sounds without the need for wiring.
- **Volume-control earpiece** – this device is placed over the earpiece of a telephone to amplify the voice.
- **Alarm clock** – set to vibrate instead of ring.

Modifications to conferences

A person with hearing impairment may find it difficult to follow the conversation when there are a number of people talking. Suggestions include:

- Supply typed notes and the intended agenda beforehand.
- Install an audio loop, or other assistive listening devices, in meeting rooms.
- Presentations could include an audiovisual component with printed materials. Printed information or progressive notes can be projected onto a large screen with the use of a data-projector connected to a laptop computer.
- Videos could be subtitled.
- The speaker's face should be well lit.
- Consider hiring an interpreter.

Interpreters can be helpful

In situations where there are mass gatherings of employees, such as conferences or social events, the company could employ the services of an Auslan or oral deaf interpreter. The interpreter will translate the spoken word in Auslan (sign language) and vice versa or 'lip-speak' (repeat without voice) what is said.

Points to remember include:

- Interpreters need to be booked well in advance.
- It's helpful to discuss the event with the interpreter beforehand, and brief them on things like jargon and particular technical matters.
- Everything discussed is kept in confidence. Consult with the Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association for further information on confidentiality and their code of ethics.
- When talking to the person with a hearing impairment, make sure to address them and not the interpreter. As you are talking to them, the interpreter will translate your words into sign language. A deaf person with hearing impairment will then sign back, and the interpreter will relay their conversation in spoken words.
- The interpreter should have regular breaks – for example, a 10-minute break every half hour or so.
- If the conference is lengthy, you may need to book a couple of interpreters and allow them to share the workload.

Where to get help

- Better Hearing Australia Tel. (03) 9510 1577 TTY (03) 9510 3499, Fax (03) 9510 6076, email: bhavic@betterhearing.org.au
- Vicdeaf Tel. (03) 9473 1111
- Victorian Council of Deaf People (VCOD) Tel. (03) 9521 2466
- Deafness Foundation, Victoria Tel. (03) 9738 2909
- Meniere's Australia Tel. 1300 368 818
- National Relay Service (operator assisted calling of TTY telephone numbers, available 24 hours) Tel. 133 677
- Information on National Relay Service Tel. 1300 555 727
- Australian Communication Exchange (for provision of telephone typewriters) Tel. (07) 3815 7600, TTY. (07) 3815 7602
- Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association Tel. 0402 888 560
- Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services - Disability Services Program website
- Communication Rights Australia. Tel. (03) 9555 8552
- The Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital Tel. (03) 9929 8666

Things to remember

- A flashing light should be fitted on any device that could be a health or safety issue – for example, lights that flash when smoke alarms go off or machinery is operating.
- Specialised equipment includes the Telephone Typewriter (TTY), volume enhanced telephone, and personal amplifying devices such as the FM system.
- For conferences or social events, the company could employ the services of a sign language interpreter (Auslan) or oral deaf interpreter. A data-projector can also be helpful.

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