
Hearing loss - communication in the workplace

Summary

- If you have a hearing impairment, it's a good idea to let people know the best way to talk with you.
 - If you're unsure how to best communicate with a hearing-impaired colleague, ask them.
 - Speak clearly and a little louder than usual, making sure your face is well lit and unobstructed (for example, don't eat or turn away while talking).
 - Don't limit conversations to just business issues – social chit-chat is important too.
 - Specialised equipment that people with a hearing impairment might need in the workplace includes the telephone typewriter (TTY), volume-enhanced telephone, and personal amplifying devices such as the FM system.
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If you have hearing loss, communicating at work can be difficult, especially if your colleagues don't know what to do. It's worth remembering that many people who shy away from talking with you are just nervous of making a mistake or offending you. There are many ways to improve communication with your colleagues.

It's a good idea to tell people the best way to talk with you. In most cases, they will appreciate your direct approach.

If you have a colleague with a hearing impairment it can be difficult to know how to communicate with them. The best thing to do is ask.

Explain your hearing loss to colleagues

Your colleagues may know little or nothing about your particular hearing impairment. To communicate effectively with you, they need to know specific details.

Suggestions include:

- Avoid the blanket statement, 'I'm deaf'. Instead, describe the nature of your hearing loss. For example, you might say: 'I have trouble hearing voices if there's a lot of background noise'.
- Tell your colleagues how best to talk with you. For example, tell them it will help if they speak more slowly. Ask them to be a reasonable distance from you and to make sure that their face is adequately lit.
- Ask them to raise the volume of their voice slightly and use appropriate visual cues.
- Ask them to rephrase rather than repeat things you have difficulty with, and write down critical information such as dates, times, addresses, telephone numbers, peoples' names, and amounts of money.
- If you have more hearing loss on one side, let people know which your 'good side' is. Explain that gauging direction can be difficult for you.
- Explain how your specialised devices (such as the TTY) work and let them know if you wear hearing aids or a cochlear implant.

If you suffer from **tinnitus** or **Meniere's disease**, let work colleagues know how this might affect you. For example, you may become dizzy and nauseous and need to lie down. You may not be able to drive or operate machinery at this time.

Learn about hearing loss

Communicating with a colleague who has hearing loss can be difficult when you're unsure of what to do. If in doubt, ask them – they will appreciate your efforts to improve communication. They won't think you're rude or drawing

unnecessary attention to their hearing loss.

If a colleague has a hearing impairment, it can help if all staff members are trained in deafness awareness. (This can be accessed through government and community organisations, as can professional advice on adapting the workplace for people with hearing impairment.) You might want to suggest this to your manager.

It will also help if all staff members learn some of the basics about hearing loss, such as:

- All deaf or partially deaf people have different communication needs.
- Not all people with a hearing impairment feel the same way about their disability.
- Learning Auslan (sign language) is helpful, but it is generally used only by people who are completely deaf.
- Most people with impaired hearing will have some residual hearing, but will show no outward signs of how much they are able to hear. The amount they can hear may fluctuate, depending on environmental factors and their emotional or physical state.
- Most people with impaired hearing communicate orally (by speaking). 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 using their speech processor.

Talking face to face with a colleague with hearing loss

General suggestions for talking face to face with a colleague who has hearing loss include:

- Make sure you have their attention. This could include saying their name, getting into their line of vision, waving at them or touching them on the shoulder.
- A person with hearing loss needs to see your face when having a conversation. Make sure your face is well lit. Don't stand in front of a window, for example, because the back-light shadows your face.
- If necessary, move to a quieter location.
- Allow your colleague to see your face directly at all times. For example, don't look around or drop your head, don't eat, and don't cover your face with your hand.
- Keep eye contact. Don't talk to them if they are walking away from you, or as you walk out of the door or from another room.

Effective communication with a colleague with hearing loss

Tips for communicating effectively with a colleague with hearing loss include:

- Identify the topic first – for example, 'I'd like to talk about tomorrow's meeting'.
- Use open-ended questions, rather than those that need only a 'yes' or 'no' answer. This helps you know whether they understood you or not.
- Speak clearly, but don't exaggerate your lip and mouth movements – this makes speech-reading harder.
- Speaking too slowly can seem patronising. Talk at a normal pace.
- Speak a little louder than usual, but don't bellow. Ask the person how best to alter your speech for speed and volume.
- Pause from time to time to allow the hearing-impaired person to catch up and ask questions.
- Body language and facial expression are important. Try not to keep a deadpan face.

Problems communicating with a colleague with hearing loss

Sometimes, the person with hearing loss can't understand what you're saying. Suggestions include:

- Don't be embarrassed, uncomfortable or frustrated.
- Don't make the person feel as though they are the problem.
- If you have an accent, the person may need time to adjust. Be patient.
- Rather than repeat the missed phrase word for word, say it another way.
- Use visual cues, like gestures.

- If you still can't communicate, offer to write it down.
- If they prefer that you don't write it down, ask them what they would like you to do.

Meetings with colleagues with hearing loss

A person with hearing loss may find it difficult to follow the conversation when there are a number of people talking. Suggestions for running successful meetings and conferences include:

- Distribute a written agenda hearing loss to submit any questions they have in writing, if they feel more comfortable doing it this way.
- Ask the chairperson or the person addressing the meeting to repeat questions from around the table, or from the floor, before answering them.
- Adjust your speed when reading from notes or documents, as most people read out loud more quickly than they normally speak. This makes it difficult for colleagues with hearing loss to keep up.
- Present the information visually if possible – for example, Power Point displays or written notes.
- If you use videos or DVDs as part of a presentation or for staff training, include captions and subtitles.
- Install an audio loop. This is a wire loop that encircles a particular area (such as the conference room) and provides amplified sounds to a person using a hearing aid. Sound is fed into the system through a microphone. Only this sound will be heard.
- Use other assistive listening systems, such as FM and infra-red. Personal receivers can be equipped with headphones or individual 'neck loops' for hearing-aid wearers.
- Make sure the speaker's face is well lit.
- Ask the person with hearing loss if they want to use an interpreter.

Using an interpreter in the workplace

A company may hire a sign-language interpreter or an oral-deaf interpreter for occasions such as conferences or social events. A sign-language interpreter translates the spoken word into Auslan and vice versa. An oral-deaf interpreter 'lip speaks' (repeats without voice) what is said for the benefit of lip-readers.

Points to remember when using an interpreter include:

- You need to book interpreters well in advance.
- 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.
- Address the person with hearing loss, not the interpreter. For example, say directly to the person, 'What time is the meeting scheduled?' rather than saying to the interpreter, 'Ask her what time the meeting is scheduled'.
- Don't speak too quickly. The interpreter will be about four seconds behind. If they need you to slow down, they'll tell you.
- 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 two interpreters and allow them to share the workload.

Socialising with colleagues who have hearing loss

Some people feel uncomfortable around a person with hearing loss, because they're not sure how to behave or communicate. Suggestions include:

- Don't neglect the person with hearing loss when it comes to social conversations. Limiting your interaction to business issues can make them feel isolated.
- Ask the person with a hearing impairment how best to communicate.
- Don't focus on their disability by expressing sympathy or admiration.
- Move past their hearing impairment and concentrate on getting to know them as a person.

- Consult with your employer about staff training in deafness issues.
- Sign language training for staff is available. Discuss the possibility with your employer.

Tips for managers of hearing-impaired staff

Work environments can be adjusted to take the needs of a person with hearing loss into consideration. While specialised equipment is helpful, training 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.

Office set-up for hearing loss

Suggestions for improving your office set-up include:

- Make sure the office is well lit. Good lighting – both natural and artificial – is essential, 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. Avoid wide counter-tops and desks.
- Give the person with a hearing impairment an office or working space with minimal background noise.

Safety issues and hearing loss

Suggested changes to make your workplace safer include:

- Fit flashing lights to audible smoke or evacuation alarms.
- Install emergency flashing lights in toilets and storerooms, or areas where closed doors may obscure vision.
- Fit a 'visual alert system' such as a flashing light on any device that could be a health or safety risk – for example, a light that flashes when machinery is operating.
- In your organisation's evacuation plan, include a 'buddy system', where employees leave the building in pre-arranged pairs.
- 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 hearing-impaired workers understand all evacuation procedures, as it may be difficult to offer reassurance in an emergency.
- Use flashlights to guide hearing-impaired workers from the building if electrical power fails or smoke affects visibility. Keep in physical contact with them until they reach a safe area.

Specialised workplace equipment for people with hearing loss

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 users type their conversation rather than speak. 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. Use 'looped mats', designed to be placed on desks and counters, 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, which flashes when the telephone is ringing

- FM and infra-red 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.

Personal equipment that may also be useful in the workplace includes:

- hearing aid – to amplify all sounds. This may or may not be helpful, depending on the workplace. For example, in a noisy workplace, the hearing aid would amplify the background noise as well as people’s voices
- pager – set to vibrate instead of ring
- FM system – this portable receiver and headset amplifies sounds without the need for wiring
- volume-control earpiece – placed over the earpiece of a telephone to amplify the voice
- alarm clock – set to vibrate instead of ring.

Where to get help

- **Better Hearing Australia.** Victoria Tel. 1300 242 842 (hearing advice line) or (03) 9510 1577, TTY (03) 9510 3499
- **Vicdeaf.** Tel. (03) 9473 1111, TTY (03) 9473 1199, toll-free for country callers Tel. 1300 780 225, TTY 1300 780 235
- **Deaf Victoria.** SMS 0431 476 721
- **Deafness Foundation Victoria.** Tel. or TTY (03) 9738 2909
- **National Relay Service.** (operator-assisted calling of TTY telephone numbers, 24 hours) Tel. 133 677, Speak and listen 1300 555 727
- **Australian Communication Exchange.** (for provision of telephone typewriters) Tel. (07) 3815 7600, TTY (07) 3815 7602
- **Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association Victoria.** (ASLIA Victoria) Tel. 0407 568 869
- **Communication Rights Australia.** Tel. 1300 666 604, (03) 9555 8552 or (03) 9555 8948
- **The Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital.** Tel. (03) 9929 8666, TTY (03) 9929 8052

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