

Hearing loss in the workplace

BY SAMUEL TRYCHIN

It is probably accurate to say that most jobs today can be effectively performed by people who have hearing loss. In this article **Dr Sam Trychin** outlines some of the major issues which should be considered in regard to hearing loss and employment.

In a few instances, hearing loss is a barrier preventing access to some jobs because of legal or other restrictions. For example, I was a control operator in the US Air Force when my hearing loss was discovered. I was no longer in air traffic control the moment my hearing loss was diagnosed but was reassigned to a job in supply.

Fortunately, today there is a great deal of information about what can be done to increase one's ability to obtain and maintain employment in most work situations. The Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) has published an Employment Toolkit [1] covering topics ranging from applying for jobs, interview strategies, dealing with adverse situations, insurance, and legal issues. Also, HLAA's January/February 2014 issue of Hearing Loss Magazine [2] is entirely devoted to 'Working successfully with hearing loss'.

In the remainder of this article, I will attempt to outline what I believe to be general factors which need addressing when considering hearing loss in occupational settings. More detailed, specific information can be obtained from the information in the resources from HLAA and from other items in the list of references at the end of this paper [2,3].

Personal considerations

Hearing loss variables

Severity of hearing loss is one issue to consider when assessing an individual's ability to perform specific tasks required in his or her work situation. Assessing the benefits gained from using hearing aids alone, together with other assistive listening devices (ALDs), or using ALDs instead of the

hearing aids in employment situations is important in regard to the specific tasks a person who has hearing loss (PHL) is required to comfortably and efficiently perform. For example, hearing aids may not be the best accommodation for a person who operates very noisy machinery all day long.

It is also important to know the onset pattern of the hearing loss. If the person has experienced a sudden, severe to profound hearing loss, the person who has it (as well as family members, coworkers, and supervisors/employers) may experience psychological/emotional effects, e.g. anxiety and/or depression that need to be managed along with treating and accommodating the hearing loss itself. The possibility of post-traumatic-stress-disorder (PTSD) should also be considered when hearing loss has a sudden and severe onset. PTSD can also occur when a person has a history of less severe hearing loss but frequent social and emotional painful experiences due to communication difficulties related to hearing loss.

On the other hand, if the hearing loss has a gradual onset over a period of years, the person may have adapted to each small increment of hearing loss and fail to recognise its contribution to decreased job performance or impaired relationships in the work place. A person who has long-standing hearing loss has also had many opportunities to learn and practise a variety of bad communication habits such as bluffing or actively avoiding communication situations. These habits can be difficult to undo and can have adverse effects on work performance and interpersonal relations on the job. Bringing such issues to the individual's

attention in order to establish more effective communication behaviour usually requires information and, perhaps, training [5].

In this regard, it is important to assess the communication behaviour skills the person has acquired, such as their ability to identify the cause(s) of communication breakdowns. Once the cause of a problem has been identified, the person is in a better position to implement or suggest ways of reducing or preventing that problem. Ability to anticipate potential communication difficulties in upcoming situations, and plan tactics and strategies for preventing or reducing such difficulties is a necessary, high-order, communication skill [6]. Becoming skillful in doing this often requires time and opportunity to learn and practise communication behaviour, tactics and strategies.

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Work history

A person who has been in the labour force for some years has had the experience of applying for a job and being interviewed and has most likely learned the requirements for performing well and keeping a job. It might be easier for that person to find ways to accommodate her or his hearing loss in the work situation than it might be for someone who has not had that work experience - the first time job seeker. A person new to the labour market might well be more disadvantaged by trying to learn general job requirements and skills as well as how to accommodate the hearing loss at the same time [7]. People who have work experience and those new to the labour force would benefit from hearing loss and employment education/training experiences in order to increase the likelihood of becoming successful job applicants/employees and decrease stress-related physical and psychological problems [8].

Job factors

Certainly, every job situation is unique, but there are certain factors that need to be addressed in every situation when considering how to accommodate hearing loss.

Communication demands

It is essential to determine communication demands of the job.

- Does it require using a telephone, interacting with supervisors employers, speaking to customers, attending staff meetings, or attending training classes?
- How important is it to understand what is being said in each of these communication situations?
- How much time is usually required for these activities?
- Do customer interactions typically last for ten minutes? Two hours? Half a day?
- How often do these interactions typically occur? Continuously? Once per hour? Twice a week?

This data provides information concerning the communication demands and potential physical costs the person faces on the job. What can the employee do to prevent or reduce the anxiety and fatigue that often accompanies hearing loss in demanding communication situations? Where does the candidate or employee go to learn about effective tactics and strategies?

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Communication barriers

It is also important to determine barriers to communication in the work environment in order to find ways to prevent or reduce their negative effects. Typical barriers to communication are noise, poor lighting, physical obstructions, visual distractions, failure to use hearing aids and/or other ALDs, and faulty communication behaviour [3]. Some training and practice is usually required for people to be able to quickly identify barriers to communication in the environment and find ways to prevent or reduce the effects of these impediments. However, in many instances cooperation from others is required in order to reduce or eliminate certain barriers.

Solutions to barriers

Once the barriers to successful communication have been identified, the next step is to institute interventions that eliminate or reduce the barriers and their effects. For example, an FM system can eliminate or reduce the effects of some barriers, e.g. distance from the person speaking and background noise. Changing the location of a person’s desk or improving lighting can eliminate other barriers to communication. Training other employees in effective communication behaviours goes a long way in improving a person’s ability to understand what they are saying. Of course, it is usually necessary to elicit the cooperation

of others in reducing the barriers to communication especially those arising from faulty communication behaviour on the part of coworkers. Making environmental changes or modifying a job description usually requires support from supervisors or employers. An issue that needs to be addressed concerns the employee’s ability to request environmental or behavioural changes in a way that is likely to elicit cooperation from others—no small feat. The person needs to know not only what to do but also how to do it in a way that elicits cooperation. Again, where does the employee or candidate who has hearing loss go to acquire the information and finesse necessary for identifying and overcoming the potential array of barriers to communication in the workplace?

Benefits of sharing experiences in a support group outside of the workplace

Meeting together with a group of people who have hearing loss on a regular and frequent basis provides opportunity to share work-related concerns. It is proven to be an excellent way to learn and practise effective solutions for hearing loss-related problems that occur in many work environments. Sharing experiences with others provides information about anticipating possible problem situations and how to prevent or reduce such difficulties. A group of people focused on a problem are more likely to arrive at workable solutions than an individual can working alone. Being with others who share similar concerns provides opportunity to be more objective about one’s experiences, reducing self or other-blame and allowing for a more effective problem-solving approach.

Meeting on a regular basis provides opportunity to learn and practise new and different communication behaviours in a safe environment in order to fine-tune new skills and become more adept in their use. This practice increases the probability that the new behaviours will be implemented in the work situation. Group members can then report back to the group what happened when they applied what they had learned. If success was not achieved, the group members can offer suggestions for fine-tuning the behaviour to see what improvement the new adjustment

might have. Suggestions for organising and conducting these groups are provided in an online training program funded by the Ida Institute [9].

Institutional help

Here in the US we have the Americans with Disabilities Act [10] and other legal remedies [11] that offer some protection against discrimination for people who have disabilities in the workplace. The Offices of Vocational Rehabilitation offers some assistance to people who have hearing loss by purchasing hearing aids and other assistive alerting and listening devices and, in some instances, providing information about effective communication strategies [4].

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Samuel Trychin PhD,

Licensed Psychologist, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Listed in the National Register of Health Service Psychologists

E: samueltrychin@gmail.com

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None declared

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Trychin is a psychologist in private practice and provides consulting services to Stairways Behavioural Health in Erie, PA. One of his specialties focuses on psycho-social interventions for people who have hearing loss and their communication partners. He also specialises in emotional regulation coaching and training for people who suffer from stress-related disorders. Dr Trychin conducts national and international education and training programs for people who are hard of hearing, their communication partners, and for professionals who provide services to them. Dr Trychin is the Mental Health and Rehabilitation Advisor to the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) and a member of the Governor's Advisory Council for Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Dr Trychin has written 15 books, authored several professional book chapters and journal articles, and produced a variety of DVDs focused on strategies for living better with hearing loss. He and his wife, Janet Trychin, an audiologist, frequently conduct workshops and training programs together.

He was the Director of Training for the Mental Health Research and Training Center for Hard of Hearing and Late-Deafened Adults, California School of Professional Psychology, San Diego.

