

Putting You in the Employment Picture: *Getting Along with Your Supervisors and Co-Workers*

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This is the fourth and last in a series of articles which takes a common-sense approach to the issues related to hearing loss in the workplace. The first three articles covered getting a job, getting the equipment and services you need, and getting promoted. To round out the series, this issue looks at getting along with your supervisors and co-workers. This article was originally published in SHHH Journal January/February 1996. It is used with the permission of the author.

Make it a point to confirm all verbal instructions immediately with the person giving them. If necessary, double-check all instruction in writing or with E-mail. It is up to *you* to make a determination of whom you can hear and whom you cannot. And it is up to you to set up a system so that others with whom you interact can know ahead of time that they will need to give you instructions in writing or over the office E-mail.

Misunderstandings can happen and communication lines break down if you are sloppy. Be disciplined. Take charge of the inter-communication effort from the start. Never bluff on professional issues. There is too much at stake for your successful employment and promotion prospects, not to mention relationships with your co-workers and supervisors.

Keep Hearing Loss in Perspective

Keep a sense of humor about issues that may arise related to your hearing loss. Try to stay light. If you show that you are comfortable with your hearing loss, this will help others also to feel more comfortable working with you. Try to build up a buddy system, one or two people that you like and trust and who can help you out in a pinch when other accommodations are not working out.

Generally speaking, for people who are hard of hearing the more structured the situation the easier it is to make the necessary accommodations to enable you to hear. For example, to position yourself to hear a speaker during a training session, it is relatively easy to sit at the front of the class and use an assistive

listening device or real-time computer assisted note taking. On the other hand, in unstructured situations - such as keeping up with the conversations of your co-workers in the employee lounge, the cafeteria, or across desks and between cubicles - it is much more difficult, if not impossible, to accommodate. Since the information being exchanged under these circumstances is most likely to be "soft" information, you can ask for an update from one of your "buddies."

Seeing others holding a conversation, laughing, perhaps enjoying a joke, and not being able to hear well enough to join in or to share in their camaraderie can sometimes lead to insecure, almost paranoid feelings.

Although you may try to reason with yourself that it is not rational to feel like this, and, on the surface recognize that your associates have absolutely no reason to be talking about you, nonetheless, you may have these feelings. The longer you stay out of the conversations the longer you feel left out, and the worse the feelings of paranoia tend to get.

Face the situation; don't hide from it. Try to find ways of showing that you would like to be included and that you are interested in what is going on, and what is being said, even if it is merely a joke or interoffice exchange and not some earth-shaking event. Be open with them, explaining briefly that you cannot follow the conversations. Then, go a step further and take the initiative in looking for cooperative ways to be included.

Many people who are hard of hearing report feelings of anger which they take out on those around them both at work and at home. If

you recognize that you do have anger beneath the surface, seek help to deal with it. Anger can be a great motivator as it creates energy. The key is to be conscious of how best to direct that energy and how to use it positively, to create and not to destroy.

Lots of "Thank You's"

We make a lot of requests of those around us in order to hear better. We should try to say an equal number of "thank you's." Most people respond well to positive feedback and the chances of their continuing to do what helps us are increased if we show our appreciation. So, remember to say "thank you" often and show your appreciation to someone who is obviously going out of his or her way to communicate with you.

Be Specific About Communication Needs

Just saying, "I am hard of hearing" is not enough. You need to be specific about what you need the other, party to do. For example, "I need for us to move away from the copy machine to continue this conversation in a quieter place." Or, "When you face me and speak more slowly, it is much easier for me to hear you." Or, "Raising your hand when you begin to speak in a meeting orients me so that I know who is speaking now." In a word, **educate**.

Use ALDs to Participate in Social Functions

Get involved. Don't avoid social functions. That's an important way for co-workers to gel. Use assistive listening devices (ALDs) at the company picnic...at holiday celebrations...at a favorite restaurant with a co-worker... when traveling to an assignment. One of the biggest complaints of employees with hearing loss is that they feel left out of the social give-and-take of the workplace - the fun, the gossip, the relief of letting your hair down after a particularly busy period. Accommodating the social aspects of work life is an important and rewarding element of being a contributing, valuable, and valued member of the job force.

Remember Your Hearing Colleagues Have Needs and Frustrations Also

People with normal hearing are sensitive to noise and loud voices. These can interfere with their ability to concentrate on the work they are doing, or their ability to carry on a telephone conversation. So, think before you slam down the telephone receiver. Make sure you are not driving everyone mad with the feedback from your hearing aid.

At the same time that you are asking others to speak louder for you to hear, learn to monitor how loud your own voice is. In this regard, too, your own sense of awareness and courtesy should remind you when you are holding a conversation to move away from other co-workers who are using the telephone or immersed in other work.

We can all be independent now on the telephone, thanks to the telecommunications relay service and text telephones. There really is no need to ask someone else to take or place our phone calls. So long as we have a text telephone (TTY) used in conjunction with the telecommunications relay service, we now have access to all callers whether or not they have a TTY. Telephones with volume controls and which are hearing-aid compatible are other accommodations which are reasonable to request under the ADA.

Remember, monopolizing the conversation is a negative coping strategy that we all tend to employ from time to time. We need to take the time *to listen to others*, even though it may be a struggle. It is easy to become a bore if we do all the talking, especially if it's about our hearing loss most of the time.

Worth mentioning again is the fact that even though we cannot overhear conversations in other offices, or down the hall, or over the noise of office machinery, our hearing co-workers can. We need to keep that in mind when we are talking on the telephone or holding a conversation.

When using ALDs in meetings, let things get started for a bit before jumping in and asking for reorganizations. If someone is not familiar with using the microphones (which are often directional and need to be held close to the speaker), be considerate about how you remind the speakers to use the microphone. Getting

angry with them will most probably be counterproductive, Again, educate... educate... educate.

In the final analysis, the key to coping with hearing loss in the workplace is to be open about your hearing loss and aware of how you can be helped to achieve your highest potential. Once that first door has been unlocked, use the same key to open the understanding and cooperation of others, and, in this way, create an atmosphere of mutual creativity, productivity, and respect.