

Putting You in the Employment Picture

Getting Promoted

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This is third in a series of articles which takes a common-sense approach to the issues related to hearing loss in the workplace. The first two covered getting a job and getting the equipment and services you need. This article looks at getting promoted. The last article will cover getting along with your supervisors and co-workers. This article was originally published in the SHHH Journal November/December 1995. It is used with the permission of the author.

Getting Promoted

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), an employer may not deny an individual with a hearing loss a promotion. Employers cannot:

- assume the individual is not interested or qualified;
- deny promotion because an accommodation may be needed;
- put employees in segregated units or locations that limit their chance for promotion.

In a 1993 National Focus Group Report, Virginia Johnson of the University of Arkansas' Research and Training Center for Persons who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing, looked at employment issues and found that, nationwide, people who are hard of hearing express frustration with underemployment in entry level jobs with little chance for advancement.

Her report researched and noted numerous instances showing that employment success and job retention depend on the worker demonstrating his or her value to the organization from the *onset* of employment. The possibility for promotion starts from our first day on the job. Right from the beginning, it is up to us to show that we are promotion material and that we are motivated to achieve.

We can demonstrate our work commitment in a variety of ways. The amount and quality of the work we perform - in addition to work ethics such as punctuality, and attendance and safety records are all

indications that we are serious about our work and care about how we perform on the job. These, in turn, justify our being considered as candidates for promotion.

The way we react to supervision, our ability to follow instructions and carry them out, and our level of flexibility and willingness to adapt to change are areas that management monitors to determine an employee's future. In today's work world, teamwork is common so the ability to function as a team player is a key element in successful employment. So, too, are the degree of initiative demonstrated on the job, and the ability, when necessary, to work without supervision.

Interpersonal skills - evidenced in effective social interaction with coworkers, supervisors and clients are another important aspect of being successful on the job. As you can see, many of these factors present no difficulties for people who are hard of hearing. The amount and quality of work and work ethics should be something easily within our own control.

Other areas, however, such as following instructions, teamwork and interpersonal skills, may need creative approaches by the employee who is hard of hearing to ensure a smooth outcome. We have to work at them and find ways to eliminate the barriers which prevent us from demonstrating our capabilities in these areas.

Following verbal instructions, whether face to face or over the telephone, may require different approaches to ensure the

instructions are clearly understood. Confirm the instructions right after they are given. For example, one might say: "My understanding is that I am to draft an outline of the, proposal by August 26, and distribute it to the sales team ready for a department meeting one week later."

Other approaches could include asking for instructions in writing, or writing them up yourself for a sign off, or asking for them to be relayed to you through the company e-mail.

The method you use is not important as long as there is a certain comfort level on both sides with your chosen method; that there is no ambiguity in the instructions; and that you are perfectly clear concerning what you are expected to do.

The communication required in teamwork also requires that you take the initiative and work with your co-workers. Together you can devise a satisfactory way for you and them to communicate satisfactorily with each other, and thus enable you to hear everyone on the team, whether one-on-one or when you meet as a group. In a group situation, technology such as an assistive device or computer assisted note taking may not be the best solution.

Consistently Upgrade Your Skills

Skills count and so we should take advantage of any and all staff development opportunities both off-site and on company premises. It means advocating and pushing for accessible training. In this regard, note that the ADA mandates that all public accommodations, including conference and convention centers, be accessible. Let the training coordinators know of your specific communication access requirements. Do this well in advance of the event.

There are a variety of accommodations which you can consider to enable you to participate fully in training, which is vital to promotion. Just for starters, consider these options:

- Discuss your needs with the trainer prior to the classes.
- Request technology or services such as an assistive listening device, an interpreter, computer assisted real-time transcription, or a note taker (this could be a colleague taking the same training who might volunteer to serve as a note taker or share notes).
- Ask for printed handouts such as a course outline or visual aids.
- Request seating to accommodate your needs for speech reading.
- Ask if training could also be videotaped and captioned so that you could view the tape both in advance of the class and thereafter as needed.

Other factors which affect the accessibility of a training class would be lighting, and the communication style of the trainer. Trainers should be encouraged not to pace when presenting, to always face the class and speak clearly and slowly, and to rephrase the idea rather than repeat verbatim when a point is not heard. (A brief, printed or typed card incorporating this last suggestion, and presented to the trainer beforehand, is an excellent, continuing reminder.)

Also, on your own, take classes independently, outside of your place of work to keep upgrading your skill level. Skills attract employers, make you a valuable employee, and, more importantly, give you self-confidence. Today's workforce is a demanding one, and more and more skills are needed all the time.

Keep Working on Attitudes

No matter how capable and skilled you are, some decision makers may have stereotypical attitudes about what people with hearing loss can and cannot do, often focusing more on the hearing loss than on the abilities. Although, this is unfair and frustrating for the employee, it still happens even today, and can affect the promotion process.

SHHH has accounts of employees who have been successfully employed only to experience a change of manager and a sudden

turn of events where they and their abilities are trusted less and less, and the employment situation becomes intolerable to the point where individuals feel forced to seek employment elsewhere.

The best way to deal with this is education: keep educating everyone we come into contact with about hearing loss. In addition, work to achieve a comfort level on both sides in communicating; and, finally, let our employers and coworkers see our abilities in action.

It's a proven fact there is a variation in attitudes of managers within the same company. This supports the importance of someone with a hearing loss developing a mentoring situation in the workplace. In this way, we have a constant in our work lives and we have the backing of someone who understands our abilities and needs, someone in a responsible position who can offer support and motivation when the going gets tough.

Nip Communication Difficulties in the Bud

If difficulties in communication are happening, don't let them drag on and drag you down in the process. Do something about them quickly, resolve them and put them to rest. Unresolved communication difficulties - whether with your co-workers, boss, or customers - can hinder productivity and make you look inefficient and incapable of carrying out your required responsibilities.

It's really important to be up front so take the initiative if you get into a situation where you cannot hear well. Take action quickly to try to resolve the problem immediately, on a temporary basis if necessary, or preferably and if time permits, on a long-term, permanent basis. Try not to let the problem get to the point where it would make you seem vacillating or totally inept to suddenly state that you have not been able to follow what has been going on for the past ten minutes or one hour, or entire meeting. You need to do a quick inventory of what is creating the problem. Is it acoustics? Is it

background noise? Is it the speaker's communication style? Is it the distance from the speaker? Is this a situation that can be resolved with a request for behavior change or seating relocation? Or, would the only workable option be an accommodation such as an assistive listening device? Half the battle is figuring out what we need in any given situation and then being assertive enough to set it up.