The author explores some of the concerns employers might have about hiring workers with hearing loss, some of the benefits to be gained, and how to make it all work.

Why should you as an employer consider hiring and accommodating a person who has a hearing loss? Besides the fact that it is illegal to not offer equal employment opportunity, what’s in it for you? As it turns out, there are many benefits to employers to be disability-neutral when considering two otherwise equally-qualified candidates, one of whom happens to have a hearing loss.

As a person with hearing loss who uses assistive technology to communicate in the workplace, from my experience, hiring and accommodating employees with hearing loss is not as big of a deal as people make it out to be. The only thing you have to fear is fear itself. We are people first, and our hearing loss is secondary.

There are assistive listening devices and services available that enable us to access the spoken word equally and effectively. All that is required is our employer’s willingness to put them in place for us and off we go. The trail has been well-blazed by others who have gone before us, so nobody has to reinvent the wheel.

In her blog, Betty Hoven offers some compelling benefits that I have excerpted here for brevity and edited for terminology. You can read the complete and original wording at http://bettyhoven.wordpress.com. Search for “Why you should hire a deaf person.”
People with hearing loss are productive and improve productivity among their co-workers.

In 1990, DuPont conducted a survey of 811 employees with disabilities and found 90 percent of employees with disabilities rated average or better in job performance compared to 95 percent for employees without disabilities.

Two researchers, Parent and Everson (1986) reviewed case studies and documentaries that found workers with disabilities were viewed as dependable, loyal, and responsible. As reported in the Journal of Rehabilitation, compared to workers without disabilities, they were reported to have equal or better productivity, accuracy, and overall job performance ratings.

Blogger Betty Hoven suggests that a person with hearing loss might work harder than others, because they feel like they have to prove themselves. Betty says, “I am a late-deafened worker who uses bilateral cochlear implants and assistive technology in the course of doing my job. Speaking from personal perspective, I absolutely concur that I do work extra hard every day to prove myself because I realize people judge the capabilities of other people with hearing loss by their experiences with me. I am not unique in this.”

People with hearing loss are experts at being creative with communication.

They practice total communication: body language, speechreading, contextual and environmental cues. They take nothing for granted and perceive things people who hear effortlessly do not. If you do not believe this, try turning the sound off on your favorite TV show and observe how much you begin to notice visually.

Hiring a person with a hearing loss does not have to cost you an arm and a leg.

The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) reported in 1999 that most accommodations cost less than $500, and for every dollar invested in accommodations, companies reported an average of $40 in benefits.

If you need an employee who can roll with the punches and adapt to change, you should strongly consider the people with hearing loss who have applied for the job.

Diversity!

In order for your business to be the best it can be, if you hire a diverse group of people you will get diverse ideas, opinions, work styles, and so on. Also, the Canadian Hearing Society suggests that with a diverse and accessible workplace, “An employer will have access to a larger, more qualified pool of workers, a plus in today’s competitive business world. It will improve your company’s image in the business community and with the public.”

People who have hearing loss are a safe bet.

One study found that “deaf, late-deafened and hard of hearing workers have a 98 percent average or above average safety record, among the highest of all of the disabled workers and workers in general.” (Keep Deaf Workers Safe, Menchel & Ritter, National Technical Institute of the Deaf, Rochester, New York – 1984).

What about outside the workplace? Henderson and Burg did a study in 1973 of commercial motor vehicle drivers and found that “greater hearing loss was associated with fewer driving accidents.”

The Job Accommodation Network supplies additional information on workplace safety considerations for employees who are deaf and hard of hearing. In most cases, the signaling and alerting assists are not cost-prohibitive. People with hearing loss are adaptive to change.

Hearing abilities can change daily and persons with hearing loss must quickly adapt to the new world they find themselves in. New technology is created and existing technology is improved frequently (digital hearing aids, cochlear implants, text messaging, smartphone apps, assistive listening devices, speech-to-text captions, video remote interpreting, etc.) and persons who depend upon it master it quickly. If you need an employee who can roll with the punches and adapt to change, you should strongly consider the people with hearing loss who have applied for the job.

People with hearing loss are experts at problem solving.

Betty Hovan quotes from the Canadian Hearing Society website: “Employees with disabilities are well known for being loyal, professional and hard working. Moreover, hiring a person with a disability means you’re hiring a specialist in problem solving—someone who has spent a great deal of time working around unique and difficult obstacles. Studies have shown that most employers who hire someone with a disability are happy with their decision.”

Okay, But What About…?

Next, I would like to turn your attention to some of the things you might have heard about hiring persons with disabilities in general, and persons with hearing loss, in particular. Please bear in mind I am not an attorney, this information is not legal advice, and it is not intended to substitute for professional legal counsel.


Q: Do I have to give hiring preference if a candidate with hearing loss applies for a job?

No. You do not have to hire a candidate with hearing loss if he or she is not the most qualified candidate for the job. You do not have to give that person

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special preference. You do have to
supply an accommodation during the
hiring process, if the candidate requests
one. You do have to give the candidate
with hearing loss the same consideration
you are giving other candidates without
hearing loss who are applying for the
same position.

People with hearing loss can
perform successfully on the job and
should not be denied opportunities
because of stereotypical assumptions
about hearing loss.

Q: Am I stuck with an employee
with a hearing loss if he or she
doesn’t work out?

No. Employees with hearing loss are
subject to the same personnel policies
as your employees who don’t have
a hearing loss. Having hearing loss
does not release an employee from
the duty of being able to perform the
essential duties of the position for
which they were hired, with reasonable
accommodation. Job modification,
particularly as it applies to non-essential
duties of the position (“other duties
as assigned”), is sometimes reasonable
to consider. The Job Accommodation
Network can provide more information.

Q: I just hired a person with
hearing loss? How do I help the
other employees adjust?

In my experience, onboarding (organi-
zational socialization) for a new em-
ployee with hearing loss is not so
different from onboarding for any other
new employee, in terms of helping them
fit into the workplace. Ask your new
employee with hearing loss what she
needs and how you can best implement
it. Ask her what she would like other
employees to know about her and her
hearing loss.

One strategy that works is
to educate and inform your entire
workforce about the knowledge, skills
and abilities the new employee brings
to the workplace. Educate them about
what you are doing to ensure effective
communication access for the new
employee and how that benefits all.

Don’t let a person’s hearing
loss be a show stopper. You
might just make the best
hire of your life. Look at the
person and the qualities
first, then look at how
you can work together to
be sure the hearing loss
is accommodated so the
employee can perform to his
or her highest potential.

Have the new employee address co-
workers about communication tips or to
demonstrate a particular technology she is
using such as a captioned telephone or an
FM system, or explain how her hearing
aid or cochlear implant helps her hear
some things, but not everything.

If you are comfortable with your
new hire, that goes a long way in help-
ing the rest of the workforce to feel
comfortable.

Technology

The use of assistive technology has
leveled the workplace playing field
for persons with hearing loss. There
are so many options and the choices
can be overwhelming. Even everyday
technologies like voice recognition
software, Skype, FaceTime, Google
Hangout, email, or instant messaging,
can help people with hearing loss. Please
don’t assume that people who have
hearing loss and say they are deaf will use
a sign language interpreter. Most people
don’t because they use their residual
hearing with the help of technology and
never learned sign language especially if
they lost their hearing later in life.

The best policy is to first ask the
new employee what he or she needs.
Please bear in mind that one size does
not fit all. Your employee with hearing
loss will not want to use them all, but
might want to use one or some of
them. That is why you want to ask first.
Sometimes people come with their own
communication devices they prefer to use.

Don’t let a person’s hearing loss
be a show stopper. You might just make
the best hire of your life. Look at the
person and the qualities first, then look
at how you can work together to be sure
the hearing loss is accommodated so
the employee can perform to his or her
highest potential. Smile and do it!

Putting it All Together—
Resources for Employers

• Hearing Loss Association of America—
  www.hearingloss.org—for information
  about hearing loss, technology and
  communication tips for people with
  hearing loss in the workplace

• Society for Human Resources Man-
  agement (SHRM)—www.shrm.org

• HR Magazine—www.shrm.org/
  Publications/hrmagazine—Search
  for articles by Kathryn Tyler, “Special
  Communication Services” (September
  2004) and “Learn How to Com-
  municate with Deaf and Hard-of-
  Hearing Employees” (September 2002)

• Job Accommodation Network—
  www.askjan.org—includes tax
  credits for hiring people with
  hearing loss and effective
  accommodation practices

• National Technical Institute for
  the Deaf, Rochester Institute of
  Technology—www.ntid.rit.edu

• National Court Reporters Associa-
  tion—www.ncra.org—for CART
  reporters (Communication Access
  Realtime Translation), also known
  as speech-to-text HLM

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