

I have been researching the workplace experiences of people with hearing loss for nearly two decades. During that time, I have been fortunate to learn from the experiences of hundreds of amazing people. Every story is different and there are rarely easy or permanent fixes. Career success is rather a lifelong journey that hearing loss impacts every step of the way. Here, I share ten career success strategies that I have observed among successful people with hearing loss.

Given the diversity of situations, offering tips and tricks would seem misguided. At the same time, it is important for all of us to learn from one another and from the growing body of available empirical research on career success and disability in the workplace. I discuss a few broad strategies for career success after hearing loss.

people with hearing loss many, if not all, of these same factors would likely emerge. With this in mind, I focused on illustrating general strategies that are particularly important to people with hearing loss.

Strategy 1: Know Yourself

Know who you are, what you enjoy doing, and how you can add value in the workplace. Before thinking about your career goals, it is important to first think about your core values and main life goals. In particular, think carefully about how much time you want to spend with family, friends, and on non-work activities. Are you looking for a 40, 50, 60-hour a week job and career? There are only so many hours in the week and work often spills over into other areas.

The first area of self-knowledge is your values related to work/life

to know what you want most and to prioritize your work time and energy accordingly. I already mentioned key factors associated with salary attainment. To expand on the other dimensions of career success, research suggests that important factors associated with rate of promotion in the general population include training and development, extroverted personality, social capital and hours worked while career satisfaction is associated with having an internal locus of control (believing you control your life rather than fate), supervisor supportiveness, career sponsorship from senior level employees, proactivity and training and development.

Which dimension of career success is most important to you: high salary, high status or high satisfaction? Are you focusing your time and energy on what matters most to you?

Career Success After Hearing Loss: Finding and Refining Your Path

These strategies are rooted in a review of the general career literature, as well as my own research on hearing loss in the workplace and my own experiences as a person with hearing loss.

Before looking at the impact of hearing loss on career success, it is important to first briefly consider common determinants of career success in the general population. This is important because people who are more intelligent, more personable, harder working and better educated are likely to experience greater career success with or without a hearing loss.

For example, in a recent meta-analysis, Thomas Ng and colleagues (2005) statistically aggregated data from 45 peer-reviewed journal articles which combined data from nearly 50,000 respondents and found that education level, political skills, work experience and cognitive ability were top predictors of salary attainment. While a study of similar scale is not available for

balance and material success. While this is true for anyone, my research leads me to believe that this is an even more important consideration for people with hearing loss because so many respondents report that coping with hearing loss at work can be stressful and exhausting.

Strategy 2: Know What You Want From Work

Next, carefully consider what career success means to you. Common responses include:

- Salary, benefits, perks (extrinsic and material)
- Promotions, recognition, status (extrinsic and nonmaterial)
- Career satisfaction, meaningful work, sense of accomplishment (intrinsic and nonmaterial)

While these goals are not necessarily mutually exclusive, it is important

These questions are important for everyone to consider but given the challenges of hearing loss in the workplace, it is even more critical for people with hearing loss to focus on what matters most to them.

Strategy 3: Find Your Highest and Best Use

As an exercise to help you visualize your highest and best use and related job and career activities draw three partially overlapping circles (see page 14). In the first circle, list activities that you enjoy the most. What are you most interested in and passionate about?

In the second circle, list activities that you excel at. What are your top talents and skills?

In the third circle, list activities that you can do that add the most value to others, to organizations and to society. That is, what activities allow you to

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contribute the most or add the most value?

The intersection of these circles includes activities that you are skilled at, passionate about and that allow you to add the most value. These activities are likely your areas of highest and best use and where you want to spend as much of your work time and energy as possible. Your skills, interest and what adds value changes with time and can be impacted by hearing loss.

The Career Leader assessment which is based on the research of two Harvard Business School colleagues, Timothy Butler and James Waldroop (1997), takes a similar approach. You can use their online assessment to uncover or rediscover what motivates you as well as your top skills and interests (www.careerleader.com).

This assessment then compares your responses to responses from 500,000 others to suggest specific jobs, careers and organizational cultures that best match your response profile. To further validate your responses, this assessment also allows you to systematically seek input from other people who know you well.

Strategy 4: Take an Unflinching Look at How Hearing Loss Impacts Your Work

It's important to understand how having a hearing loss impacts your skills, interests and areas of value added. For example, I met a man who worked as a supervisor for many years before losing much of his hearing. He was frustrated by how difficult it was for him to communicate in meetings. After a brief discussion, it became clear that he was using the best available communication technologies but he was still struggling and, more importantly, emotionally drained from trying not to miss anything.

His hearing loss had impacted the context in which his skills were most effective and most enjoyable to use. It is also important to assess how hearing loss can impact how you define career



success. Self-awareness involves knowing what you really want. Self-discipline is then required to focus on what you really want even when it goes against social norms.

The experience of a bright young woman whom I met illustrates this point. She was unhappy that she had been passed over for a promotion. In conversing with her, however, it became clear that she was frustrated because she felt unappreciated, not because she would prefer the supervisory job. Her true goals were around career satisfaction, in particular, making a difference in the lives of others. The promotion was not really a goal but rather an indicator that she was successfully making a difference. For her, the key to career success was knowing what she really wanted from her career—satisfaction—and then having the self-discipline to focus in on this and her own measures of success.

Strategy 5: Choose a Positive Mindset

In my research, people with hearing loss who focus on career satisfaction appear to experience and enjoy the most career success. Those who are intently focused on salary and promotion appear to

struggle more, in particular, when they gauge their success relative to others or to themselves prior to their hearing loss.

One strategy for success then seems to be having an unflinching knowledge of yourself, including the impact of hearing loss on what you do well and enjoy doing in the workplace and the self-discipline to look inward rather than outward to gauge your success. Attitude toward hearing loss seems to be closely related.

For example, I met a middle-aged man who said that every morning he felt grateful for the “miracle” of sound that his cochlear implant provided. Not long after, I met another man of similar circumstances, who seemed to view his experiences through a lens of disappointment in what his cochlear implant failed to capture instead of what it did capture. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these overarching differences in attitude and mindset appeared to deeply impact the workplace experiences, integration/isolation, and degree of career success these two men experienced.

Strategy 6: Stay Abreast of Assistive Technology

People with hearing loss who are more successful in the workplace often

minimize communication barriers at work by maximizing use of assistive technology. Many highly engaged people with hearing loss seemed to enjoy continual learning about new technologies such as hearing aids, cochlear implants, and other hearing assistive technology.

They also seem to enjoy learning new and creative ways to use technology and talking with others to exchange information and best practices. People who are less willing to learn and try new things have more difficulty, particularly in rapidly changing environments. Attending events such as annual HLAA Conventions is a great strategy for staying abreast of assistive technology.

Strategy 7: Practice Positive Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy means speaking up and letting other people know your communication needs. Self-advocacy takes knowledge and courage. By positive self-advocacy, I mean speaking up for yourself in a way that brings you closer to supervisors, co-workers and others at work.

Positive self-advocacy takes knowledge and courage, plus social savvy. It is a skill that is not easily mastered. Self-advocacy involves knowing your needs as a person with a hearing loss and knowing what others can do to maximize communication effectiveness.

Common forms of self-advocacy among people with hearing loss range from asking for an amplified phone to requesting CART (captioning) for staff meetings to asking to change seats so that the light is at your back. Positive self-advocacy involves being attentive to what other people are thinking and feeling and responding to others' needs, interests and anxieties. Saving face, feeling competent and avoiding embarrassment are common needs.

People whom I have met who excel in positive self-advocacy care about themselves and care about the people around them. They are patient, if not joyful educators, and have a great sense of humor. They are able to take a potentially tense situation and turn it

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into a positive learning experience for everyone involved.

Strategy 8: Focus on Fit

Some people find success by changing their job within the same organization. Others find success by joining a new organization. Still others change careers entirely. One consideration is the extent to which hearing loss impacts work in your chosen profession.

I interviewed a woman who taught English as a second language. She said that as her hearing declined she was no longer able to hear the subtle differences in her students' pronunciation that allowed her to effectively teach. Perhaps new technologies would allow this woman to continue to teach English as a second language but for her, at that point in time, she saw a career change as the path forward.

I have seen three common patterns. Some people find that larger employers are more able or more willing to provide extensive accommodation. Others report that educational and governmental organizations are more supportive, while still others find greater success in organizations serving people with hearing loss. In these organizations, hearing loss can be an asset. At the same time, competition for plum jobs at Gallaudet, the National Technical Institute for the Deaf and in government and nonprofit organizations serving people with hearing loss can be difficult and often leads those with an entrepreneurial drive to the creation of their own organizations. Each person and situation is different so while these

are common patterns reported by people whom I have interviewed, what works best for you may well differ.

Strategy 9: Build Strong Individual Relationships

Research indicates that social isolation is a common career barrier for people with disabilities. Hearing loss by nature can be isolating. Some people who I have interviewed seem to be super extroverts. Hearing loss or not, these individuals remain the life of the party.

Most people with hearing loss, however, report some degree of social isolation. Even if formal meetings are made communication accessible, many people have difficulty communicating informally (hallway and water cooler conversation) and in quasi work/social functions (coffee, lunch, drinks after work, parties hosted by colleagues). These events are often seen as social rather than work events but are nonetheless important tools for building relationships and gaining access to critical work related information.

If you are not a super extrovert, you might find that the best approach is forming and maintaining strong dyadic bonds. Spend time each week getting to know your peers, co-workers and supervisors one-on-one. Explain your communication needs and learn about their needs and aspirations while cultivating relationships based on understanding and mutual respect. Find ways to help these individuals and they will be ready to help you when you need it most. One-on-one or small group meetings in quiet well-lit settings work best for most people with hearing loss.

Strategy 10: Maximize Your Human Capital

In the career literature, human capital is described as skills, knowledge, and experience possessed by an individual. Maximizing human capital is good advice for anyone but I believe that hearing loss amplifies the importance of building your skills, knowledge and experience. Having a hearing loss can also make it more difficult to build and maintain human capital.

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In my research, I have noticed that many successful people with hearing loss have a strong technical base and report a need to be even more skilled and knowledgeable than their counterparts without hearing loss. Continually learning and gaining new skills and knowledge is therefore an important strategy.

In conclusion, please keep in mind that these ten strategies are working hypotheses based on the general population career success literature and my own research on people with hearing loss. While every person and situation is different, I hope that understanding these common career strategies will help you find, and refine, your path to career success with hearing loss. **HLM**

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Ten Common Strategies for Career Success with Hearing Loss

- Strategy 1: Know yourself.
- Strategy 2: Know what you want from work.
- Strategy 3: Find your highest and best use.
- Strategy 4: Take an unflinching look at how hearing loss impacts your work.
- Strategy 5: Choose a positive mindset.
- Strategy 6: Stay abreast of assistive technology.
- Strategy 7: Practice positive self-advocacy.
- Strategy 8: Focus on fit.
- Strategy 9: Build strong individual relationships.
- Strategy 10: Maximize your human capital.



Hearing Loss Association of America



Go to www.Walk4Hearing.org to find an event near you. Spring Kickoffs coming soon.