

Hearing is Big Business

By Bettie B. Borton

In a 2009 survey of 46,000 U.S. households, the Better Hearing Institute (BHI) determined that over the past generation hearing loss grew at an alarming 160 percent as compared to the growth rate of the U.S. population. This differential is largely attributable to the aging of the population, and the concurrent associated increase in hearing loss.

Consider this. The same study found that **60 percent of people with hearing loss in this country are below retirement age**, indicating that approximately 16.3 million people with hearing loss were part of the U.S. workforce in 2010. Perhaps the most compelling statistics for such employees indicate that:

- People with untreated hearing loss lose up to \$30,000 in income annually, depending on their degree of hearing loss. That's a loss to society of \$26 billion in unrealized federal tax revenue, and an estimated aggregate yearly income loss of \$176 billion due to underemployment.
- People with hearing loss who do not use hearing aids are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed as their peers who use hearing aids.

In other words, untreated hearing loss has serious consequences for both employers and employees. This trend is costing society *and* those with hearing loss millions of dollars annually in lost revenue, productivity, taxable revenue, and valued manpower resource.

Good Hearing is Good Business

Given the incidence and prevalence of hearing loss, most businesses will confront this challenge sooner or later in the context of management's

Are you dealing with performance issues at work related to hearing loss? Are you assisting employees with hearing loss in your workplace? If so, the president of the American Academy of Audiology says, "Listen up!" and "Start the 2014 business year off right!"

responsibility and oversight of human resources. So what can companies, their staff, and employees do to plan for and effectively address the impact of employees with hearing loss? There are a number of simple, easy to implement and cost-effective steps companies can take to educate staff and management about hearing health care and as a by-product, facilitate the performance of those dealing with hearing loss.

Research has shown that 50 percent of those with untreated hearing loss have never had their hearing checked, and therefore lack sufficient information to know whether they need to take action to correct it. Despite the fact that approximately 48 million Americans have hearing loss, only about 13 percent report they received a hearing screening during their last physical exam. Business owners and human resource professionals can help both employees and the company's bottom line by:

- Educating employees and management regarding the impact and consequences of untreated hearing loss.
- Encouraging employees and management to have their hearing

screened on an annual basis, and providing opportunities to do so.

Those with hearing loss have to work harder to understand conversation, particularly in noisy environments...and most busy offices *are* noisy places! Additionally, Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD) can affect those with or without hearing loss, and can contribute to communication difficulty in the workplace. The typical office acoustical environment is plagued with background noise comprised predominately of human speech, and such noise is particularly challenging for those with hearing loss and/or CAPD.

Today's sophisticated technology offers good news for those with hearing loss who are actively employed. Most people with hearing loss can be helped with high-quality hearing devices and a vast array of assistive listening devices. Research indicates that quality of life improves for three out of four who use hearing aids.

For people with milder hearing loss, studies have shown that the use of hearing aids reduces the risk of income loss by 90 to 100 percent, and from 65 to 77 percent for those whose hearing loss is severe to moderate. Employers can cost effectively create a corporate climate where auditory impairments are recognized and outcomes are positively influenced for all stakeholders.

Encouraging those in the workplace with unaddressed hearing loss to feel more comfortable acknowledging a hearing loss and working collaboratively to provide workable solutions, is in everyone's best interest. Here are some suggestions:

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- Avoid noisy restaurants as meeting locations, or ask for a private dining area.
- Summarize meeting minutes in writing to be sure that those with hearing loss issues are clear on meeting outcomes.
- Offer quiet zones to enhance employee communication by reducing background noise.
- Provide basic accommodations, such as moving an employee's desk away from noisy hallways, machines, or air conditioning or heating vents.
- Consider installing a phone that amplifies or provides visual messaging—often this equipment is available without charge through state or federally linked providers.
- Build work environments that facilitate better hearing by choosing cubicles with noise-absorbing materials and equipping meeting rooms with an inductive loop system that creates a wireless zone for hearing aids or cochlear implants with telecoil capability.
- Remember that partition height, cubicle location relative to the administrative heads, imposition of quiet zones, and other office design characteristics often send subtle messages about status, influence, or office affiliations, so changes in office design and acoustic improvements should be approached with as much employee “buy-in” as possible. Such modifications won't work if people aren't willing to use them.

In many cases, the use of hearing devices (and other assistive technologies such as looping, Bluetooth, or FM capability) can help ensure that employees with hearing loss are not at a competitive disadvantage, but will also safeguard achievement of maximum productivity for the business.

Companies can encourage hearing instrument use when indicated as part of their total compensation package by collaborating with an audiologist. Most audiology practices can create

Find an Audiologist

Audiologists are the primary health care professionals who evaluate, diagnose, treat, and manage hearing loss and balance disorders in adults and children.

Think you might have a hearing loss? Visit www.HowsYourHearing.org and click on the “Find an Audiologist” link to locate and set up an appointment with an audiologist in your area.

contractual arrangements for global corporate provision of hearing health care services offering group discounts, hearing aid maintenance and repairs, informational presentations on the importance and proper use of hearing protection devices and more.

Audiologists can also design and implement OSHA-compliant hearing screening programs (on and off-site), as well as effective follow-up scenarios to assist employees and their families with managing hearing loss if it is identified. Human resource managers can also provide employees with information regarding how to fund the purchase of needed hearing instruments using pre-tax medical flexible spending accounts if this is an available option.

If you're currently employed and have hearing loss, give yourself every opportunity for success! Embrace new technologies, treatments, and devices, and encourage your employer to seize opportunities to enhance company productivity by following suit. If you're an employer and don't currently offer hearing health care resources for employees, consider adding a hearing health care package with various incentives to your current array of benefits for your staff and their families.

Start the 2014 business year off right! By encouraging employees to treat hearing loss rather than hide it, you can create a win-win situation by ensuring that the loss of hearing does not interfere with job performance, productivity, safety, career opportunities or quality of life—on or off the job. **HLM**



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only audiologist with such certification in private practice in the Montgomery area. Dr. Borton is the founder and practice director of Doctors Hearing Clinic, a full service audiology private practice. She currently serves as president of the American Academy of Audiology. As the largest organization of, by, and for audiologists in the world, the Academy represents more than 12,000 audiologists in the United States as well as 13 foreign countries.

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When you advocate for an accommodation, it helps to be polite as well as knowledgeable about what will help you. Sometimes it takes a while to get what you need, so be persistent. Keep a record of conversations about your request and be willing to negotiate, as long as what the employer agrees to provide will work for you. Remember that you will most likely need to educate your employer that your hearing aid or cochlear implant does not restore your hearing and how assistive technology can improve your ability to hear. **HLM**

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