



You're **NOT** Fired!

Technologies and Strategies for Workplace Success

Here are several technologies and strategies to minimize difficulty and maximize the chance for success in the workplace despite a hearing loss.

By Brad Ingrao

We all know that getting and keeping a job in today's market is tough. The last thing anyone wants is to get the "Donald Trump treatment" as on the show *The Apprentice* when he bellows *you're fired!* It might seem that having a hearing loss makes this problem worse, but this doesn't necessarily have to be the case.

Rise and Shine

Before you face hearing hurdles at work, you have to actually get to work. Having a reliable way to wake up every morning is critical since most people with hearing loss don't wear their primary hearing technology (hearing aids or cochlear implant processors) to sleep.

There are several commercially available alarm clocks that produce very loud sounds, flash lights, shake your pillow, or provide some combination of all of these. Because many of us don't know what will be the best waking stimulus, it is advisable to buy an alarm that either has all the options, or is modular so that options like a bed shaker can be added later if needed.

It's also important to make sure that the vendor allows for a refund or exchange within a reasonable time period (usually 15 to 30 days) in case it doesn't work. Test it on a day you don't have to work, so you can make any adjustments needed without the stress of getting to work late.

Hearing Loss is NOT Anonymous

As difficult as it might be, it really is critical that your employers know about your hearing loss. In addition to telling them you have a hearing loss, you need to help them understand how your hearing loss affects your ability to communicate in different areas of the workplace. While each workplace is different, the basic communication requirements and challenges are pretty standard.

Face-to-Face Communication

Usually, this kind of interaction occurs close up. This is fortunate because

the typical conversational distance of three to five feet is the distance where hearing aids and cochlear implants work best. While this is certainly an advantage, you still need to preach and practice good communication strategies such as controlling background noise, ensuring you have adequate lighting, and helping your conversational partners practice good speaking habits.

If your job requires face-to-face communication in areas with high background noise and you can't easily move to a quieter place, you might need to add a remote microphone Assistive Listening System (ALS) to aid in understanding. These include something as simple as a Pocket Talker with a directional mic attached to a neckloop all the way to more sophisticated (and expensive) solutions such as Bluetooth microphones paired to a receiver keyed to your hearing aids, or even an FM system.

Meetings

Meetings are more challenging for several reasons. Typically, you end up having to hear people farther away from your three-to-five-foot "sweet spot." In addition, the larger the meeting, the greater the potential for background noise and reverberation to negatively affect your ability to understand speech. In some meetings, several people are speaking where the pace and overlap of their contributions exceed your ability to follow. So, how do you address these issues? Try these in the order they appear. Following the list are examples of what you might use in various settings.

- Identify the key hearing hazard in each type of meeting you are required to attend.
- Have a conversation with your supervisor about why it's difficult and how important it is to you that you get all the information at the meeting correctly.
- Brainstorm together about ways to make it easier for you to participate fully in the meetings. A few ideas:

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Large Group Meetings

These include staff training, company briefings and major announcements where only one person is talking at a time, usually in an auditorium or classroom seating arrangement. The major challenge here is distance, but depending on the room, reverberation can also play a part. Having a good quality public address (PA) system will help everyone hear and listen. It also allows you to hear better by capturing the speaker's voice with a microphone and then carrying it to you. If you hear and understand well with your hearing aid or cochlear implant at close range, you might do just as well by just sitting close to the PA system speaker.

More likely however, you'll need to connect the remote microphone ALS you use for face-to-face communication to this PA system. The easiest way to do this is to arrive at the meeting a few minutes early and hang your remote mic on the PA system speaker. If the meeting happens on a regular basis, ask about attaching a piece of Velcro® on the speaker so you can do this easily and quickly. You might be thinking it would be better to just give your remote microphone to the presenter.

While this is a good solution for *you*, it has a couple of disadvantages. One, it singles you out and makes the use of a microphone about helping one employee. If you encourage the use of a PA system for all meetings in this setting, you are educating management that *all* employees will hear and

understand better with a little bit of amplification.

This allows your employers to be the good guy for everyone, and also lets them reach all the folks in the room who have hearing loss, but haven't yet done anything about it. It also forces them to practice and enforce a one-at-a-time speaking plan and effective microphone use. You might need to help them with this, but in the end, if you spin it as a benefit to them *rather* than a benefit to yourself, you should find less resistance and more compliance.

Small Group Meetings

It might seem that a smaller meeting would be easier, but in fact, they are often *more* difficult. While a few small meetings follow the classroom format, many are collaborative meetings where multiple people are contributing and talking. The pace of these meetings is often quite fast and might be highly specialized in vocabulary. As with large group meetings, communicating your needs clearly to the group leader is key.

In these settings, finding a quiet area to hold the meeting often reduces your listening effort considerably. If this is not possible, your remote microphone ALS will again be your best solution, but you'll need to get the other participants to agree to use it. This usually isn't as difficult as it might seem as most people are willing to make a reasonable accommodation once they know that you need it, and that using it will help you pull your weight on the team. This last part is really critical as your contribution makes *their* lives easier.

Spinning the Story...

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Another way to help make these collaborative meetings easier and also more efficient for everyone, is to consider using online tools like

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Google Hangout at www.google.com/+learnmore/hangouts/. This allows everyone to meet while staying at their desk. It provides text, audio, high quality (depending on your Internet connection speed) video and even zooms into the person talking to allow for some lipreading help.

To prepare for the meeting a collaboration tool like Google + Communities provides a centralized space for documents, threaded discussions and media related to your small group. Using these tools certainly helps you since you can optimize the acoustics and listening connectivity of your personal space, but these tools also make the meeting more efficient and convenient for others. This reinforces the fact that you are a normal part of the team and the use of these tools will benefit everyone equally. The fact that these and similar tools are current business technology further reinforces the fact that multimedia enhances understanding in a meeting and is beneficial to everyone.

Hold the Phone

For many jobs, telephone communication is necessary. For a person with hearing loss, this can often be difficult. Following the advice above, figure out what does and doesn't work for you and spin any accommodation requests as ways to increase your productivity, and improve the customer experience. It might be as simple as an amplified handset and acoustically favorable office space. If you already have a Bluetooth receiver for your hearing aid or cochlear implant, maybe they can provide the telephone adapter.

If you need a captioned phone, be prepared to not only request it, but also to provide training and support to internal and external customers on how to use it, what to expect and how this technology makes you a fully contributing member of the team.

If you really can't function competitively on the phone, be honest, but offer alternatives. Maybe the

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company needs a social media manager, and you can interface with customers via the company blog, Twitter and Facebook accounts. Maybe you can be assigned to the segment of the customer base which indicates on surveys that they prefer email contact.

Maybe it's time to cross-train to a department that relies less on the phone. The real key here is to understand and accept that certain telephone-intensive jobs might simply be beyond your capability. This is a tough thing to accept, but the alternative is demonstrating poor performance overall based on one job function. The better alternative is to be honest with yourself and your employer and sell yourself on how well you can do a job where your hearing loss is a non-issue and your performance alone represents your skills.

To Thine Own Self Be True

As I hinted at above, really knowing yourself, your skills and your limitations is essential to mapping out a strategy for success. All the technology in the world won't help if the required duties of the job don't jive with your abilities.

Work with your hearing care professional to really understand how your hearing aid or cochlear implant function in both ideal and adverse conditions. If you haven't already, put some time into some auditory training, either with a speech-language pathologist (audiologists can't bill insurance for these services) or using some of the available

computer-based programs like LACE (www.neurotone.com) or Read My Quips (www.sensesynergy.com/readmyquips).

These programs fine-tune your brain's ability to pull meaning out of sound that is less than ideally mixed for speech understanding. After your "brain boot camp," have your hearing care professional repeat the measures above and share the results with you. This will give you a fairly accurate picture of your potential function in the workplace where listening is never ideal.

Using this data, take a critical look at your current or desired job. List all the functions of the job. Then describe the typical environment where these functions occur in terms of background noise, and reverberation. Finally, and this is the really difficult part, rate your best ability to understand speech in that situation based on the data you collected with your audiologist.

In this matrix, both preparing reports and providing training are functions easily done well, and in relatively favorable listening settings. Of the two, providing training is more favorable in terms of listening conditions. An argument can be made for placing this employee in a primary training role because training employees creates better workers which is more beneficial to the company than preparing reports. In addition, the fact that this occurs in an acoustically more favorable setting will improve productivity due to reduced listening effort. (See my article in the September/October 2013 issue for more on this).

Armed with this information, you can approach your supervisor and make a strong case for assigning you to the job you do best in the environment that is easiest for you to work in. As with all the other modifications discussed above, the key is to spin it as a suggestion to improve productivity and customer experience rather than a request for help.

Something Really New

A relatively new, but really interesting product which might address several of the issues raised above is the

ClearSounds Quattro 4.0 (www.clearsounds.com). At the time I submitted this article, it was still in final testing, but I had the opportunity to check it out at HLAA Convention 2013 in Portland, Oregon. What makes this product really nice for the workplace is that it combines several tools in one package.

It is primarily a Bluetooth receiver for both telephone use (handset and hands-free protocol) and streaming audio applications (A2DP protocol). This lets you use it for phone calls, to connect to computers or TV to hear webinars, training videos, etc., and virtually any audio source with a 3.5mm jack (ClearSounds offers a Bluetooth adapter that plugs in anywhere you'd normally attach headphones).

The signal is then transmitted to the telecoil of your hearing aid or cochlear implant processor via a standard induction neckloop. This is important because unlike Bluetooth systems provided by hearing aid manufacturers, this product will work with any hearing aid or cochlear implant that has a telecoil. More importantly, if you have one of each, you can use one Quattro 4.0 for both.

A really interesting advocacy benefit of this is that you can also share a Quattro with another person who has telecoils. This is a great way to spread the good word about hearing assistive technology. If they don't yet have a hearing aid, or have it without a telecoil, the Quattro 4.0 also has a headphone jack.

The feature that sets the Quattro 4.0 apart from its predecessor and other similar products is the included removable directional microphone. This can be detached from the main unit and clipped on a presenter, placed near a PA speaker or passed around at a meeting. When I listened to it at the Convention, I also found that the zoom effect of that microphone reached out about five feet.

This could make this a really helpful tool in a small group discussion where multiple people are speaking in turn. Rather than passing the mic around, a user could leave it docked to

the main unit around their neck and just rotate their torso slightly to zoom in on different speakers. To really maximize the benefit of this, your hearing care provider should provide you with a telecoil-only program. In this configuration, the room noise will be minimal and only the signals being picked up by the Quattro 4.0 will be heard.

In the interest of full disclosure, I have spoken to ClearSounds on a few occasions about how to improve the product. I have received no monetary compensation, however once the product is released in its final form, I might be given one. If that happens, I plan to give it to my son who has a hearing loss and uses a hearing aid with a telecoil.

It's Quittin' Time!

Hopefully, this article has given you a few ideas about how to analyze, adapt and conquer the hearing hazards of your current and future workplaces. As with everything related to hearing loss, it isn't easy, but neither is it rocket science.

Identifying and controlling for distance, noise and reverberation will get you halfway home. After that, it all comes down to knowing what works for you and helping those around you, particularly your boss, understand that working together to reduce these hazards benefits them as much or more than it benefits you. **HLM**

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provides core knowledge and understanding for individuals who work with, or wish to work with, people impacted by hearing loss. It is not restricted to any one profession or discipline. The program is beneficial to professionals or volunteers who provide support for people with hearing loss.

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www.hearingloss.org.**

