

Hiring Employees with Hearing Loss

What's in it for Employers?

By Valerie Stafford-Mallis

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

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accommodations, companies reported an average of \$40 in benefits.

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.

For a more complete and situation-specific discussion of the legal need-to-know about hiring and on-the-job accommodations, I refer you to *Questions and Answers about Deafness and Hearing Impairments in the Workplace and the Americans with Disabilities Act*, The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, July 26, 2006 www.eeoc.gov/facts/deafness.html.

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 (organizational socialization) for a new employee 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 helping 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.

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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 Management (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 Communicate 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 Association—www.ncra.org—for CART reporters (Communication Access Realtime Translation), also known as speech-to-text **HLM**



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form sign language interpreting. Her highly-acclaimed trainings advise and educate public and private entities on methods that improve communication access for persons with hearing loss and people who have both vision and hearing loss. She is also a member of the HLAA Board of Trustees and lives in Lakewood Ranch, Florida. She can be reached at valerie@accaptions.com.