

**A research report
into hearing loss
in the workplace**

By Laura Matthews

**ACTION ON
HEARING
LOSS**

**UNLIMITED
POTENTIAL?**

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the participants who kindly gave up their time to be interviewed for this research. I would also like to thank my colleagues, and in particular Madeleine Clark who reviewed the literature, as well as Melissa Echaliier, Laura Ringham and Rachel Calton who assisted with the interviews.

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Summary

Ten million people in the UK have hearing loss – one in six of the population. As our society ages this number is set to grow and by 2031 there will be approximately 14.5 million¹ people with hearing loss in the UK. Of those with hearing loss now, around 3.7 million are of working age. With increases to pension and retirement ages, the number of people with hearing loss in the UK workplace will increase. It is therefore important that we understand now the challenges they face, and what solutions can enable them to remain in the workplace as effective staff members.

This report is based on both qualitative and quantitative research undertaken by Action on Hearing Loss. We explored the experiences of 27 people who have lost some or part of their hearing while of working age. Through in-depth interviews we looked at what support they received from their employers and other sources, as well as the gaps in service provision. We also used our 2010 annual survey of members, a substantial quantitative questionnaire, to question our members about employment experiences. These statistics are included throughout the report² and are based on the responses of over 4,000 Action on Hearing Loss members.

Culture

This research found that the culture of an organisation has the biggest impact on the experience that someone with hearing loss has in the workplace. The organisation's values and beliefs influence the support mechanisms available as well as the way that managers and colleagues react to someone with hearing loss.

Losing your hearing can be extremely distressing and many of those affected don't want to admit they have hearing loss. This in turn can impact upon the individual's confidence and generate fears regarding job security. In the annual survey of members only one third (32%) of respondents who lost their hearing while of working age said that this made no difference to them at work. Hearing loss can have a significant impact, however over time and with the right support, a person can learn to adjust to it.

1 Action on Hearing Loss (2011) Hearing Matters

2 A summary of the statistical findings from the annual survey are available at the end of the report and the full findings are also available in the 2010 annual survey report at www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/annualsurvey

Managers' attitudes can be divided into three typologies.

- Passive – broadly supportive but they don't take action. Only likely to take action or make adjustments when requested and even then, this action was often not undertaken promptly.
- Positive action – fully supportive and actively finds out information about support mechanisms and adjustments.
- Negative action – not supportive and possibly discriminatory.

Passive managers were the most common, with positive action managers being the exception. A significant number of participants had managers who displayed negative action behaviours. Managers play a seminal role in the workplace and they need to be flexible and know where to access support for their employees.

In general human resources (HR) and occupational health (OH) teams played a scrutinising role rather than a supportive one. Participants had mixed experiences with colleagues, with some very supportive, others unaware or quickly forgetting. Training on deafness and hearing loss would help to reinforce the importance of adjustments for members of staff within the organisation.

Work environment

Hearing loss can have an immediate impact on communication but it is important that people feel confident in asking for adjustments. Meetings were a problem for most participants due to problems such as background noise and difficulties lipreading. Simple changes can be made to minimise these problems, for example by using equipment such as loop systems and personal listeners, or even using communication support such as a speech-to-text-reporter.

Telephones can be a source of anxiety however alternative methods of communication can be used such as email or face-to-face. Organisations' procurement policies need to be flexible to ensure that specialist equipment can also be purchased such as hearing aid compatible telephones. The office layout can create barriers due to background noise, particularly in open plan offices. Simple changes can be made such as considering where the person with hearing loss should sit in relation to their colleagues and noise sources. A work based assessment would be very useful in highlighting these barriers and solutions.

Adjustments and support

Audiology services are generally focused on the provision of hearing aids and do not provide a holistic service with advice and support tailored to the work environment. Hearing aids can make a vast improvement to people with hearing loss, however it is also important that both the individual and their employer recognise the limitations of the aids and consider other adjustments and equipment to support them.

Access to Work (AtW) is a government scheme to support disabled people with the adjustments needed to undertake their work. However, there was a general lack of awareness among both the person with hearing loss and their employers.

Access to information needs to be improved and as a minimum audiology departments should play a key role in signposting. Participants wanted to try out equipment before they bought it and they also would prefer equipment to look like the standard market version.

Changing jobs and retirement

Hearing loss can have an extremely negative impact on job prospects, with some participants forced to resign or retire early or are made redundant as a result of their hearing loss. Looking for work can be difficult, with some prospective employers dismissive of people with hearing loss. This highlights the importance of organisations supporting and retaining staff that develop hearing loss, as well as the need for specialist support to help people with hearing loss find work.

Solutions

This research has highlighted the need for a variety of solutions to be considered in order to ensure people with hearing loss are effectively supported in the workplace. There is no 'one size fits all' solution for people with hearing loss. They must be supported as individuals, with their particular needs understood. However, relatively easy adjustments and support can be made which will enable a person with hearing loss to continue to work effectively in their organisation. We propose a range of solutions to ensure that this happens.

1. For organisations:

Organisations play a substantial role in supporting employees with hearing loss. Establishing a culture that values and supports people with disabilities will ensure that people with hearing loss are able and willing to stay in their role. There are some simple steps that organisations, particularly through their HR departments, can take to achieve this including training, implementing clear procedures and the provision of information for all staff.

2. For line managers:

Line managers are the people who translate organisational policies and procedures into action and are therefore critical in ensuring that their member of staff is effectively supported. Line managers must take responsibility for encouraging a supportive environment within their team and ensuring that effective adjustments are made.

3. For government:

Government must play a role in improving the experience that people with hearing loss have in the workplace including through raising awareness of the support currently available, such as AtW, as well as legal rights and responsibilities under the Equality Act.

4. For audiology services:

Audiology services are an important source of support for people with hearing loss. However, they must consider the needs of people with hearing loss in a holistic manner, including the individual's workplace environment. Audiology services should provide information and signpost people to other sources of support such as equipment and technology, lipreading classes and AtW.

5. For individuals:

People with hearing loss must also accept some responsibility in ensuring that they benefit from the support and advice available by actively finding information using the internet, through local and national hearing loss charities as well as speaking to their audiologist or hearing aid dispenser. It is also vital that an individual with hearing loss tells their employer about their disability and what adjustments they need.

6. For manufacturers:

Manufacturers of equipment for people with hearing loss should consult with them in order to design a range of products that are both functional and attractive to everybody.

7. We will:

Action on Hearing Loss will continue to play an active role in ensuring more support is provided to people with hearing loss and that no one is isolated through their hearing loss. We will consider further research, update our information, as well as support employers to make their organisations accessible to people with hearing loss.

The full list of solutions is available in the main report, on page 52.

Introduction

Ten million people in the UK have hearing loss – one in six of the population. As our society ages this number is set to grow and by 2031 there will be approximately 14.5 million³ people with hearing loss in the UK. Of those with hearing loss now, around 3.7 million are of working age. With increases to pension and retirement ages, the number of people with hearing loss in the UK workplace will increase. It is therefore important that we understand now the challenges they face, and what solutions can enable them to remain in the workplace as effective staff members.

A review of the literature shows there is a lack of research into the experiences of people who lose their hearing while working. Our existing research shows that people with hearing loss face the prospect of poorer labour market outcomes⁴. This may include people leaving paid work as a result of developing hearing loss, as well as negative experiences within the work environment.

We therefore undertook research looking specifically at the experiences of people who lose their hearing while of working age. We wanted to find out what impact hearing loss has had on their employment experiences, if any, including their opportunities for progression. We also wanted to find out what support they were given both in the workplace and externally, as well as what support they would like to receive.

Legally, people with hearing loss are protected from discrimination in employment by the Equality Act 2010 (previously the Disability Discrimination Act). All employers are covered by the Equality Act and workers are protected by it everywhere except in the armed forces. Employers are required to make reasonable adjustments to enable a disabled person to work in a role and it is illegal for employers to make the disabled worker pay for this adjustment. The reasonableness of an adjustment is determined by numerous factors including how effective it is, whether it is practical, how much it costs, the resources of the organisation, and the availability of financial support. In theory therefore, people who lose their hearing while at work should be supported and adjustments made by their employer.

³ Action on Hearing Loss (2011) Hearing Matters

⁴ Baker, M. (2006) Opportunity Blocked; RNID

Research methodology

We interviewed 27 people with acquired hearing loss about their experiences in the workplace. We also included quantitative questions in the annual survey of members. The questionnaire was sent with the June 2010 issue of our membership magazine and we received over 7,000 completed questionnaires. The majority of respondents to the annual survey, three fifths, said that they were employed when they lost or began to lose their hearing. These statistics are included throughout the report.

Report structure

The report begins by looking at the impact of culture upon the way hearing loss is dealt with in the workplace, including the attitudes of managers and colleagues. The barriers created by the work environment and possible solutions will then be discussed, followed by other adjustments and support that is available for both people with hearing loss and their employers.

Chapter 1: Culture

This research has found that the culture of an organisation has the biggest impact on a person with hearing loss's experience in the workplace. Culture includes the organisation's values and beliefs, which influence the way in which managers and colleagues respond to someone with hearing loss. A supportive and flexible culture can enable a person with hearing loss to continue to fulfil their role effectively. Conversely, an environment that is not willing to adapt or respond to a person's hearing loss will make it very difficult for them to work effectively, and may even force them to leave the organisation. This finding is consistent with previous research by Schur et al (2009) which found that a responsive corporate culture is especially beneficial to employees with disabilities⁵.

This chapter will begin by looking at the impact that a diagnosis of hearing loss can have on an individual. It is important that both employers and people with hearing loss recognise this impact and take appropriate action to reduce its effects. We will then examine relationships with managers and colleagues and communication more generally.

Diagnosis – reactions and responses

Being diagnosed with hearing loss can have a substantial impact on the individual concerned. For some it can be a very distressing period.

“At the time I was devastated. I remember sitting in my car outside the hospital sobbing uncontrollably.” (Yorkshire and Humber, female)

“I think I was really quite frightened but everything happened very quickly.” (London and South East, female)

“It was a bit of a body blow really because when you've got what you think normal hearing for 51 and a half years and then all of a sudden, bang you need hearing aids. Here I am now nearly two and a half years down the line of wearing them and I'm only very slowly now coming to terms with it all.” (North West, male)

“It's a shocking thing at any age and you don't get any support with that.” (Yorkshire and the Humber, female)

As this participant highlights, people may need time to grieve and accept the loss of their hearing.

⁵ Schur, L., Kruse, D., Blasi, J., and Blanck, P. (2009) 'Is Disability Disabling in all workplaces? Workplace disparities and corporate culture', *Industrial Relations*, vol 48, no.3.

“You haven’t even grieved for what you have lost and then the next minute you’re back and you’re expected to continue to be okay. But because after that I had some annual leave so in a way it helped me more to accept what I am going through.” (London and South East, female)

One participant already had some hearing loss in one ear, and then started to lose their hearing in the other ear.

“For my right [ear] to start going was very distressing and very difficult. So that first day was difficult but scary as well. But it got even scarier after that.” (East of England, male)

Due to hearing loss in the family, two participants mentioned that they were expecting to lose their hearing, although this did not necessarily make it easier for them to accept it. Being in denial was a common theme and this supports findings from previous research⁶.

“I don’t think I accepted that I need one [hearing aid].” (South West, female)

“Once I had the diagnosis that I did have hearing loss, I found it quite difficult but I suppose I was in denial for a bit as well.” (North West, male)

Denial may in part be due to the association between hearing loss and ageing. Some participants view hearing loss as something that develops with age, and they do not feel they are old enough to have it.

“When I had my ears tested privately, I was a little bit shocked because I said I’m not old, you associate this sort of thing with older people.” (East Midlands, male)

“I just thought I was invincible and I might be getting old, but you don’t see yourself as getting old, you still feel the same person inside.” (Scotland, female)

Few participants talked about accepting their hearing loss. One participant had been seriously ill due to meningitis and therefore felt that this put his hearing loss into perspective.

“My illness had been so serious, and I just feel lucky that I am still here at all.” (London and South East, male)

⁶ Echaliier, M. (2009) Hidden Crisis: why millions keep quiet about hearing loss, RNID; Matthews, L. (2011) Seen but not heard, RNID

Unlimited potential?

More commonly participants were fearful with regards to the impact their hearing loss might have on their work, how able they were to do the job and fears of the reaction from their managers and colleagues.

“When I first lost all of my hearing I felt like my life was going down the tubes. I felt my life was over in terms of my career and stuff like that.” (Scotland, male)

“I have a mortgage that I have to pay and sometimes I’m so afraid to be telling them and then in the end they might be saying, oh we have to lay you off.” (London and South East, female)

Although many were fearful, it was the exception for participants to be reassured by their employer that their role was secure.

“Everyone was extremely positive, if anything my boss and work colleagues made me feel better about it, it was alright so you’ve got hearing loss, don’t worry, your job is safe.” (South West, female)

Another fear that was expressed was losing the remainder of their hearing, particularly in relation to the impact this could have on their employment.

“I was scared it would get worse and worse until i couldn’t work, and I was only 39.” (Yorkshire and Humber, female)

“Am I going to wake up another morning and have lost another sizeable chunk, because that really frightens me, if I can’t hear at all.” (London and South East, female)

A diagnosis of hearing loss can therefore be extremely traumatic, and as one participant stated, people may need time to grieve. There are also added complications of the association with old age and the likelihood of denial. Previous research⁷ found those who link their difficulties with the natural ageing process are less likely to believe that they need any adjustments in their role. This link with ageing could therefore prevent a person with hearing loss from seeking help and adjustments. It is important that employers recognise the major impact that losing hearing can have on an individual. They should be flexible and supportive to enable their employee to accept their hearing loss and to deal with it. Employers need to also be aware of the mechanisms in place to support their employees.

7 McMullin, J.A. and Shuey, K.M (2006) ‘Ageing, disability and workplace accommodations’, Ageing and Society, 26, 831-847

Initial impact at work

Prior to any adjustments, hearing loss can have a substantial impact on an individual at work. In the annual survey of members, only one third (32%) of respondents who lost their hearing while of working age said that losing their hearing made no difference to them at work.

A sudden loss of hearing can have a profound impact on the individual's work initially.

“At the start... my work was really impaired... I just couldn't hear properly in many situations. I couldn't use the phone, in meetings I couldn't hear, most situations I couldn't hear.” (London and South East, male)

However, over time adjustments can be made which enable the person with hearing loss to work effectively. Some participants lost their hearing gradually and they described implementing strategies to minimise the impact of their hearing loss, often done subconsciously. For example, sitting in specific seats for meetings, during home visits asking people to turn the television or radio off, or using their telephone on a specific ear.

“I suppose I coped by doing little things, for instance I would always hold the telephone to my right ear, I can't remember the last time I ever held it to my left ear and it was just something I automatically did.” (East of England, female)

“As long as I lean forward and people were careful and spoke like BBC news readers then, you know I got by, just.” (East of England, male)

“More and more often I had to develop a repertoire of compensating behaviours.” (South West, male)

One participant needed to talk to members of the public, and this was normally done over the telephone. However, she increasingly visited people in their home in order to avoid using the telephone which then had implications for her work productivity.

“So I found myself taking much more time to do the same work.” (Yorkshire and Humber, female)

Support from colleagues was hugely beneficial.

“Several days later it became apparent that I was having real difficulty and for one important client another advisor had to accompany me. He couldn't have done the meeting on his own because it was my speciality but he had to go along with me and write notes.” (East of England, male)

Hearing loss had an impact upon participants' confidence. They feared that their colleagues or managers would think they were unable to do their job properly, and for some people this resulted in keeping their problems a secret, or working extra hard to try and deal with the problems.

“So I kept quiet and kept working, to the point where I was working twice as hard as everyone else to prove that I can do it.” (West Midlands, male)

“I simply worried more about it and apologised more and just tried my best to cope and hope that tomorrow would be okay.” (East of England, male)

“You sort of lose your confidence and you think I can't do this.” (West Midlands, female)

“It could have repercussions if it was to do with something important... more than a couple of times I had to backtrack, and we suddenly realised, hang on a minute can I work at this level anymore. You start to question, and your confidence starts to erode.” (South West, male)

This is confirmed by our annual survey of members, which found two fifths of respondents who lost their hearing while in work felt less confident in their abilities as a result⁸. One in three (34%) said losing their hearing made them less confident in taking on new work and responsibilities. One in eight (12%) felt less valued at work after losing their hearing.

However, for many these fears were unfounded.

“I don't ever remember there being an incident where something went horribly wrong because I couldn't hear so it was a worry that never came to actually blossom.” (London and South East, female)

Over time participants adapted their roles and ways of working in response to their hearing loss. Common changes including communicating more by email or face-to-face rather than by telephone, and by reducing the number of large meetings they attend.

“I'd say I've adapted to the job that I've done, with the problem I've got. But I suppose I have just concentrated on ways of working that work for me, and so I am a little bit lighter on face-to-face meetings than perhaps I might otherwise be, but nevertheless they are still there, when necessary.” (London and South East, male)

⁸ A summary of the statistical findings from the annual survey are available at the end of the report and the full findings are also available in the 2010 annual survey report at www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/annualsurvey

It is clear that hearing loss can have a significant impact in the workplace environment. This includes problems communicating as well as impacting on an individual's confidence. It is therefore important that employees are supported and encouraged. The work environment may unintentionally increase the stress that a person with hearing loss feels and people may fear their hearing loss will impact on their ability to do their job. With sufficient time people with hearing loss can discover what adjustments work best for them and enable them to continue working in their role.

Managers

Managers can play a vital role in supporting their employee with hearing loss. In the annual survey of members, just over one third (37%) of people who lost their hearing while of working age chose to tell their employer about their hearing loss. This will have a big impact on the adjustments and support an employer can offer. It is therefore important that people with hearing loss feel comfortable in telling their manager about their hearing loss and it is important that managers then discuss what adjustments are needed to support them.

On the whole participants told their managers about their hearing loss, although this was often only after hearing aids had been fitted. As discussed above, people who develop hearing loss can be fearful telling others about it and worry about the implications this will have on their job.

“I didn't feel at the time that I was confident enough to go and speak to my manager about it because he was very much, at the time, he was very much old school and I think it was that perpetuation, the fear that it was going to be, “Right, you're off and somebody can have your locker and we'll have a buffet when you go”. (North West, male)

“He is not the most approachable person for the position he is in but I am quite a forceful person usually so I could deal with him pretty alright or so I thought. But in actual fact I wasn't really dealing with it, probably not saying and doing the things I would normally have done had I been feeling well.” (London and South East, female)

There were mixed reactions and attitudes amongst managers.

These attitudes can be divided into:

- passive
- positive action; and
- negative action.

Unlimited potential?

Passive managers are broadly supportive but don't take action. The majority of participants had passive managers. These were generally sympathetic but this did not translate into active support. They were only likely to take action or make adjustments when requested and even then, this action was often not undertaken promptly. Passive managers generally rely on the person with hearing loss to inform them of their needs and the support that is available.

**“I've had to find my own help basically, and I've had to be proactive.”
(London and South East, Male)**

**“I wouldn't say they've gone out of their way to ever do anything to be helpful.”
(East of England, female)**

“My employer knew nothing about it, in fact I had to print all the stuff off the RNID website and give them it.” (Scotland, male)

Positive action is when an employer positively supports their employee and actively finds out information about hearing loss and the support mechanisms available.

“I think I was incredibly lucky in that I was in a really, really caring environment so they supported me and helped me.” (London and South East, female)

Despite being at the company as a temporary member of staff, this participant felt fully supported by her employer.

**“The first day was basically a team meeting and she says, so tell us how you feel about being deaf and how we can work it out between us. Fine I said, brilliant and we worked together and I loved it there. They were brilliant.”
(West Midlands, female)**

Employers do not necessarily have to be experts on hearing loss, but a willingness to learn and to take action to support the person with hearing loss is vital.

“The employer was brilliant. They didn't know anything about how to support a deaf person, but were willing to learn from it, and they acknowledge, you are the first one, and it will be good to learn about it. So this was completely different to where I used to work.” (North West, female)

An employer with a positive action attitude was very much the exception. This is confirmed by the annual survey, where only 14% of respondents said their employer made every effort to help them. A few participants described their employers having some aspects of positive action, but were passive in most other respects.

Some participants described their managers as displaying negative action behaviour. This behaviour is not supportive of the individual and may even be discriminatory.

“More demands were being made... going to meetings, and attending training days. And so I found myself getting more and more tired, because I was lip reading ...So it just built up, and I just got harassed by my line manager, and her line manager, and I just went off ill then for five months... my line manager knew about the disability, because I explained to her what I needed... but it was almost like she doubted me.” (North West, female)

“He hadn’t been helpful to other people. If somebody say came back to work after being in hospital for breaking a leg and on crutches, he was very unwilling to make any changes.” (South West, female)

We asked respondents what changes had been made to their role, if any, after their diagnosis of hearing loss. Two participants’ roles were changed substantially by their employer. One person working for a local authority was moved from his public facing role.

“Their response was to put me in a room on my own for six months archiving files... it was soul destroying.” (Scotland, male)

Another participant was moved from his usual role in a prison due to health and safety concerns.

“I was then office bound for about three months and I didn’t mind that because (1) it was a break, (2) it was different.” (North West, male)

However, this participant continued to be moved to different roles as his management struggled to find him one appropriate for his hearing loss. This seemingly positive action may be completely inappropriate. It may have been possible for these individuals to remain in their roles if they were supported and given time to adjust. This highlights the lack of awareness that many managers have about what action they can and should take to support their employee with hearing loss.

“She kept saying to me, you are nuisance and I don’t know what to do with you.” (West Midlands, female)

“My manager knew I was deaf, my manager laughed at me when I said, I am really struggling with phones. I mean in a good humoured way, but it still says something about his level of awareness.” (Yorkshire and Humber, female)

Managers play a seminal role in the experience that a person with hearing loss has in their workplace. It is therefore vital that managers take a positive action approach to supporting their employees. They must be flexible and know where to access support for their employee. This can be achieved through deaf awareness training as well as through the provision of information about support mechanisms. Managers should be prepared to learn about their employee's disability and to take on the responsibility for ensuring that adjustments are made in a timely manner. An organisation should also play a key role in encouraging their staff to take a positive role in supporting their employees.

HR and Occupational Health

Some participants were referred to or decided to speak to their human resources (HR) or occupational health (OH) team. However, these teams only provided limited support to the person with hearing loss. Several participants reported extremely negative experiences with these teams including being warned that their job may be at risk.

“The HR people said to me ...even if we make reasonable adjustments for you, whatever they might be, after that we reserve the right to either move you to another post which could be at a lower rate of pay or indeed terminate your employment. That was the level of support from HR.” (Scotland, male)

“I got a letter from HR to confirm that I was going to be assessed by Occupational Therapy and that the point of the assessment would be to assess my capability of doing the job, and if the assessment was negative then necessary action might have to be taken.” (East of England, male)

A head teacher asked to be referred to occupational health for reassurance, however they did not offer her any support.

“I didn't want some parent to accuse me of something; I was really watching my own back”. (London and South East, female)

OH teams did however make some participants aware of Access to Work which is an important source of support.

Employees, managers and/or employers turn to HR and OH teams for information and support. However, people with hearing loss feel they are performing a scrutinising role rather than a supportive one. It is important that HR and OH departments are aware of the legal requirements to support disabled employees and are aware of the legal requirement to make adjustments. People with hearing loss could benefit significantly if these teams had some awareness of the barriers they face and the possible solutions available. This could include advising staff on assistive equipment.

Colleagues

In the annual survey, less than half (45%) of respondents who lost their hearing while of working age told their colleagues about their hearing loss. This means that people with hearing loss are not getting the benefits from sharing this information about their disability.

“I talked to my line managers and they were good and in fact one of them said something that helped me more than anything else ever has done. She said that I had to tell the rest of the staff... the reason she basically thought that everybody should know was that it put some of the responsibility onto them as to how they communicated with me and that’s the single most helpful thing that anybody has ever said to me and it is why I do tell people because I think well you now have a responsibility to make sure you look at me or it makes it easier for me to say sorry, will you look at me.” (Scotland, female)

The concept of sharing the responsibility to communicate is extremely interesting. Supportive colleagues may be more willing to take on this shared role while others may see adjustments as solely the responsibility of the person with hearing loss.

Worryingly, in the annual survey only 27% of respondents felt their colleagues were supportive when they lost their hearing and 17% reported feeling isolated at work. Feeling isolated and unsupported in the work environment can cause stress, resulting in sickness absence, staff turnover and poor performance.

These mixed experiences are mirrored amongst the interview participants. Attitudes varied, with some colleagues responsive to changing their behaviour while others forgot or did not try.

“Some of them are better than others, some of them shout at me across the room, and I can’t hear them.” (London and South East, male)

Many participants reported extremely supportive colleagues.

“I think everybody was very kind because I’m quite an open sort of person. So staff meetings, I had all the teachers sitting round and I said look, I have got a problem here. The teachers were kind and they always knew they had to face me.” (London and South East, female)

This also extended to the people whom participants were managing.

“I was only managing two people at the time, but they were both incredibly supportive.” (Yorkshire and Humber, female)

“I’m a senior manager now, so I have a team of people, seven at the moment. Funnily enough three of us wear hearing aids, and another two have hearing problems. They have all been open about their loss for the first time after finding out I am deaf. We all look out for each other.” (Yorkshire and Humber, female)

One team adjusted their roles to enable their manager with hearing loss to work more effectively. He moved away from an outwardly facing role to doing more of the internal management and administrative work, and his colleagues took on more of the external engagement work. This would not have been possible without their agreement and support.

For some participants, their colleagues were willing to make small adjustments such as emailing instead of phoning, or through changing their behaviour in meetings. Many participants talked about their colleagues initially changing their behaviour but then soon forgetting. This could be partly due to low levels of deaf awareness. If a person is not aware of the impact their behaviour can have on a person with hearing loss, they will not consider the adjustments important. Deaf awareness training could therefore help to reinforce to colleagues the importance of supporting their colleague with hearing loss.

“Some people don’t know how to compensate, and some people start compensating then forget.” (London and South East, male)

“They have a better understanding on a personal level and are very supportive but when it comes to the logistics of being hard of hearing I don’t think they quite understand. I’ve said to them when you’re talking to me make sure I’m actually looking at you so I can concentrate but half the time they’re sat at their desk or doing something and they will be chatting to me and I haven’t got a clue that they’re chatting to me.” (South West, female)

“I always introduce myself, I am ...I have a hearing loss, I am really dependent on lip reading, please keep your hands away from your mouth when you are speaking. As I said before, peoples’ brains retain that information for about 30 seconds.” (Yorkshire and Humber, female)

Some participants reported being teased by colleagues because of their hearing loss. However, only one person was upset by this behaviour. The others thought it was part of the culture of their organisation and were not offended.

“I’d laugh it off but I think there were a few comments from colleagues, you know, I had a couple of people who were mocking and doing sign language because I wasn’t hearing them.” (North West, male)

However, some participants did report colleagues displaying negative or even discriminatory behaviour towards them.

“The attitude in the office changed and people started to avoid me, because they didn’t understand what this hidden disability is all about. And so they couldn’t face me, or they wouldn’t write down on a piece of paper, you notice I always have a pen and paper now, I don’t go anywhere without it.” (London and South East, male)

“I got so used to people with their reaction of being quite short tempered or quite impatient about somebody who doesn’t catch what they say first time, and then they speak slightly more aggressively, slightly more louder.” (East of England, male)

It is clear from these quotes that they have been forced to adapt and in some ways accept the discriminatory attitudes of others.

Several participants relied on other colleagues with hearing loss or other disabilities to support them and provide advice. Some of the participants also talked about taking on a mentoring and supporting role in their work place for other employees with hearing loss.

“I’ve identified a number of deaf colleagues in my organisation who have been incredibly supportive.” (Yorkshire and Humber, female)

“I have met quite a few people with hearing loss ...we sort of get together and swap notes sometimes... I think that’s quite reassuring as well. There are some very senior people as well who are suffering with the same issues.” (North West, male)

Being able to talk to someone in a similar position with hearing loss was thought to be useful by participants; however they were often unsure about how to access these networks. Age was also important, with participants keen to talk to other people of a similar age.

“I sometimes feel that what I am going through it would be nice to have a support group, you know people of my age or something who are going through what I am going through... You know you are not really all alone.” (London and South East, female)

“The people who have lost their hearing all seem to be old, and even in the lip reading group I’m the only one there under 60 so I can’t seem to find anyone I can relate to, somebody of my age and I’m sure I’m not the only 37 year old deaf woman.” (South West, female)

Social situations in the workplace were a common source of difficulties for participants.

“If there’s a tea break, and there are 20 people round the table, there is lots of banter going on, and I really struggle to catch it, and to get involved, and it’s quite an important part of work morale, so that is a difficulty.” (London and South East, male)

“I started becoming isolated and working on a project abroad for example, I found it difficult to take part in the...banter and the repartee especially after work in the pub.” (Scotland, male)

“I just gave up going to the staffroom because people were saying things like did anyone see such and such on telly last night, and I had no idea what they were talking about. So you just kind of withdraw and I was feeling a little bit miserable.” (South West, female)

In general participants were less likely to speak up to their colleagues about problems faced in social situations and informal conversations than they are in work specific situations.

“I did find it hard when people were together, say at break times, and all chatting. I didn’t feel able to say that I couldn’t hear... just because it would stop the flow of the conversation and I think my self-esteem was a lot lower at that time, so I didn’t think it was important that I was involved. I used to read the paper instead.” (Yorkshire and Humber, female)

“I miss out on the conversation and I am sitting there like a dummy because I am frightened to say something in case I have picked up the wrong thread of the conversation and then they are like what the bloody hell are you on about so I would rather not say anything.” (London and South East, female)

One participant mentioned losing friends at work due to his hearing loss and their lack of understanding over how to communicate with him.

Participants therefore had mixed experiences with colleagues. Some were extremely supportive, making adjustments to enable their colleague with hearing loss to work effectively. Others were unaware of how to change their behaviour or quickly forgot. Deaf awareness training for staff would help to raise awareness of the importance of adjustments for a person with hearing loss, to ensure their working experience remains a positive one. Managers must also be aware of relationships within their teams to ensure that discriminatory behaviour is not tolerated. Social situations appear to be the main area that participants withdrew from as they are able to do so without impacting on their work. However, as these quotes show, this can have an isolating effect on the individual. Colleagues and managers must therefore ensure that they involve people with hearing loss in all areas of the workplace environment, including social situations. This can be reinforced through deaf awareness training to ensure that an inclusive work environment is created.

Communication

Communicating can be difficult for people with hearing loss. Participants talked of feeling nervous or stressed when communicating, both in person and by telephone, due to the fear of not hearing properly. One participant working at a reception desk stated that she will leave the desk if she sees an unfamiliar person entering the building as she finds communicating with new people difficult. While her colleagues and manager are aware of her hearing loss, she has not confided in them about this issue.

Lots of participants spoke about needing to ask colleagues to repeat themselves regularly as they couldn’t hear what they had said, or making an inappropriate response during a conversation.

“I was struggling and I was making up what I thought people were saying to me.” (Scotland, female)

“People were saying things to me and I was replying and I could tell by their response that I had clearly got the wrong thing.” (South West, female)

Those who lost their hearing gradually generally didn't realise they had done so for quite some time. One participant said he remembered thinking people were saying strange things. Another said they realised due to other people pointing things out that they had not heard, or had misheard.

“The first thing you notice about yourself suddenly everyone is telling you, I told you that, and you don't remember hearing it, because you didn't. The second thing is you say, pardon me, what, a lot, and it becomes a habit of speech that you are not conscious of anymore, and people say, do you know how many times you've said, pardon me, and then all of a sudden you realise, why am I doing that, oh yes I do don't I? Then you realise, why is that, and you've got to figure out that you are deaf, you've actually got to figure out that, I am not hearing things properly.” (South West, male)

“If they were talking behind me, I quite often would get a tap on the shoulder and people say, “Did you not hear me”?” (North West, male)

Communicating when you have hearing loss can be very tiring, particularly if the loss is relatively recent and the person has not yet adjusted to it.

“The only thing is that to stay ahead of everybody else I had to run twice as fast, because being deaf is very tiring when you're listening to people trying to understand people, and you have to work a hell of a lot harder to do what you did quite easily prior to going deaf.” (East of England, male)

Many participants talked about initially not feeling confident in asking people to repeat things or in making other people aware of their hearing loss. However many participants recognised confidence was important to aid communication.

“I think if I was more confident with the situation I was in and be able to explain to them what I need then it would be alright.” (South West, female)

“I bless the fact I am fairly large, fairly robust, fairly confident, or some will say arrogant. I have been a trade unionist for most of my life so I am used to standing up and speaking. So I cope with it but there are still huge obstacles in my way.” (Wales, male)

As time goes on, people are more accepting of their hearing loss, have a greater understanding of their needs, and therefore are often more confident in asking for adjustments.

**“I’ve learned so much since then, and I wish I had known that years ago.”
(North West, female)**

“Over the last six years I became more and more confident.” (Scotland, male)

“When I went to the new job I thought, right, I am going to make sure everybody knows about my deafness, I need the support, I was much more proactive about it, and they were brilliant, really supportive.” (North West, female)

Hearing loss has an immediate impact on communication. People in the workplace should be aware of these implications, and be encouraged to support their colleagues and for others to take action on their hearing loss. People with hearing loss need to feel confident in telling others about the adjustments they need and this will often develop over time.

Chapter 2: Work environment

The work environment can create barriers to people with hearing loss. However, some relatively easy adjustments can be made to ensure that these do not cause a particular problem for employees with hearing loss.

Meetings

Overwhelmingly, large meetings were an issue for most participants. This is due to numerous reasons. The speaker will often be further away from the person with hearing loss than in a normal conversation and therefore their voice is quieter. Large meetings can also generate background noise such as shuffling papers or more than one person speaking at once. A person with hearing loss may have problems distinguishing the speaker's voice from this background noise.

“We would have guest speakers at conventions ... and if I sat near the back I simply couldn't hear what they were saying.” (Scotland, male)

“Life was a succession of meetings and they had to become more structured in that people had to talk one at a time.” (London and South East, female)

Technology such as hearing aids, listening devices and loop systems can be very effective in improving communication during meetings.

“Now with digital hearing aids, and other technology they really do help me and help me with my job. Without that I would be lost really.” (London and South East, male)

“The technology I think is probably the thing that has made it more easy for me to get to where I am now than any other.” (Scotland, male)

However, previous research⁹ has found that people are not always aware of what loop systems are or how to put their hearing aid on the T setting. However, this setting is important for use with assistive technology and so it is important that audiology departments ensure that people are given the option of having a loop setting programmed into their hearing aid and are trained in how to use it.

One participant described normally wearing only one hearing aid, but during meetings he will put in his second hearing aid to help with communication.

“My hearing is at a comfortable level with just the one aid. I do carry the other one and if I'm in difficult surroundings, I put the other one in.” (North West, male)

9 Matthews, L. (2011) Seen but not heard, RNID.

Some participants use a personal listener, which uses a microphone to pick up voices and then transmit it direct to the individual's hearing aid. This helps to amplify the sound and cut out background noise.

“I've nearly always got this [personal listener] with me. People don't know what it is, so I tell them.” (London and South East, male)

“[The personal listener] gave me the guts and courage to keep doing it.” (East of England, male)

One participant talked about planning ahead when attending meetings or conferences, checking in advance if a loop system would be available.

People with hearing loss can find it difficult to judge the direction from which a sound is coming from, and therefore may find it difficult to follow a discussion. They may also rely on lipreading and the seating arrangements and room layout can therefore have an impact on how easily a person with hearing loss can follow a conversation.

“In meetings I'd try to manipulate where I sat just so I could get to see more faces a bit clearer.” (London and South East, female)

In this case, round tables were mentioned as useful in aiding lipreading as they allow the person with hearing loss to see all faces around the table.

One participant taught IT, and so all of the children were sat facing away from her which made lipreading extremely difficult.

Taking minutes can also be difficult for someone relying on lipreading.

“If I put my head down to write I then would miss what they're saying and they have to repeat it.” (South West, female)

The acoustics of a room as well as background noise inside and outside of the room can have an impact on the ability of a person with hearing loss to participate in meetings.

“If there was a room and it was playtime and the children were in the playground just outside the window, that was a total no go.” (London and South East, female)

“I am perhaps more inclined to book meeting rooms than I did previously, so rather than just meet somebody at my desk, and have a chat with other people around, I will make the effort and book a meeting room every time, so we’ve got somewhere quiet, and I am a bit more selective about which meeting rooms I book as well, because some of the meeting rooms have ceiling fans in, and I can’t hear when they are on.” (Yorkshire and Humber, female)

Several participants talked about their colleagues supporting them in meetings. For example, by taking notes or minutes to enable them to focus on lipreading.

“I didn’t take minutes because I couldn’t write and listen, I needed to be looking at the person but somebody else would take them and I would write them up at a later date so I sort of compromised.” (Scotland, female)

“My immediate colleagues are generally very helpful, very obliging, and if they know I am going to go to a meeting where I might not be able to hear generally I will ask them if they can take notes.” (Yorkshire and Humber, female)

Another participant talked about needing the support of his colleagues to ensure that his listening equipment was effective.

“Everybody was doing a five minute presentation. So the big microphone is sitting in the middle of the table, it makes you feel like self-conscious about it, and every time it went to a different person to speak they had to move the microphone, I guess that comes with the territory. But they do, I haven’t felt any stigma at all.” (London and South East, Male)

It is therefore important that both employers and colleagues are aware of loop and infrared systems so that they are installed and used correctly. This information could be provided at staff induction and/or during deaf awareness training.

Some participants asked their colleagues to make adjustments however this was often forgotten or ignored.

“I have to say it was never, ever taken on board in terms of being quiet in meetings because our meetings tended to be noisy and I struggled during them.” (Scotland, female)

Communication support such as a lipspeaker or speech-to-text-reporter can help a person with hearing loss in meetings. However, none of the participants interviewed for this research had used communication support. While some participants thought that communication support would be useful they felt that this was a great expense and often felt their hearing loss was not severe enough to warrant this.

“Thing that did cross my mind is that I could do with a lip speaker... I don't think I am deaf enough to need that much help. But actually my partner and daughter do that for me in social situations... I am aware that it's quite expensive, it's quite an expensive luxury... to describe myself as disabled, let alone say I need an assistant.” (Yorkshire and Humber, female)

This suggests that participants and their employers did not explore the full range of options available to them to support them in the workplace. A lipspeaker or any other form of communication support should not be considered a luxury. They can play a vital role in supporting communication for people with hearing loss. More information should be provided to ensure that people are fully aware of the options available to them including the funding mechanisms to help pay for this support.

Relatively simple adjustments can be made to make the experience of meetings easier for people with hearing loss. Some adjustments cost nothing and could make a significant difference to a person's ability to participate in a meeting. For example, adjusting the seating arrangements so that the person with hearing loss can see everyone's face, ensuring only one person speaks at a time, and choosing a meeting room with good acoustics and minimum external background noise. The support of colleagues in making these adjustments is vital and this should be reinforced through the organisations' values, management and training.

Telephone

The level of an individual's hearing loss will vary the extent to which they can use a voice telephone. Some participants were able to use the telephone while others had to find alternative methods of communication.

“I have a perfectly reasonable telephone conversation with some people, and other people I just can't make out what they are saying at all. The lack of the lip reading extenuates it and then also there are certain individuals that I find difficult, just the way that they speak.” (London and South East, male)

There was initially a fear of using the telephone.

“I think I was very frightened by phones at first but we put it up to full volume and I can cope. I can cope on the phone as long as I know what the conversation is about. If I pick it up and it's somebody who I don't know and they talk too quickly, I couldn't cope with that at all.” (London and South East, female)

“I had to learn to use a phone. That was the hardest barrier. So I had a coupler that I used to put on the phone, but I made a mess of all the phone calls, their names I couldn't get hold of. The people around me were brilliant, they said 'don't worry about it, if they need to get in touch with us they will ring again'.” (North West, female)

A coupler enables the hearing aid to be used on the loop setting. This can either be built into the telephone or as an extra piece of equipment you attach to the phone to make it hearing aid compatible.

It is important that the individual accepts their hearing loss in order to deal with it. One participant told people she had a bad telephone line rather than admit to hearing loss.

“I'm sorry, we've got a really bad line, can you repeat that.” (London and South East, female)

It is important that the person with hearing loss makes other people aware of their preferred method of communication. In general, most participants who reduced their reliance on the telephone did not find that this had a negative impact on their work.

“I try and arrange it so that almost none of my business is done by telephone. Very few people phone me. So it tends to be external people touting for business.” (London and South East, male)

“I basically wrote people emails saying, if you want to contact me I'd prefer you to email me because I'm having a problem with my hearing.” (North West, male)

Depending upon their level of hearing loss, some people are still able to use a voice telephone. This can be supported through the use of hearing aid compatible phones, using a phone with adjustable volume, or through listening devices.

However, the workplace may not always be supportive or aware of the importance of these adjustments to help someone with hearing loss use the telephone or they may have restrictive policies and procedures in place which do not allow for any deviation. For example, one participant described spending hours researching hearing aid compatible mobile phones. However, despite giving her IT department a list of suitable phones, they then failed to order the correct one.

“So they ordered me a [name of mobile phone] not on my list, and I got it, and I couldn’t hear it, and I sat and cried... A couple of days later I’d calmed down a bit, I rang IT and said, look you’ve ordered me the wrong phone, the ones that I need are on this list. They said, ‘oh you can’t get them, you can only get them in India’. I have used one in the [name of mobile phone company] shop, so I am being fobbed off.” (Yorkshire and Humber, female)

Another participant was passed between departments as there were no clear procedures in place to deal with this situation.

“I went from IT to Occupational Health. Occupational Health said you should ring IT and I went, I’ve had enough, you put Positive about Disabled People all over everything, I am putting in a complaint to the Equalities Officer. I got ...landline phone inside a week at that point.” (Yorkshire and Humber, female)

Another participant talked about the lack of awareness of the engineer responsible for changing their phone.

“The final straw was when the engineer turned around and says ‘why can’t you use a normal phone like normal people’. And I thought I’ve had enough, I’m not taking it”. (West Midlands, female)

From the quotes above, it is clear that the personnel in the procurement department and the engineer are not aware of the barriers that can be faced by people with hearing loss. This can have an extremely negative impact upon the individual with hearing loss. It is important that all staff in an organisation are deaf and disability aware, and not only those people who work directly with people with hearing loss. It is also important that advice and support is available to employers regarding hearing loss and how to help employees with hearing loss. It should not be the sole responsibility of the person with hearing loss to investigate and organise adjustments.

The telephone is no longer the dominant method of communication in the workplace today due to the advent of email, internet and video communication. This means that a person with hearing loss is able to continue to work effectively without relying on a voice telephone. However it is possible for people with some hearing to continue using a phone with various adjustments such as amplifiers and loop systems. Organisations need to ensure that their policies and procedures, particularly around procurement, do not prevent or create unnecessary delays in purchasing equipment and other adjustments.

Office layout

Background noise was a common problem for participants. This is because hearing aids are not able to discriminate between, and filter out, background sound to the same extent that the ear can. The current trend for open plan offices creates particular difficulties for people with hearing loss due to the absence of walls and partitions to absorb background noise.

“Your hearing aids amplify everything, they amplify the person over there telling a joke that they don’t want everybody to hear, they amplify the air conditioner above your head.” (North West, male)

Background noise can also create particular difficulties when using the telephone.

“It is very distracting when you have got a phone on this ear and all this noise around you on your deaf ear. It is really off putting. So then it makes it difficult for you to hear what’s been said in the good ear.” (London and South East, female)

Some participants had their own office due to their seniority in the organisation, and they felt this helped with their hearing loss.

The acoustics of offices and meeting rooms can be improved through simple changes such as laying a carpet and reducing the number of hard surfaces. However, in some situations, it may be necessary to apply more complex acoustic treatments such as special ceiling tiles and acoustic absorbers on walls. A consultant that specialises in building/architectural acoustics should be consulted.

Participants wanted to be positioned in the office so that they are able to see their colleagues for lipreading purposes as well as to be aware when someone is coming towards them.

“Obviously I need to change desks. Selfishly it would probably be somewhere where I could sit and see what was going on in the office, probably at the top of the office or at the bottom of the office to be more aware of people passing and see what’s going on.” (Scotland, female)

“There’s a wall in front of me and then my boss’s office is behind that wall partition and then we’ve got a couple of other desks, so I’m not actually in eye contact with any of the desks so if anyone needs to speak to me they do have to get up and come and sit in front of me.” (South West, female)

The office layout can impact on a person with hearing loss’s ability to participate effectively in the office environment. However, some simple changes can be made to the office layout to improve the environment for a person with hearing loss. Work place assessments can be made regarding the adjustments necessary for that individual. Employers need to recognise that people have different needs and there is not a one size fits all option.

Chapter 3: Adjustments and support

As discussed above there are numerous ways to remove or minimise barriers in the workplace for people with hearing loss. This section will discuss some of the support methods available outside of the work environment including audiology services, hearing aids and the government scheme, Access to Work.

Experiences with audiology services

Getting advice from an audiologist is an important step in raising the awareness of the person with hearing loss. Due to some of the participants being younger, as well as the sudden loss in some cases, several participants were referred to Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) departments prior to audiology.

Some participants talked very positively of their experiences with NHS audiology services. However, participants who were given specific help or advice in relation to their work were the exception. Only one participant said their audiologist told them about the government scheme, Access to Work.

One participant wanted advice on listening devices however his audiologist wasn't able to provide this. Another participant suggested that audiologists should look at the impact of hearing loss on their whole life, rather than solely concentrating on hearing aids.

“The audiology department... they were underfunded and over worked and it was all past focused. Oh this isn't working, we'll try that, come back in six months. There was no quality of experience.” (Scotland, male)

Waiting for hearing aids to be fitted can put a strain on communication in the workplace and therefore negatively impact upon the participants' ability to do their job. Two participants decided to buy hearing aids privately in order to avoid the wait.

“I didn't consider NHS at that time there was a two to three months waiting list and I didn't have two to three months.” (East of England, male)

One participant in the military needed to go on a seven hour round trip due to procedures which means she needed to visit a military audiologist. It took about a year from diagnosis before she was fitted with her hearing aid.

It is important not to see hearing loss in isolation. Many participants also reported having other symptoms such as tinnitus, balance problems, stress and depression. People with hearing loss would therefore benefit from a holistic approach to supporting the individual. For example, some people with hearing loss may benefit from talking to a hearing therapist, particularly those who have lost their hearing suddenly, who can provide counselling and specialist hearing rehabilitation advice.

**“Sometimes you just stand at the window and then you just want to end it”.
(London and South East, female)**

“I have got to say the tinnitus. I’m almost suicidal sometimes with it. 3am-4am I could quite easily take a packet of pills it is that bad some days. I am finding it very difficult to cope with.” (London and South East, female)

Participants had mixed experiences with private hearing aid dispensers. One dispenser has given an excellent service to the participant, including loaning equipment to try before they buy. However, this level of service was not the norm.

**“I walked out with about £2,500 worth of equipment. They just said try this, try that, other bits and pieces that they felt might be helpful and some experimental equipment as well and I never had to pay for a thing, they said just take it away and try it and see if it’s helpful, come back in six weeks.”
(Scotland, male)**

In general audiology services, both NHS and private, are focused solely on fitting hearing aids rather than looking at how hearing loss impacts on the individual’s whole life. While we recognise that audiology departments have limited budgets with which to support people with hearing loss, it is important that there is support available which encompasses more than just hearing aids. The introduction of quality standards within audiology should help to address this issue, particularly with the introduction of Individual Management Plans¹⁰.

¹⁰ The Quality Standards for Adult Rehabilitation (2009), published by the Scottish Government, defines Individual Management Plans as a set of agreed needs and actions that aim to improve a person’s participation in life by reducing the disabling effects of a hearing impairment. When first developed it will be a list of the needs the audiologist and the patient have agreed need to be addressed and a list of the actions the audiologist is going to take in an attempt to address these needs.

It is also important that audiology services are aware that the delay in getting hearing aids fitted can have a substantial impact on people in the workplace. Efforts should therefore be made to ensure that these delays are minimised. It is also important that employers are aware of these difficulties and are able to support their employee effectively while waiting to get hearing aids.

Hearing aids

Hearing aids are the major method of communication support in the UK for people with hearing loss. Two million people in the UK have hearing aids. Most participants received NHS hearing aids. Two participants started with NHS hearing aids but then decided to buy hearing aids from a private dispenser, only one participant bought hearing aids initially and then moved onto NHS hearing aids. One person did not have hearing aids as they had been told they would not benefit from them.

Most participants found their hearing aids helpful to some degree, although this depended upon the situation.

**“Now with digital hearing aids and other technology they really do help me, and help me with my job. Without that I would be lost really.”
(London and South East, male)**

“Everything sounds muffled, but when I put them in everything is extremely sharp”. (East Midlands, male)

Hearing aids being broken was therefore a concern for some.

“I’m desperately precious about them, you know if I break them I wouldn’t get a replacement like for like.” (North West, male)

Participants discussed some problems with their hearing aids; however the majority of these can be resolved. One participant found it difficult to get to her audiology department during working hours. Audiology departments need to offer a range of appointment times, to enable people who work to attend the clinics. However, it is also important that employers are flexible, and recognise the importance of giving time off to attend an audiology appointment.

Participants talked about problems using their hearing aids with the telephone.

**“I can hear less well on the phone now than I could before I had hearing aids, and that has been enormously stressful, frustrating, depressing.”
(London and South East, female)**

This can be resolved with hearing aid compatible telephones or other devices. Audiologists should be making people aware of these issues when they fit hearing aids so that the individual is aware of both the limitations of hearing aids as well as the benefits.

Interference was an issue for some participants. This can be due to the hearing aid not being fitted appropriately and can be resolved by the audiologist. This illustrates the importance of review appointments so that any problems arising after initial fitting can be addressed.

Hearing aids and hearing loss could cause embarrassment to the individual.

“It’s better obviously hearing wise, but mentally, shall I say I’m very conscious of them and I always have my hair behind my ears, I always do, especially at work.” (South West, female)

“I was just scared of other people seeing me with hearing aids and they might be... I thought maybe they will start shouting at me a wee bit.” (Scotland, female)

“So I started off with a single in the ear device, which I wore on and off and it was more of a covert thing. I’d stick it in at meetings and hide it behind my hand sort of thing.” (North West, male)

A limitation of some hearing aids is that they amplify all noise and therefore background noise can cause particular problems for people with hearing loss. Digital hearing aids do have features which are able to suppress background noise and focus on speech sounds however background noise can still pose a problem for hearing aid wearers.

“If you are trying to concentrate on what your report is, and these are amplifying Joe Bloggs across the way there, who’s having a yack with the girl from payroll, then that can be as annoying as if you can’t hear.” (South West, male)

“It’s a soundproof room, and you go, wow, this is great, I love it, but get out in the environment that you are either going to work in, or on your way to your car, and suddenly your steps sound like you’ve got size 24 shoes on, or the person that normally you can’t hear, or haven’t noticed, they become the loudest person in the office, because they’re close to you, and they have a loud voice.”
(South West, male)

One participant was told that she wouldn’t benefit from a hearing aid. However at work she felt she needed a visual clue to remind her colleagues that she has hearing loss.

Hearing aids are an important tool in helping people to deal with their hearing loss. While many of the problems discussed by participants can be resolved, it is also important that hearing aid wearers are aware of the limitations of hearing aids. Employers should also be aware of these limitations and be willing to make other adjustments as required such as the use of other equipment and/or communication support.

“People don’t necessarily realise that hearing aids are not a complete solution, they are correctly named when they are called hearing aids, they only help, they don’t replace what’s lost.” (South West, male)

Hearing aids can improve communication immensely for people with hearing loss. However, it is important that both the person with hearing loss and their employer recognise the benefits and limitations of hearing aids. Audiology departments need to make these clear at fitting, as well as provide advice on how to get the most out of hearing aids with the use of other equipment such as loop systems. It is also important that people are fitted with the most appropriate hearing aid for their needs.

Access to Work (AtW)

Access to Work (AtW) is a government scheme designed to support disabled people with the adjustments needed for them to undertake their work. An assessment is undertaken of the person’s needs and difficulties in the workplace and solutions are suggested. For example, hearing aid compatible telephones, loop systems and deaf awareness training for staff. Generally, employers are asked to pay towards the cost of the adjustments, and the amount varies depending on how long the individual has been with the company. AtW pay the remaining amount.

AtW can therefore be hugely beneficial to someone with hearing loss in supporting them to remain in the workplace. In the first two quarters of 2010-11, it provided support for 4,850 workers with hearing loss in the UK¹¹. Hearing loss is the second most common reason for the award of an AtW payment.

11 Access to Work – Official Statistics, January 2011. Department for Work and Pensions

For those people who need a communication support worker, such as a British Sign Language interpreter, lipspeaker or speech-to-text operator (palantypist) to assist them at work, the associated costs can sometimes be too high for an employer to meet – and could be found to be ‘unreasonable’ in law, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises. AtW therefore plays a vital role in ensuring that people with hearing loss are able to access communication support.

However, this research has found that there was generally a low level of awareness of the scheme amongst participants and their employers. Several participants had not heard of AtW or were not aware of what support it could provide. Information needs to be given to people diagnosed with hearing loss to ensure that they are fully supported in the workplace.

Generally people found out about AtW in a haphazard way including through the RNID (now Action on Hearing Loss) website, from colleagues, from social services, their audiologist or through an occupational health team. This suggests that there is no consistent method to inform people with hearing loss about AtW.

Even in situations where AtW may not be available, employers should be aware of organisations that undertake work place assessments and provide equipment and advice for people with hearing loss.

Participants who had an assessment through AtW were generally happy with the adjustments, equipment and training recommended. However, for some participants, the AtW report did not necessarily translate into action from their employer. For example, one participant paid her employers’ portion of the adjustment as they made it clear they did not have enough money to pay for it. Another has waited months for senior management to decide whether to implement the recommendations and this is now impacting upon his job.

**“He is saying my teaching is below par, it is not adequate enough... I said to him well if you took into account all these things that Access to Work have recommended then you are giving me a fighting chance. But at the moment I am at a disadvantage that I am struggling on and they are wanting to come in and do more observations which is adding to the stress and making it more difficult.”
(West Midlands, male)**

This participant’s employer is clearly not aware of their legal requirements to make adjustments for their disabled member of staff. This has placed the participant in an extremely difficult situation with his line management now claiming his teaching is not up to standard. This situation could easily deteriorate, with the participant feeling that they have no other option but to resign. Despite having had an AtW assessment, it is clear that employers need reminding of their legal requirements to make reasonable adjustments, such as those included in the AtW report.

It is important that the assessor has specialist knowledge about hearing loss. One participant reported that their assessment was not undertaken by someone with specialist knowledge of hearing loss, suggesting only basic equipment which provided little assistance.

Another participant discussed the practical problems in registering for AtW.

“I did it online, oh yes you’ve registered but you must phone us up first. I can’t phone you up till I’ve got the equipment...’ Catch 22... And it’s such a pain having to get somebody else to ring them up.” (West Midlands, female)

A lot of the equipment is unfamiliar and therefore it is important that training is provided to ensure that people with hearing loss get the most out of the equipment.

“I started using the Bluetooth, and the T switch, and that was so confusing. Nobody showed me how to use it.” (North West, female)

A lack of awareness about adjustments, including the Access to Work scheme, is a key issue for people who develop hearing loss later in life. It is therefore important that there are mechanisms in place to enable people to get advice from experts about the adjustments that can be made in the workplace, as well as funds to support this. It is also important that the government raise awareness of this scheme to both employers and disabled employees.

Information

There was an onus on people finding out information themselves rather than being given it, for example by their audiologist. Participants used the internet to find information, including the RNID (now Action on Hearing Loss) website. Very few participants contacted charities for people with hearing loss. Those who did contacted RNID, Hearing Concern Link and local deaf charities.

Several participants were able to attend lipreading classes during work time. Most lipreading classes are only available during work time which can make it difficult for people who work to attend. It is therefore fantastic that some employers have given their staff this opportunity to improve their communication skills. Lipreading classes should however be seen as one part of the support package for people who develop hearing loss. Employers should not view this as the solution to communication problems. Instead it should be seen as a joint responsibility, with the employee taking steps to adjust and the employer taking steps to provide support.

Some participants took British Sign Language (BSL) courses, however, the obvious limitation is, with any language, it can only be used to converse with other people who use that language.

Overall participants had a limited awareness of their rights in the workplace, although two participants were union activists and so were very aware of their legal rights.

“I am a strong person, but I didn’t know where I stood.” (North West, female)

“I’m just so disappointed and disgusted you know and very, I’m at the stage now where I’m becoming very bitter. I’m just going to, I’m going to leave it another fortnight and if I don’t hear anything or I don’t see any action I’m going to go and see the Occupational Health lady and find out where I stand like, you know legally.” (North West, male)

The law can be extremely useful in encouraging employers to make adjustments and it is therefore important that people with hearing loss are able to access this information easily.

“It was a bit of an uphill struggle initially... just beat them to death with it. I was saying this is your responsibility and if you don’t I will take you to court.” (Scotland, male)

People who develop hearing loss while of working age need access to information specifically in relation to their workplace rights and adjustments. This information needs to be easily available. Ideally this should be through their local audiology department or dispenser as this is the principle route for taking action on hearing loss. They are uniquely positioned to provide information on a wide range of subjects in one setting. As a minimum, audiology departments and dispensers should signpost people to this vital information.

Equipment and technology

As discussed throughout the report, equipment and technology can make a huge difference to people with hearing loss. Participants generally wanted to be able to try out equipment before they buy it. However, no participants were able to find a location that offered this service.

“What I wanted was somebody who had a T Coil phone that I could try, that’s harder than you think. There are a couple of BT try before you buy centres locally, the one in Doncaster has a range of non-working equipment that you can look at, great. The one in Sheffield said, oh no we are only for Sheffield patients, ok, the one the RNID used to have in Rotherham no longer has the contract.” (Midlands, female)

**“I’d been given a catalogue, but I don’t know whether this piece of equipment is twice this because it has better functionality, whether it’s better made, whether it will feel horrible to use. When I buy a mobile phone I go into a shop because I want to be able to feel, tactile and nice to use, and it’s enormously frustrating there isn’t somewhere you can go and try out the equipment.”
(London and South East, female)**

Some participants also highlighted the issue that most equipment is designed for older people and those with multiple disabilities.

It is important that people are able to try out equipment before they buy it so they can choose the right equipment for themselves and the environment they want to use it in. This should also be true of any equipment obtained through AtW and would help to reduce wastage through unwanted and unused equipment. People with hearing loss want to use equipment that looks similar to that used by other people; they do not want equipment that marks them out as different. Manufacturers should therefore develop a range of equipment options for people with hearing loss so that they can have a choice of design.

Chapter 4: Changing jobs and retirement

Participants have had mixed experiences when changing jobs or looking for work. For some participants their hearing loss had little impact on their pay and promotion opportunities. However, for several participants it had a devastating impact on their career prospects.

Changing jobs, redundancy and dismissal

In the annual survey of members it is positive to note that for the vast majority of employed members (85%), hearing loss had not resulted in a change of jobs. Although this may be reflective of the high proportion of older respondents, who may be less likely to change jobs close to retirement age. One in seven respondents (14%) stated that they had changed jobs for reasons related to their hearing loss.

Table 1: Whether changed jobs due to hearing loss

	Number of respondents	%
No	3446	85
Yes, to somewhere more suitable for my hearing loss	244	6
Yes, because my employers were not supportive of my hearing loss	106	3
Yes, for other reasons related to hearing loss	206	5
Total number of respondents	4067	

In the interviews, some participants talked about needing to leave their job due to a lack of adjustments made. One participant was forced to leave their job as a lecturer due to her employers' negative attitude towards her hearing loss. As a result of this bad experience she decided to change her whole career.

“I had to change my career because I thought, I can’t go back into teaching now, because it is too much... I wanted to go into life coaching, counselling, or careers adviser work, and I realised at that point I am not even going to be able to follow any of those, because lip reading, and talking, and listening all day, plus typing what they were saying, it was blinking hard work...” (North West, female)

Technology can also create barriers. For example, one participant described being forced to leave his job due to his organisation's increasing reliance on video conferencing. However, this could have been resolved through adjustments such as communication support.

**“The video conference thing was a really difficult situation because the company had spent probably £1m on video conferencing and I just couldn't hear it.”
(Scotland, male)**

Another participant, a teacher, was forced out of her job due to unsupportive management.

“You're so down, well depressed I guess is the word, that you just want to get out. You think I don't want to go near that place again.” (South West, female)

Another said that hearing loss contributed to her decision to leave a job. She worked in a noisy office, and her colleagues spoke very quietly.

“My problems with hearing contributed to leaving after such a short time...It was working for a small charity, and there were four or five of us in a room, with phones, copiers, printers etc, and the phones were really busy ...All the women I worked with tended to speak VERY softly as they thought it was better for talking to victims. I couldn't hear on the phone, my aids then were analogue, so i ended up with really bad headaches.” (Yorkshire and Humber, female)

One person was made redundant from his job.

“When I asked the question they said it was because I couldn't hear the kettle and it was a danger, health and safety.” (London and South East, male)

Hearing loss therefore can have a major impact on people's employment, with participants feeling they had no choice but to resign and one being made redundant as a result of his hearing loss. This clearly demonstrates a lack of awareness amongst employers of their legal requirements to make adjustments and to support disabled employees.

Looking for work

Participants were uncertain about whether they should tell prospective employers about their hearing loss.

**“That’s the other dilemma I had last year, how much do I talk about my disability, that was really difficult, because it does put them off. But on the other hand it’s not fair on them if you don’t mention anything about it, I don’t know.”
(North West, female)**

However, after being made redundant or being forced to leave their job, participants often struggled to find a new job.

“At the end of the day I lost my job, and at 63 ... I went for about 10 interviews and explained that I was deaf but I was going to have a cochlear implant and you knew straight away when you sat for the interview that they weren’t going to be interested in you.” (London and South East, male)

**“As soon as they see the hearing aids they can’t get me out of there fast enough... they assume because I can’t use a phone, I can’t do the job.”
(West Midlands, female)**

**“I don’t think I would expect to get a job with anybody else, now I’m slightly over 60, I’m deaf and I’m not the most employable person in the world.”
(East of England, male)**

This can have significant consequences for the individual, both mentally and financially.

**“I was getting desperate, in fact she [wife] didn’t know it but I would have killed myself because I couldn’t go on like it. I couldn’t get a job, I couldn’t support her, I couldn’t communicate, and I didn’t know where to go.”
(London and South East, male)**

“I had real hopes for going to this conference... but when I got there I burst into tears, because it was just full of the elderly, there was nobody of my age, and most of them, when they became deaf, they retired. I am too young to retire, and a lot of them had partners, or wives or husbands, that could carry on working, so the financial situation was easier. With me it’s scary, because I am in debt now, I am struggling.” (North West, female)

People with hearing loss are advised to talk with the disability employment advisors based at Job Centre Plus. One participant spoke positively of the support they had received from the Job Centre.

**“I get massive support from the disability officer down at the job centre. I’m unemployed now, I lost my job because I can’t use the phone, my last job.”
(West Midlands, female)**

However, these advisors often had no specialist knowledge of hearing loss.

“The Disability Employment Adviser at the Job Centre was hopeless, I complained. I need somebody who understands my disability, my deafness, and who matches it with a career.” (North West, female)

“The Job Centre Plus were even worse, there was only one single person that deals with the hard of hearing... and nothing happened, it was myself that had to chase all of this for myself.” (Scotland, male)

One participant was sent on a government training scheme, however, the course was inaccessible, beginning with her struggling even to enter the building through an intercom system.

“All our courses are audio, you’ve got to put the headphones on’. Pardon, but I’m hearing impaired and it’s not going to work with my hearing aids. ‘Nope you take them out and put the headphones on’.” (West Midlands, female)

We asked participants if they felt that their hearing loss might impede their promotion or new job opportunities. Many did not believe it would cause a problem.

**“I don’t think my hearing would stop me applying.”
(Yorkshire and Humber, female)**

Although others were unsure as to the effect their hearing loss would have on them when looking for a job, mainly because they hadn’t had to yet.

**“Whether I would have difficulty finding employment I don’t know, fortunately I haven’t had to go through interview processes for jobs, apart from internally when we’ve had reshuffles, since I’ve had hearing problems.”
(London and South East, male)**

Several people have given consideration to what role they would apply for in future.

“I think as the deafness has progressed there are certain kinds of job now that I know I probably should shy away from, for example I wouldn’t go to work in a store now, where I had to deal with customers.” (South West, male)

**“I would be slightly more choosy about the kinds of jobs I would apply for.”
(South West, male)**

**“Things like face-to-face consultancy really appealed, and I think that’s actually because of the hearing loss but you don’t sort of think about it in those terms.”
(Scotland, male)**

Several people have thought about running their own business as a way to get around looking for a new job.

“I realise I am tired of having to adapt, to fit into a work environment, and I decided I need to set up my own environment that I’m in control of, because its hard work to try and find an employer who is willing to give you the time, and the effort, and the understanding.” (North West, female)

Another participant described learning accountancy skills so that he can set up his own bookkeeping business.

**“So I had my exit strategy and my parachute all ready and I got my qualifications.”
(East of England, male)**

Looking for work can therefore be difficult for people with hearing loss. Retention is important and this benefits both the individual and the employer. The employer retains an experienced member of staff, and the individual is able to continue in their role. Where people with hearing loss are looking for work, it is important that specialised support is available, with people who understand their specific needs.

Retirement

We wanted to explore whether hearing loss contributes to people retiring early from their work. Both the quantitative questionnaire and our qualitative interviews have shown that some people with hearing loss have retired early as a direct consequence of their hearing loss.

In our annual survey of members more than one in three people (36%) who took early retirement said that this was related to their hearing loss in some way and around one in ten (13%) of these regretted doing so.

In our qualitative interviews, some participants had taken early retirement. One participant attributed this directly to his hearing loss.

“I took early retirement from [company name] at 54 and I have to say that was mostly because of my hearing loss. Had it not been for the hearing loss I would have bashed on a bit longer.” (Scotland, male)

This participant felt he was becoming ineffective and struggled with meetings. However, no adjustments were made or equipment provided to support him in his role. He may have been able to stay longer if this support had been provided.

Another participant did not retire any earlier than planned but looked forward to her retirement more.

“I had always said I would retire when I got to 60 ...that was what I was aiming towards and working towards and I suppose I started counting down more because of it [the hearing loss] than I would have otherwise... I was looking forward to it more.” (London and South East, female)

Hearing loss can therefore contribute to the decision to take early retirement. This can have financial implications for both the individual and the state.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Losing your hearing can be an extremely distressing and frightening time, with many of those affected reluctant to admit they have a hearing loss. This in turn can impact upon the individual's confidence and generate fears regarding job security. Hearing loss can have a significant impact upon a person in the workplace, however this does not have to be permanent; with the right support and adjustments a person can continue to work effectively in their role.

A key theme to emerge from this research is a general lack of awareness about hearing loss, its effects and what support and adjustments are available to ensure that people with hearing loss can continue to participate effectively in the labour market. Employers often did not recognise problems their employees were facing; did not know where to go for information or what support and adjustments they should offer. Lack of awareness was also an issue amongst people with hearing loss. They were generally not given information about sources of support and information specifically in relation to their employment needs. Instead the research participants had to be proactive and find out this information themselves.

Managers play a seminal role in the experience that a person with hearing loss has in the workplace. Employees should feel comfortable disclosing details of their hearing loss to their employers. This research has found that managers' attitudes can be divided into three typologies; passive, negative action and positive action. Passive managers were by far the most common; broadly supportive of their staff member, but unlikely to take action unless asked. They were also likely to delay implementing adjustments. Positive action managers were the exception. They were fully supportive of their employee and will actively research adjustments and support mechanisms available. Some participants were unfortunate to have managers with negative action attitudes. They were not supportive, and indeed some were discriminatory in their behaviour. For example, one participant, a teacher, was accused by his employer of a poor standard of work and yet has not had any adjustments made for him, despite being given a series of recommendations from an Access to Work review. In this situation it is important that the person is aware of their legal rights and is able to get support.

HR and OH teams generally played a scrutinising role rather than a supportive one, and mixed experiences were had with colleagues, with some extremely supportive, while others were unaware or quickly forgot. Having supportive colleagues helps to reduce feelings of isolation and can assist the individual to adjust and accept their hearing loss.

The physical environment can create barriers in the workplace. Most participants found meetings difficult due to issues with background noise and problems lipreading. Telephones are also a challenge as well as some office layouts. However simple adjustments can help to minimise these barriers through the use of technology such as loop systems and personal listeners, greater use of email as a method of communication, and considering the location of people with hearing loss within the office space.

Procurement policies must also be flexible to enable specialist equipment to be purchased for people with hearing loss.

Employers have a legal duty under the Equality Act 2010 to prevent discrimination and make sure that steps are taken so that people who are deaf or hard of hearing are not disadvantaged in the workplace. This would include removing or minimising the physical barriers discussed above. Access to Work (AtW) can provide support for people with hearing loss (and other disabilities) and their employers, to help overcome these obstacles related to work, including through the provision of funding. The Equality Act and AtW must be promoted so that employers and employees are aware of their responsibilities and the support that is available to enable people with hearing loss to better manage in the workplace.

It is important that those who support people with hearing loss have specialist knowledge about the disability. For example, AtW assessors need to know about the specific barriers in relation to hearing loss and the equipment available to remove these barriers. It is also important that when looking for work, a person with hearing loss is able to get support from someone in the Job Centre who is knowledgeable about hearing loss.

Hearing loss can influence a person's decision to change jobs, take early retirement and can create difficulties when looking for work. It is striking how many people have felt no choice but to resign or retire from their workplace due to an unsupportive employer and/or a lack of adjustments. Due to the ageing workforce and rising retirement age more people will experience the onset of hearing loss in the workplace and when seeking work. It is therefore vital that more specialist support is available to help people with hearing loss stay in their current role or help them to find a new job.

Audiology services generally play a narrow role, focusing only on the fitting of hearing aids. However, they should provide a more holistic service that supports a person with hearing loss in all areas of their life. This includes the provision of information and advice that is tailored to the work environment. Participants highlighted their desire to be able to try out equipment before they buy it which, at the very least, audiology departments and private dispensers should be able to signpost people to.

There is a general lack of age appropriate support available for people who lose their hearing while of working age. While the incidence of hearing loss does increase with age, it is important to recognise the spectrum of people with hearing loss and to ensure that support mechanisms are available that are aimed specifically at people who lose their hearing while of working age. Participants highlighted the importance and value to be able to share their experiences with people in similar circumstances. They also requested the opportunity to be able to buy specialist hearing loss equipment that is aesthetically attractive.

A lack of awareness can therefore have a significant impact on a person with hearing loss in the workplace. This research found that with the right support, people with hearing loss are able to continue in their role and be successful in their career. There are numerous barriers to people with hearing loss, however many of the solutions are cheap and easy, and can even improve the experience for other people in the organisation. The culture of an organisation can be seen to have the biggest impact on the experience that someone with hearing loss has in the workplace. An organisation's values and beliefs affect the way in which managers and colleagues interact and support someone with hearing loss. Organisations must develop values that are positive towards disabled people and encourage workforce diversity. In turn, greater awareness of hearing loss throughout an organisation would help to ensure that effective support is provided to those with hearing loss.

Chapter 6: Solutions

This research has highlighted the need for a variety of solutions to be considered in order to ensure people with hearing loss are effectively supported in the workplace. There is no 'one size fits all' solution for people with hearing loss. They must be supported as individuals, with their particular needs understood.

1. For organisations:

Organisations play a substantial role in supporting employees with hearing loss. Establishing a culture that values and supports people with disabilities will ensure that people with hearing loss are able and willing to stay in their role. There are some simple steps that organisations, particularly through their HR departments, can take to achieve this including training, implementing clear procedures and the provision of information for all staff.

- Ensure there are clear procedures in place to activate support if someone develops hearing loss, or if someone joins the organisation with hearing loss. These procedures should include how to access work based assessments including Access to Work and information for managers on where to obtain help. Procurement policies must also be flexible to enable specialist equipment to be purchased for people with a disability.
- Ensure these procedures are widely known and, in particular, that HR and occupational health teams are familiar with them.
- Encourage staff to share responsibility for making adjustments and ensuring effective communication is achieved with staff with hearing loss. Recognise the importance of and promote staff support networks and mentoring schemes.
- Provide information regarding possible adjustments that can be made, for example, the purchasing of specialist equipment, and provide details on the route through which these can be obtained.
- Provide training for all staff on deaf and disability awareness, including understanding the impact of hearing loss on an individual, and the legal rights of disabled people, in particular through the Equality Act 2010.
- Encourage staff to get their hearing checked, for example as part of any health and well-being initiatives.

2. For line managers:

Line managers are the people who translate organisational policies and procedures into action and are therefore critical in ensuring that their member of staff is effectively supported. Line managers must take responsibility for encouraging a supportive environment within their team and ensuring that effective adjustments are made.

- Discuss with your employee what adjustments and support they need and organise support through AtW.
- Give your employee time to adjust and accept their hearing loss.

3. For government:

Government must play a role in improving the experience that people with hearing loss have in the workplace including through raising awareness of the support currently available, such as AtW, as well as legal rights and responsibilities under the Equality Act.

- Raise awareness of AtW so that both employers and employees are better informed about what assistance is available to them.
- Promote the Equality Act 2010 and its implications for employers.
- Ensure that specialised support is provided for people with hearing loss to find work through the Work Programme and Work Choice schemes, and that this support is monitored and managed to promote equality of opportunity.

4. For audiology services:

Audiology services are an important source of support for people with hearing loss. However, they must consider the needs of people with hearing loss in a holistic manner, including the individual's workplace environment. Audiology services should provide information and signpost people to other sources of support such as equipment and technology, lipreading classes and AtW.

- Provide a holistic or joined up approach to supporting people who lose their hearing while of working age. This includes linking with other specialist provision such as Hear to Help¹².
- Signpost people to information relevant to hearing loss and the workplace. For example, equipment and technology, communication tips, lipreading classes and Access to Work.
- Provide appointment times outside standard working hours to enable people who work full time to attend their audiology appointments.
- Provide information about where equipment can be tried before buying.
- Be clear about the benefits and limitations of hearing aids and provide information about other mechanisms to aid communication.
- Where appropriate, ensure that hearing aids have a 'T' setting for loop listening. Hearing aid wearers should be offered the opportunity to test out their 'T' setting and to try out loop systems.
- Provide a follow up appointment for all new hearing aid wearers and encourage them to return to the audiology department to ask questions and talk through any problems as and when they arise.

¹² Action on Hearing Loss's Hear to Help project trains volunteers, many of whom have a hearing loss themselves, to show others how to get the best performance from their NHS hearing aids. This includes helping with basic maintenance such as replacing tubing and batteries, as well as providing advice on equipment that can make life easier in the workplace and at home.

5. For individuals:

People with hearing loss must also accept some responsibility in ensuring that they benefit from the support and advice available by actively finding information using the internet, through local and national hearing loss charities as well as speaking to their audiologist or hearing aid dispenser. It is also vital that an individual with hearing loss tells their employer about their disability and what adjustments they need.

- Find out about both local and national charities which offer information and resources on hearing loss.
- Contact Action on Hearing Loss's Information Line/website for advice.
- Try to find others who may have experienced the same type of hearing loss as you. For example, check with your library about any local hard of hearing clubs and lipreading classes.
- Check hearing loss/deaf charities' websites for advice on communication support methods (note-takers, lipspeakers) and assistive technology.
- Be open and honest about your hearing loss in the workplace.
- Understand your legal rights.
- If you are a trade union member, seek their advice about what support you are entitled to.
- Be assertive about getting the best hearing aid for your hearing loss – if you have any problems, return to your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser. Visit www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk for advice about what standard of service you can expect when getting your hearing tested and/or hearing aids fitted.
- Visit the Directgov website for information about Access to Work.
- Ask about hearing therapy support locally.
- If you are worried about your hearing, take our hearing check at www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/hearingcheck and/or go and see your GP.

6. For manufacturers:

Manufacturers of equipment for people with hearing loss should consult with them in order to design a range of products that are both functional and attractive to everybody.

- Design a range of equipment that enables people to have a choice over which is most suited to them, taking account of usability, aesthetics and price.

7. We will:

Action on Hearing Loss will continue to play an active role in ensuring more support is provided to people with hearing loss and that no one is isolated through their hearing loss. We will consider further research, update our information, as well as support employers to make their organisations accessible to people with hearing loss.

- Consider further research into the needs and experiences of people with hearing loss when looking for work.
- Discuss with employers how to make their organisations' accessible, including through Louder than Words.
- Update our information for employers (Don't panic pack).
- Lobby government to improve support for people with hearing loss in the workplace.

Chapter 7: Research methodology

We conducted in depth interviews with hearing aid wearers. The interviews were semi-structured to allow a free discussion about the participants' experiences of hearing loss in the workplace. We asked respondents about when they first noticed they had a hearing loss, their experiences with their GP, audiologist/hearing aid dispenser, and the experiences they have had at work during this period. All interviewees agreed to the interview being recorded and these were then transcribed at a later date.

People were invited to get involved through a press release to local newspapers, as well as a story in our members' magazine. Twenty-seven interviews took place between September and December 2010. The interviews were conducted by, in most cases, two members of the Social Research and Policy team. The interviews took place in a variety of locations, generally either in the participants' homes, an RNID (now Action on Hearing Loss) office or a public location such as a cafe. Three interviews were conducted by telephone as we were unable to arrange a face-to-face interview. One interview was conducted by instant messaging, a first for Action on Hearing Loss's research, due to the participant finding it difficult to hear on the telephone. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 70 minutes each.

The breakdown of participants was as follows:

Participants' hearing loss

All participants had hearing loss and all bar one had hearing aids. Six participants lost or started to lose their hearing within the last two years, 11 participants lost their hearing between two to 10 years ago, and 10 participants lost or started to lose their hearing over 10 years ago.

The majority of participants lost their hearing gradually, or in stages. Seven participants lost all or part of their hearing suddenly.

Participants' hearing loss was caused by numerous factors. Some stated they had family members with hearing loss and therefore believed it had a genetic cause. Some lost their hearing after a period of ill health. For example, one participant lost their hearing after being seriously ill with meningitis. One developed hearing loss after suffering from glandular fever. Another lost theirs due to the antibiotics they were taking for an infection. One person had been diagnosed with Meniere's disease, which causes hearing loss, vertigo and tinnitus. Several participants believed they had some form of hearing loss since birth, but this wasn't officially diagnosed until they were older. Some lost their hearing gradually and were not aware of it for quite a long period of time.

Participants' employment

Two thirds of the participants worked in the public or third sector when they first lost their hearing, with the remaining working in the private sector. The public and third sector roles included teaching, both in schools and colleges, working in various roles in local authorities, the military, prison service, NHS and housing associations. The private sector roles included call centre operator, solicitor, architect, administrator and mechanic.

According to the Office of National Statistics, in the fourth quarter of 2010 the public sector accounted for 21% of total employment in the UK compared with 78% employed in the private sector¹³.

Sex

Female participants - 13

Male participants - 14

Approximate age

Over 60 - 6

Under 60 - 21

Working status

In work - 20

Looking for work - 4

Retired - 3

Location

London and South East England - 7

East Midlands - 1

West Midlands - 3

North West England - 4

South West England - 3

Yorkshire and Humber - 2

East of England - 2

North East England - 0

Scotland - 4

Northern Ireland - 0

Wales - 1

13 Office for National Statistics (2010) Labour Market Statistics First Release Historical Supplement

We also asked questions about experiences of employment in the annual survey of members, which was sent out in the summer of 2010. Here are the full employment related statistics from the annual survey. For further information please see the Annual Survey report 2010 www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/annualsurvey

Table 2: Who members told at the time of hearing loss

	Number of respondents	%
I told my colleagues	1831	45
I told my employer	1502	37
I didn't tell anyone	1352	33
Can't remember/Don't know	414	10
Total number of respondents	4067	

Table 3: Whether changed jobs due to hearing loss

	Number of respondents	%
No	3446	85
Yes, to somewhere more suitable for my hearing loss	244	6
Yes, because my employers were not supportive of my hearing loss	106	3
Yes, for other reasons related to hearing loss	206	5
Total number of respondents	4067	

Table 4: Agreement with the following statements (respondents could chose more than one option)

	Number of respondents	%
Losing my hearing made me less confident in my abilities	1627	40
Losing my hearing made me less confident in taking on new work or responsibilities	1396	34
Losing my hearing made no difference to me at work	1299	32
My colleagues were supportive when I lost my hearing	1112	27
When I lost my hearing I felt isolated at work	694	17
My employer made every effort to help me	553	14
My employer made some effort to help me, but not enough	503	12
After losing my hearing I felt less valued at work	472	12
Total number of respondents	4067	

We're the charity taking action on hearing loss since 1911. We can't do this without your help.

To find out more about what we do and how you can support us go to www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk

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