

Briefing

Employment adjustments for people who have hearing loss

Abridged content for sample purposes

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Introduction

What is hearing loss?

One in six people (11 million people) live with a degree of hearing loss in the UK.[1]

Hearing loss occurs when sound signals do not reach the brain. There are different types of hearing loss depending on where the damage to the auditory system is located. It can be a sensorineural hearing loss (inner ear), conductive hearing loss (outer ear to the middle ear) or mixed loss.

Some people are born with hearing loss, others inherit a condition and some lose their hearing as a result of an accident, after illness, or through age. The incidence of deafness increases with age, for example, according to Action on Hearing loss more than 40% of over 50 year olds and more than 70% of over 70 year olds have hearing loss.

It is important to ask the person with hearing loss what their language/communication support needs are, as there are ways of minimising the barriers and improving communications generally.

Cochlear implant

Some Deaf, Deafblind or Deafened people benefit from a cochlear implant. The majority of people who receive one or two cochlear implants are children who receive their implants before they start school so that the implant can help with spoken and signed language acquisition. The cochlear implant does not remove the person's deafness but it can provide a useful sensation of hearing sound. Some deaf people with a cochlear implant can hear enough to use a regular telephone and take part in conversations; others still require language/communication support and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC).

[1] Action on hearingloss - Hearing matters report

Terminology

To understand the barriers and possible solutions for people who have hearing loss, it is important to know what level of hearing loss the person has and some of the language used to describe people with hearing loss. There are several terms that refer to people with hearing loss and to different degrees of hearing loss.

Deaf

The term “deaf” refers to everyone who has hearing loss no matter their level of hearing loss or language preference.

Hard of hearing

The term ‘hard of hearing’ is used for the largest group of people with hearing loss. People who are ‘hard of hearing’ will, in general, lose their hearing gradually over time and as they age.

Deafened

People who were born hearing and become profoundly deaf after learning to speak are often described as ‘deafened’ or as having an acquired profound hearing loss (APHL).

Deaf blind

Deafblindness is sometimes called dual sensory impairment. This is because 'deafblind' people will have both some hearing loss and some sight loss.

People who refer to themselves as deafblind are usually people who are born deaf and use British Sign Language (BSL) as their first or preferred language and who lose their sight as they get older, for example, if they have Usher's Syndrome. Some people who are born with deafblindness may also have physical and/or learning disabilities. Many deafblind people may not be totally deaf and totally blind. It is therefore important to ask the deafblind person what their preferred communication methods are.

Tinnitus

Tinnitus is the perception of noises in the person's head and/or ear which have no external source.

Those living with the condition may have to endure a ringing, buzzing, hissing, whistling or other noise. The sensation can be constant or intermittent and it can vary in volume. It is not a disease or illness; it is a symptom generated within the person's hearing system and usually caused by an underlying condition. The noise may be in one or both ears, or it may feel like it is inside the person's head. It is difficult to pinpoint its exact location. It may be low, medium or high pitched and can be heard as a single noise or as multiple components. Tinnitus is more common in people who have hearing loss but those with full hearing can have tinnitus too.

Deaf and deafblind BSL users can have tinnitus without ever hearing sounds. The British Tinnitus Association (BTA) can offer support and advice on adjustments for people who have tinnitus.

Hearing loss and language

The language used by people who have hearing loss varies depending on when they acquired their loss, its severity and the presence of associated conditions (deafblindness).

Some people with hearing loss will have English (or any other native oral tongue) as their first language whilst others, often people described as 'profoundly deaf', may be sign language users. Some deafened people may use Sign Supported English (SSE) to help them communicate. SSE borrows signs from BSL and follows the spoken English grammatical structure.

Deaf British Sign Language users sometimes refer to themselves as "Big D" Deaf and members of the "Deaf Community". Deaf people whose first or preferred language is British Sign Language (BSL) do not see themselves as disabled, but as a linguistic minority who need to use equality legislation to access their right to use their own language and to access goods and services in their language.

In the UK, Deaf BSL users may be taught bilingually – in English and in BSL from pre-school/nursery onwards. Alternatively, they may be taught solely in BSL or solely in English and then learn BSL when they move to secondary school which may impact on their fluency in English, their second language.

Employment and people with hearing loss

According to recent research, there are 5 million people of working age with hearing loss.[2]

Employers often regard people with hearing loss as particularly hard to employ. Misconceptions include the belief that they are restricted to certain jobs yet there are very few jobs which deaf people cannot do, given training and adjustments. Hearing loss can cause employees to feel isolated in the workplace which is why making adjustments and providing appropriate communication support is vital.

People with hearing loss may well be protected under the Equality Act 2010 even if they do not think of themselves as disabled. Nevertheless employers have a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments and not to discriminate against employees who might be facing barriers at work because of a disability or long-term condition – even if it has not been diagnosed as a disability or accepted as such by the individual.

Employers should be aware that non-visible disabilities, such as hearing loss, mean that barriers can be less obvious. This means reasonable adjustments may be harder for employers to determine and put in place. Employers can seek advice from Work Coaches and Disability Employment Advisers at Jobcentre Plus who refer people with hearing loss for positions. There are also organisations which offer specialist advice and disability awareness training to help employers ensure that their recruitment processes are barrier-free for those with hearing loss – **see page 35 for further details.**

[2] Action on Hearing Loss

Employment adjustments for people who have hearing loss

It is important that employers have an open and honest conversation with new employees and their support staff about the barriers that may be present in the workplace and what simple measures might help remove the barriers. The best practice approach is to make adjustments for anyone who needs them in order to work effectively and contribute fully to your organisation.

Most employers will want to know what is 'reasonable'. Doing what seems fair for the individual, and others who work for you, given the size and resources of your organisation is a good place to start.

This guidance will help you deliver best practice.

- You might need to treat people differently in order to treat them fairly.
- Don't make assumptions about what people can and cannot do.
- Ensure that everyone knows who is responsible for doing what and when it must be done.
- Involve the individual in generating solutions and respect their right to confidentiality.

For more detail on the law and making reasonable adjustments contact **Business Disability Forum's Advice Service** on telephone number **+44-(0)-20-7403-3020** or by email **advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk** or see the Briefing on The Equality Act 2010.

Reasonable adjustments and best practice

As the incidence of people who become deaf increases with age (and the UK has an ageing population), even if you do not currently employ someone who is deaf, it is likely that you will have to manage the retention of an employee who becomes deaf in the future.

By regularly talking to employees about their work, for example in performance appraisals, you may be able to identify difficulties that could be attributable to an employee losing their hearing. This will then give you an opportunity to talk about adjustments that may enable the employee to work more effectively.

Do not make assumptions about what someone can or cannot do. A person with hearing loss will often have particular talents as well as difficulties. Most people, once they understand their disability, are inventive in developing coping strategies that enable them not only to learn and work effectively but also to adopt a fresh approach to problem solving.

Consider the skills, abilities and aspirations of each individual and implement appropriate and reasonable support so that everyone can maximise their potential; this can have a positive effect on an organisation as it unlocks different ways of tackling problems and making decisions.

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Registered in England No: 2603700.**



Contact us

Business Disability Forum
Nutmeg House
60 Gainsford Street
London
SE1 2NY

Tel: +44-(0)20-7403-3020

Fax: +44-(0)20-7403-0404

Email: enquiries@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk

Web: businessdisabilityforum.org.uk