



Communication 101

The Invisible Disability

Hearing Loss is often called an “invisible disability.” When people look at you they don’t see your hearing loss. Worse, they have no idea what impact your hearing loss has on you. They use their own perfectly fine hearing as the basis for understanding your hearing. It does not occur to them that you may have difficulty understanding what is being said. This is just as true in the workplace as it is at a party, in a restaurant, at the airport, or in a store. But in the workplace this failure of understanding can affect your job, your career, and your livelihood.

Accessibility for people with hearing loss means being able to hear and understand communication and an audio signal in whatever form it takes: face to face - one on one and in groups; over the telephone; public address announcements; recorded sound - TV, radio, movies, internet based; amplified sound – theater, public presentations; alerting and emergency notifications.

As a person with a hearing loss in the workplace, it’s your responsibility to know what works best for you and communicate that to your employer.

- Pay attention to the situations where you do best and what causes the most difficulty – and why
- Maximize your residual hearing, using Assistive Listening Devices and visual clues. Consider taking speechreading classes.
- Anticipate problems and seek to minimize them.
- Tell your co-workers how to speak to you – offer them a written “Communication Tips Sheet”
- Make sure your own workspace has the kinds of lighting and seating with minimal backlighting and background noise that allows you to communicate best.
- If using a telephone is difficult, request volume controlled phones and/or access to telecommunications relay services, particularly captioned telephone services including WebCapTel. For conference calls, request agendas, names of participants in advance. You might also request that people identify themselves before speaking and that they refrain from using a speakerphone.
- Request information in writing: job assignments, meeting agendas, queries for information are best if written on hard copy or email in advance.
- Request accommodations when needed, such as: Assistive Listening Devices (FM, Infrared, Audioloop), captioning, CART (computer assisted real time transcription), communication strategies, visual and tactile alarms, oral interpreters, Cued speech transliteration.
- If a hearing dog is appropriate for you, provide your employer with the information needed to accommodate your dog on the job.