

# Hearing Loss and Employment

## Exploring Challenges and Protective Factors for Retention of Employees with Hearing Loss in the Workforce

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### Background

In the UK, 2.4m people have a degree of hearing loss (HL) which means they would have difficulty hearing most conversational speech (RNID, 2023). For working age adults, this has significant implications for employment. People with hearing loss are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed, and to have lower wages (Granberg and Gustafsson, 2021). This poster shares findings relating to employment from a PhD study exploring lived experience of hearing loss in working age adults in the UK.

### Methods

15 in depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with people (8 women and 7 men) who lost hearing as working age adults. 10 interviews took place using Microsoft Teams and 4 interviews were in person.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using NVivo software. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was carried out on the data, and a range of themes were developed.

### Impact of Hearing Loss on Workers

Participants found it difficult to find the right expertise around employment support from healthcare professionals and voluntary organisations. They reported that the design of buildings and office space rarely considered hearing loss. In cases where hearing loss happened gradually, participants did not initially realise how much it was affecting them at work.

#### Personal impact

- Stress
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Fatigue
- Isolation from colleagues
- Loss of confidence
- Taking early retirement

"I think I did start to get depressed at one point [...] I could feel myself start to feel really lose my confidence and start to feel really down." [EN]

*"In the end I had to give up my job and took early retirement at 55 because I couldn't cope anymore." [Katrina]*

- Moving to minimum wage employment from highly paid, professional roles  
*"I used to have fairly high responsibility, really good paying jobs [...] but I've gone down to more like simple like almost entry level positions." [Damon]*
- Difficulty finding new employment  
*"I think I totally ignored the potential and the difficulty to fit in when you don't hear, so it has been extremely difficult to find a job." [Marie]*

### Barriers to Support in the Workplace

The most significant barrier to support was not disclosing hearing loss. It wasn't necessarily bad experiences that led to participants leaving employment, it was the anticipation of a negative response from their employer. It is not a chance many want to take.

- Participants feared losing their jobs:  
*"my own fear was, well, if I tell them [...] they're just going to say, well, you can't do this job, then you know. That was my fear, you know, and I needed the work." [Katrina]*
- One participant had a negative reaction from the first person she told which made her reluctant to open up to other colleagues.

*"one of the first people that I told at work, which was one who was a bit higher up than me [...] she went 'But is this really the case though, has a doctor told you this?' as if to sort of say, are you just inventing it and being hysterical? [...] So, I tend not to tell people unless I have to." [Mel]*

- Many participants doubted that employers would be willing/able to support.
- Participants reported a lack of knowledge and understanding from managers.
- Participants generally didn't want to draw attention to themselves or cause doubt about their competence, but it was necessary at each point they had to request a reasonable adjustment.  
*"I just want to be able to get on with my life and do my job without sort of a big flashing sign over my head saying I need extra help." [Lisa]*
- The onus was generally on the individual to find solutions and request accommodations from their employer.

### Protective Factors

**Peer support** from colleagues was a significant factor. Participants gained practical support regarding adjustments to their role and moral support to manage the impact of hearing loss.

**Staff networks** for deaf and hard of hearing colleagues – this could be a Teams site or a network involving online and in person meetings. Networks provide support, advice and community. They can also advocate for workers' needs as a collective, taking the burden away from the individual. One participant felt the "collective sigh of relief" at her organisation's first online meeting for deaf and hard of hearing employees where people realised they weren't alone in their difficulties at work.

**Proactive, informed management** that are approachable encourage disclosure of HL.

**Information and advice** that is accurate and tailored needs to be available.

**Technology** – the move to the move to videoconferencing during the pandemic was reported as a positive change in accessibility. There are a range of devices and software that can support people with HL at work.

**Occupational Health** in larger organisations provided information and recommendations for reasonable adjustments.

**Access to Work** – an imperfect scheme but where participants had had a response, it took the financial burden away from the organisation or employee.

**Deaf awareness training** - simple dos and don'ts can make people more conscious of how to communicate clearly which is beneficial for everyone.



### Audiologists – Help!

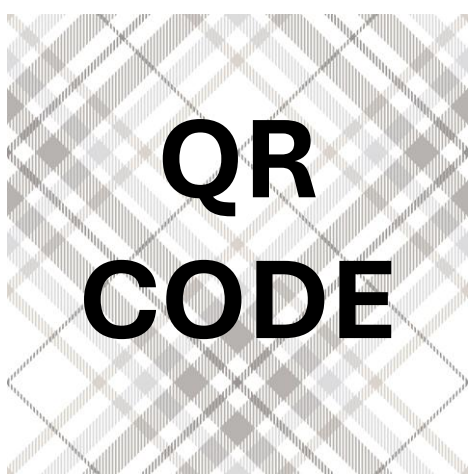
Audiologists in the NHS have demanding roles with high caseloads. One study with audiologists found they did not feel confident dealing with the issues facing workers with hearing loss. They cited a lack of specific training in this area and as appointment length is the same for all patients, it is challenging to include conversations around employment (Zuriekat et al, 2022). Workers with hearing loss have reported the focus in appointments tends to be on Hearing Aids and managing HL at work is not discussed (Zuriekat et al, 2024).

The second phase of this study has involved VCSE organisations specialising in supporting people with hearing loss and economic inclusion; a lipreading tutor; a private company that provides specialist equipment; and other health professionals supporting people with HL.

**The audiologists' perspective is missing!**



I'd like to invite audiologists to share their views in a VERY short survey to build a more balanced picture of where support should come from, and what would help audiologists to support workers with hearing loss. Please fill in using the QR code or this link:



### Conclusion

Supporting employees with hearing loss to stay in and thrive in employment is in the interests of the individual, the employer and the economy as a whole. As the number of people with hearing loss grows and retirement age increases, it is essential that employees and employers can access information and advice to develop appropriate workplace support.

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### References

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