

# Communication Matters

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Past issues of Communication Matters are posted on the **E-Learn Deaf & Hard of Hearing Resource Center**. Information or news related to Deaf or Hard of Hearing services may be forwarded to Julie Eckhardt at [jewel@traverse.net](mailto:jewel@traverse.net). *Views expressed in this bulletin are not necessarily the views of Michigan Department of Labor & Economic Growth, Rehabilitation Services.*



**MADHS Leadership  
School for Deaf &  
HOH Youth @ MSU**  
Registration Deadline:  
March 1, 2004

Deaf or Hard of Hearing students (ages 14-19) can experience a taste of life at Michigan State University (MSU) while living in the dorms and participating in a unique blend of learning and fun. Interactive presentations by deaf and hard of hearing leaders cover:

- Higher education
- Personal Responsibility
- Employment
- Team Building
- Organizational Skills
- Employment
- Personal Leadership.

For more information contact MADHS at 1-800-YOUR EAR or on the web at [www.madhs.org](http://www.madhs.org).



## Hear Here IV Conference & Technology EXPO

April 23 & 24, 2004

Valley Plaza Resort, Midland

Learn about assistive technology, the Employer Side of Hearing Loss, Power Hearing Aids, and more. See the MI-SHHH web site for details:

[www.mi-shhh.org/](http://www.mi-shhh.org/)

## Emerging Legal Trends:

Impact on Services for Postsecondary Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

*Teleconference offered at  
Lansing Community College  
February 19, 2004  
2:00 - 4:00 PM*



This live broadcast includes a review of recent case rulings and current legal issues. It is presented by Jeanne Kincaid, a nationally recognized disability rights attorney. Guidance will be offered to ensure legal compliance. Topics include “**Effective Inter-agency Agreements with VR**”, “**Finding Qualified People to Provide Services**,” and “**Working with Students with Cochlear Implant**.”

For more information see:

[www.pepnet.org/teleconfer.asp](http://www.pepnet.org/teleconfer.asp).

**No Charge to Attend.**

Contact Julie Eckhardt to register:

[jewel@traverse.net](mailto:jewel@traverse.net) or 231/922-2943.

## Communication Matters

**Workshop: Working with Deaf & Hard of Hearing People**

Learn practical skills to facilitate working with people with hearing loss (including bosses, co-workers, clients, and family members). Learn how communication can be easier and more enjoyable, in only 4 hours. **Julie Eckhardt is now scheduling regional workshops for Spring 2004.** Last year, Julie visited many of the MRS offices with this highly rated workshop. Regional workshops will offer the same content. Contact Julie to schedule a workshop for your region at 231/ 922-2943 or [jewel@traverse.net](mailto:jewel@traverse.net).

# Understanding the Impacts of Hearing Loss in the Workplace: Vocational Needs Assessment

By Dr. Samuel Trychin

*This article is a revision, with Dr. Trychin's review and permission, of an article that originally appeared in the January/February 2003 issue of Hearing Loss, the publication of Self Help for Hard of Hearing People. Thank you to Ann Liming of the Division on Deaf and Hard of Hearing and George Kosovich of the Rehabilitation Services Administration, who provided comments and input. Julie Eckhardt served as editor.*

When conducting a Vocational Needs Assessment with people with hearing loss, a hearing evaluation, which reports the degree of loss, may not tell the whole story. Unfortunately, people with hearing loss are frequently unable to articulate the exact nature of their on-the-job communication difficulties. Once identified, the person may not know what to do to overcome the difficulties. Therefore, it is important that counselors understand the impacts of hearing loss on workers and ways to address those difficulties.

The following are questions that rehabilitation counselors, and related professionals, need to ask vocational rehabilitation (VR) applicants with a hearing loss and their audiologists.

## Examples of Rehabilitation Needs

### *Hearing*

The major concern with hearing, that many people do not understand, is that all levels of hearing loss produce communication problems. The hearing loss itself can never be a sufficient criterion for evaluating its effect on communication and job selection and/or performance. Hearing loss must always be evaluated in terms of the communication requirements of the job. That means all of the communication requirements should be considered, even those that only occur once a month, such as monthly staff meetings or infrequent training sessions.

Hearing ability is impacted by a number of vari-

ables related to work settings. For example, work in an office with frequent telephone use, manufacturing in a noisy environment, one-on-one communication environments, and frequent group meetings may impact speech comprehension. Carrying on a conversation while walking, driving, or otherwise moving about in space results in a reduced ability to see the speaker's face and a consequent inability to understand what is being said through speech reading. When talking outdoors, sound dissipates rapidly, and wind and other ambient noises interfere with hearing speech. Conversing while simultaneously conducting other tasks may be problematic for many people with hearing loss. In some circumstances, the employee who is hard of hearing may need to use an assistive listening device, such as an FM system or personal amplifier, and adopt other communication strategies, such as, the use of hand signals.

**Question:** What type of communication is required on the job on a daily basis, as well as less frequently? Does the type of work you do require communication while driving, working outside, or while doing other activities? What situations are more difficult for you? How is this handled?

### *Speaking*

Depending on the age of onset of hearing loss, speech may be distorted and sometimes difficult for others to understand. The person who is hard of hearing may, depending on the type of hearing loss, talk too loudly (can't hear their own voice) or too softly (their own voice sounds too loud). People tend to match the voice volume level of whoever is speaking and may lower their own voice if the person who is hard of hearing speaks softly. This situation produces problems in understanding what is said for the person who is hard of hearing. If, on the other hand, the individual with hearing loss speaks so loudly that their voice is irritating, coworkers may avoid him or her. In either case, the person may need speech therapy to learn to adjust the volume level of their voice. Use of hearing aids may also improve self-modulation.

**Notice:** How well does the person modulate voice volume when speaking? Is their speech clear and easy for you to understand?

### *Seeing*

If vision is poor, resulting in inability to see the speaker's face, there will be problems in understanding what is said. If ambient light is too bright or too dim, or the person relies heavily on speech reading, eye fatigue results and the person will not be able to sustain the necessary visual attention to understand speech. A comprehensive eye exam is essential for persons with significant hearing loss. Those with both hearing and vision loss will require corrective lenses and hearing aids to support speech comprehension in the workplace.

Speech reading (or lip reading) alone provides less than 40 percent of spoken content. Many words appear identical on the lips. However, as an important adjunctive tool that helps increase understanding, speech reading classes or individual speech reading training is advised for most people who are hard of hearing.

**Question:** How comfortable are you with speech reading? Does your work environment make this easier or more difficult? Would training to improve speech reading be helpful?

### *Mobility*

If the hearing loss is due to Meniere's Disease, neuromas, or some other physical condition, then balance, dizziness, coordination, or other neuromuscular problems may also be present. People with hearing loss may also have difficulty with balance in the dark. If these conditions exist and are related to job requirements, caution should be exercised.

**Question:** Do you have any problems with dizziness or balance? Does the work you do require balancing in high places, working in the dark, or other dangerous activity?

### *Cognitive Processing*

People who are hard of hearing often need more time to integrate and retain spoken information.

An exertion of time and energy is required to ascertain accurate understanding. This is partially due to a tendency to constantly check that understanding is accurate. People who talk fast are often misunderstood because, while checking what has just been said, the person who is hard of hearing may miss the next thing spoken. Further, the person with hearing loss may invest so much energy into comprehension of specific words that the overall concept is missed.

Additional factors may play a role in cognitive processing difficulties. If problems are suspected, consider appropriate evaluations (auditory processing, memory, etc.)

**Notice:** Is the response appropriate when you ask open-ended questions or request a recap of the information? Can the person remember and repeat what was just explained?

### *Use and Maintenance of Hearing Technology*

How long has the individual had a hearing loss and used hearing aids and/or other hearing technology? Does he or she have the ability to properly use a hearing aid, assistive listening system, and/or alerting devices, and to trouble-shoot and adjust equipment when inevitable problems arise? If this ability is not ensured and equipment problems arise, the tendency is to stop using the devices that have been purchased. Local chapters of Self Help for Hard of Hearing People (SHHH), or individual members, are a possible resource for people needing coaching with hearing aids and assistive hearing technology.

**Question:** Are you comfortable changing batteries on your hearing aid? Do you have a drying kit and do you know how to use it? What instruction did you receive about caring for your hearing aids? Do you have a T-switch on your hearing aid? Do you know how to use it?

### *Self-Direction*

Some people who are hard of hearing have become dependent upon others such as family, friends, and/

or coworkers, for clarifying what is said. This can be a burden on others, who then become resentful, causing relationships to suffer. Support groups, such as SHHH, and coaching in managing hearing loss may be beneficial.

Denial of the hearing loss, or its effects on one's performance and life in general, results in failure to practice coping strategies that would enable better understanding and more competent functioning. Counseling aimed at realistic acceptance of the hearing loss and its effects, coupled with training in managing hearing loss, are often necessary to overcome this denial.

Many people who are hard of hearing underachieve in the workplace because they are unaware of strategies and equipment that can enable them to function at a higher level. Comprehensive rehabilitation services can play an important role in combating underemployment for people with hearing loss.

**Notice:** Does the person bring someone else to the appointment? How much do they rely on this person for clarification or to answer questions?

### ***Interpersonal Skills***

The employee who is hard of hearing may respond appropriately when someone talks to him, but may be reluctant to initiate conversations. This can be taken as lack of initiative or motivation.

Social withdrawal is a risk for hard of hearing people, and fellow employees and/or supervisors can interpret this as a sign of unfriendliness or personal problems. Coworkers may tend to avoid the person who is hard of hearing because of communication difficulties. Supervisors may give unsatisfactory evaluations of the person and not recommend promotions or salary increases.

Some people who are hard of hearing have difficulty in establishing and maintaining relationships. Frequently asking, "Huh?" or "What?" will not endear oneself to others. Pretending to understand what is being said when one doesn't, and later being found

out, is problematic in establishing and maintaining relationships at home or work. Angrily blaming others for not speaking clearly can further interfere with relationships. Many people who are hard of hearing leave jobs they are competent to perform because of the negative interpersonal climate at work. In some cases, they may have inadvertently created the problems themselves. Again, coaching in managing hearing loss can be very helpful in overcoming these interpersonal shortcomings.

**Question:** Tell me about your social activities? Do you attend group functions such as church and clubs? Has there been a change from what you used to do? Tell me about your relationships with co-workers.

**Notice:** Does the person with hearing loss assertively and appropriately address communication difficulties that arise?

### ***Work Tolerance***

Sustained visual attention results in fatigue and loss of ability to maintain the attention necessary for understanding verbal communication. Background noise also induces fatigue and inability to concentrate in people who are hard of hearing. Poor lighting (too bright, too dim) results in eyestrain and fatigue. Frequent, short breaks can mean the difference between success and failure on the job for people who have hearing loss. The use of assistive listening devices is also helpful in maintaining the attention level required for successful job performance.

**Question:** Are you able to work full-time? How do you feel after a full day at work? Are some days much more tiring than others? Why?

### ***Work Skills***

For someone who already has a job and comes to VR for help in maintaining the job, providing a hearing aid is often not enough. Most people who are hard of hearing, and who already have jobs, have the requisite competencies to perform their jobs at satisfactory levels or above. Problems arise when trying to understand what others are saying

in daily conversation. “Others” may include supervisors, coworkers, supervisees, clients, customers, delivery people, etc. Mistakes are more often due to misunderstanding what has been said, rather than incompetence to perform the task.

Workers with hearing loss may benefit from training to compensate for their hearing loss including hands-on training with a variety of assistive devices. Employers may also need advice from VR counselors on what their employees who are hard of hearing need in order to function to their potential. Prospective employees also need information to know what they will be up against, communicatively, once on the job and what is required for success.

For those who participate in training in order to obtain employment or to advance within a job, the problem becomes one of hearing and understanding what is said in the training sessions. Lack of hearing assistance technology or amplification (PA, FM, etc.) can result in failure to understand the trainers/speakers. Training films and videotapes are often not captioned and, therefore, difficult to understand. Training sites may benefit from instruction from trained and qualified VR counselors on accommodations for trainees.

**Question:** Are you required to attend training for work? How well do you understand what is said? When you attend programs in a classroom setting, are you able to hear well or is that difficult? What about small group situations?

### ***Case-Closure Data***

A few years ago, I had the good fortune to review the summary of case-closure data from vocational rehabilitation offices around the United States. Several facts of importance appeared in that data.

- ☛ Clients who were hard of hearing were older. The average age of clients who were hard of hearing was about 45, whereas the average age for all other clients was about 30 years old.

- ☛ Most clients who were hard of hearing already had jobs they wanted to maintain.

- ☛ The average amount of money provided to the clients who were hard of hearing was \$1,200, about the cost of a hearing evaluation and hearing aid(s) at that time.

- ☛ The clients who were hard of hearing were seen once or twice on average, which indicated an initial interview, prescription for a hearing evaluation, and, perhaps, a follow-up visit.

The strong suggestion in the case-closure data is that the service most often provided for clients who are hard of hearing is the provision of hearing aids. However, clients who are hard of hearing will often need additional support in order to function up to their potential on the job. It is relatively inexpensive to accommodate the needs of people who are hard of hearing compared to the costs involved with many other challenging conditions. A thorough assessment of rehabilitation needs, coupled with the implementation of a comprehensive rehabilitation plan, will result in higher work satisfaction and more stable employment among VR clients with hearing loss.

*Dr. Trychin welcomes your comments and information about workplace situations. He can be reached at [samtrychin@adelphia.net](mailto:samtrychin@adelphia.net). Additional information, books, and videos related to hearing loss are on Dr. Trychin's web site at: [www.trychin.com](http://www.trychin.com)*

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