



Best Practices in Onboarding Employees with Hearing Disabilities

DBP RESEARCH REQUEST

Overview of Research



Hearing loss is the second most prevalent health issue around the world; in the U.S., about 1 in 5 people, and 3 in 5 combat veterans, have some amount of hearing loss.

Managers or supervisors will inevitably have an employee who has some degree of hearing loss. Employers have a legal obligation to make reasonable accommodations that enable employees with disabilities, including hearing loss, to be successful in the workplace.

This report provides information, insight and best practices on how companies are onboarding employees with hearing disabilities and providing a welcoming, inclusive space for such employees.

People with hearing loss are among the 49.7 million Americans who have a disability as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

According to the National Association of the Deaf, the term “deaf” refers to individuals who are not able to hear well enough to rely on hearing as a means for processing information. The term “hard of hearing” refers to individuals who have some hearing loss but are able to use hearing to communicate.

People with hearing loss may develop some of the limitations listed below, but seldom develop all of them:

- Hard of Hearing
- Noise Sensitivity
- Progressive Hearing Loss
- Ringing in the ears

According to a [Johns Hopkins University 2011 study](#), 30 million Americans (12.7% of the population) had hearing loss in both ears while 48 million Americans (20.3% of the population) had hearing loss in one ear.

The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) reports that approximately 17% of American adults (36 million people) report some degree of hearing loss.

Age is the strongest predictor of hearing loss among adults aged 20-69, with the greatest amount of hearing loss in the 60 to 69 age group.

Men are almost twice as likely as women to have hearing loss among adults aged 20-69.

Veterans

Tinnitus and hearing loss are the number [one and two health conditions](#), respectively, among military veterans at U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers.

- In 2017, there were 1.79 million disability compensation recipients for tinnitus and 1.16 million compensation recipients for hearing loss.
- In addition, many Veterans who score normally on hearing tests have trouble understanding speech. This condition, auditory processing disorder or central auditory processing disorder (CAPD), is often associated with blast exposure.
- A [study](#) in 2015 found that 72% of Veterans with tinnitus also had a diagnosis of anxiety, 60% had depression, and 58% had both conditions.
- Paying an average of \$348.15 each, the VA buys one in five hearing aids sold annually in the U.S., according to that 2010 spending report, the last year that data was available.

Legal Protections for Employees with Hearing Disabilities



Under the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) employers are required to provide adjustments or modifications that enable employees to enjoy equal employment opportunities.

An accommodation is effective if it will provide an individual with an equal employment opportunity to participate in the application process, attain the same level of performance as co-workers in the same position, and enjoy the benefits and privileges of employment available to all employees.

It also includes those accommodations that are necessary to provide access to informal information communicated in the workplace, the opportunity to participate in employer-sponsored events (e.g., training, meetings, social events, award ceremonies), and the opportunity for professional advancement.

Legal Protections for Employees with Hearing Disabilities



Not all employees with a hearing disability will need an accommodation or require the same accommodations.

Some employees may need one or more of the following accommodations:

- Sign language interpreter
- Assistive technology (TTY or text telephone, video relay service, assisted computer software, assistive listening devices)
- Work area adjustments
- Closed captioning
- Appropriate emergency notification systems (strobe lighting on fire alarms or vibrating pagers)

Legal Protections for Employees with Hearing Disabilities



Employers must make the job application process accessible to anyone with hearing loss or any individual with a disability who wishes to apply.

The employer should let applicants know that accommodations are available by including a notice on the application, company website, or other places the job is advertised.

When an employee with a disability is hired, the employer must provide reasonable accommodations to allow the employee to perform job duties, in accordance with the ADA.

For example, this may include purchasing equipment as needed (such as telecommunications devices for communicating with persons with hearing loss) or entering into a contract or developing a relationship with an interpreter or interpreter agency.

Checklist for Onboarding and Accommodating Employees



According to the Society of Human Resource Management, many people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing do not feel welcome in the American workplace, despite legislation to encourage employment, strong popular support for the use of sign language and large investments in accessible post-secondary education for students who are deaf, a sign language interpreter.

Below are some simple ways to onboard and accommodate employees with hearing disabilities:

Some Interview Considerations:

- Ask the candidate how he or she prefers to communicate during the interview.
- If requested, arrange for an interpreter for the interview.
- Be aware that the candidate may speak for himself or herself, or the interpreter may voice what the candidate signs.
- During the interview, make eye contact with the candidate.
- Address your questions directly to the candidate, not the interpreter.

Some Suggestions for Workplace Inclusion:

- Ensure that before a meeting, there is good lighting, good visual access to the speaker and a room layout that provides the best possible visual access to anyone else who might be speaking.
- Watch for signals that the employee wants to contribute.
- Ask the employee how he or she prefers you to get their attention—for instance, by a tap on the shoulder, or by waving.
- Ensure that only one person speaks at a time so the employee who is deaf can follow the conversation.
- Visually indicate who will be speaking next during group discussions.
- Be sure that no one talks with his or her back to the audience while writing on a blackboard.

Some Suggestions Surrounding Pre-Employment

- Ensure upper-level management support.
- Clarify job requirements and job descriptions.
- Provide organizational literature for review before the interview.
- Provide a written itinerary if more than one person is interviewing.
- Inform your receptionist or secretary that you are expecting a deaf applicant.
- Ask deaf employees about their communication preferences (sign or voicing).

Checklist for Onboarding and Accommodating Employees



Tips for Orientation

Training videos

During the training process, providing captioning on all training videos will not only make them accessible to the deaf, it can actually help all new hires retain more information. It is important that deaf/HoH employees have access to all training materials to have a fair chance at succeeding in their new job.

Workspace & IT Setup

An employee's workspace and set up should also be discussed. If they are expecting to get phone calls you can provide a phone that is capable of video relay calls if they know ASL or a text phone. There may also be computer applications that can help them communicate.

Emergencies

In an emergency situation, most environments are not set up to properly notify a deaf/HoH employee. Flashing lights should accompany any alarms that sound. For emergency announcements made over loud speaker or intercom, use a buddy system to ensure the employee gets the message. Make use of text and email emergency alerts.

Checklist for Onboarding and Accommodating Employees



Tips for Orientation

Enable Text-To-Speech

Many modern phones have this facility. It's helpful for safe texting while driving, or for dictating notes. But it's also super helpful for visually impaired corporate learners that literally can't read. Input multiple 'voices' into your online training software. You should onboard new employees by allowing them to pick the tone and timbre that sets them most at ease. You can also design a version of your online training course specifically for your visually impaired corporate learners.

Employ Closed Captions

Closed captions spell out not just the dialogue, but also relevant background sound. They can be useful because, in video formats, it's not always possible to lip-read. Accents and foreign languages can interfere with lip-reading as well, causing breakdowns in communication.

Checklist for Onboarding and Accommodating Employees



Tips for Orientation

Provide a Personalized Portal

Design a one-person-platform to onboard new employees with special needs. You might feel it's not worth making that effort and expense for just one person. But it warms every individual on your team. If you're reaching that far for one new hire, you could make concessions for them too. And while you may think this will cause a flurry of unreasonable requests, it generally won't. Instead, it boosts morale and creates a genuine culture of inclusion that extends beyond lip service.

Get Employees Involved from the Beginning

When you onboard new employees with special needs, they're in the best position to tell you what they require. In most cases, they've had to deal with their condition/issue for a significant amount of time. They can indicate which online training resources suit them best so that you can know what to upload to the employee onboarding software. As well as which accessibility issues they must overcome and how their special needs might affect their online training performance. That way, you can plan accordingly and give them the custom-tailored content they require, instead of trying to guess their expectations.

Additional Suggestions for Orientation

- Provide name tags, including job titles, for everyone.
- Hire an interpreter for the first day, if necessary.
- Provide an organizational chart.
- Give deaf or hard-of-hearing employees information to read before the benefits meeting.
- Use captioned films or videotapes, if available, that explain benefits, or refer new hires to your company's appropriate web page.

Checklist for Onboarding and Accommodating Employees



Tips on Preparing Co-Workers

During a new employee's orientation, everyone who will be working with them should be notified of the new hire's preferred communication methods. Educate the department on the [proper etiquette](#) and how to provide an inclusive environment. Colleagues should know the best way to get the individual's attention when needed and how to communicate through writing or verbally.

When setting up for a meeting, choose a space that will provide the deaf/HoH employee with good visual access, with ample lighting and in direct line of sight if there is a primary speaker. Before the meeting begins, ask the employee how they would like to communicate and contribute in the meeting. Providing an agenda, presentation handouts and other written materials is also a good idea. Inform others in the meeting that they should avoid talking over each other and participate one at a time so it is clear who the speaker is. Make sure the meeting is transcribed and noted thoroughly with visual aids, or that real-time captioning is provided.

Communications from the company to all employees should always be available in text format. Make sure there is a designated person that knows to inform the deaf/HoH employee of any audio announcements.

Checklist for Onboarding and Accommodating Employees



Tips on Preparing Co-Workers

A common mistake when dealing with employees with special needs is to focus on them. It's intuitive, but can be harmful, because while they may be at ease, the people around them might not be. And this discomfort can be inadvertently lashed out upon them.

Train the rest of your staff to deal with your new hire's different ability. To plan only how to onboard new employees with special needs could not be enough.

One suggestion is to learn sign language basics, or make a conscious effort to speak face-to-face, offering lip-reading opportunities. Maybe they can lean towards text and email instead of spoken/yelled instructions.

Best Practices/Case Studies on Inclusion

Bank of America's Disability Advocacy Network (DAN)

In 2018 Bank of America's Disability Advocacy Network (DAN) created a pilot program to provide their hearing impaired employees with closed captioning so they could better participate in DAN virtual chapter meetings.

The unexpected outcome was that although they offered closed captioning to the 30 known employees, **closed captioning was used by more than 5,000 employees on the pilot.**

Due to the successful pilot, closed captioning and/or sign language interpreters are now strongly recommended for live and virtual events thus positively impacting all 200,000 employees.

Accenture's U.S. Disability ERG

Accenture's Disability ERG's aim is to empower and educate individuals with visible and invisible disabilities, as well as their caregivers, colleagues and associates.

Because "disability" is a broad concept that can include any of a wide variety of impairments (visual, physical, hearing, mental health, cognitive, intellectual, and others), the ERG has launched a number of specialized initiatives and programs to help support affected employees. One of the group's most successful initiatives is its **monthly Walk in My Shoes lunch** and learn series, launched in 2015.

The series provides a forum for employees to share valuable insights and hear personal stories of colleagues with a disability, or that have a family member with disability. Each month, up to 150 members join the call, during which a member will share their personal experience with disability. All levels of the Accenture workforce have participated on the calls, including Accenture senior leaders, who share their own experiences and, at the same time, stress the importance of self-identification and self-disclosure, and the difference between the two.

The Walk in My Shoes series has been an effective intervention to erase stigmas, raise awareness, and develop support networks across the workforce.

Cisco Systems Connected Disabilities Awareness Network

Cisco Connected Disabilities Awareness Network (CDAN) is a global employee resource organization that has chapters and representation spanning across Asia Pacific, Europe, Emerging Markets, and the Americas.

Cisco has assistive technologies such as WebEx, TelePresence and Cisco's fully accessible IP phones, and also promotes these technologies internally to employees and customers.

To break down barriers for employees with disabilities, an initiative to make internal employee tools and applications accessible was implemented. These include vacation tools, mobile applications and basic tools that employees use regularly, helping to ensure that accessibility is permanently integrated into the IT product lifecycle from the start.

EY

Manager and employee training and awareness:

EY developed a wide variety of tools and resources to its employees to help them develop abilities-friendly etiquette, language, and work habits. Samples of a brochure and poster are available on the Ernst & Young website.

System infrastructure, e.g, IT programs used by employees telecom, etc.:

On November 20, 2011, Ernst & Young became the first Big Four firm to sign the Business Taskforce Accessibilities Technology (BTAT) Charter, which confirms that accessibility is embedded in all of its IT systems and ensures that all employees with disabilities can use its technologies.