

How supervisors can create a better work environment for deaf or hard-of-hearing employees

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Hearing loss cases are climbing globally—1 in 5 adults are affected—along with a growing number of older workers who are more likely to experience hearing loss. A new study from researchers at Portland State, Oregon State and York universities sheds light on how the severity of an employee's hearing loss can impact their experience at work—and the steps managers and employers can take to create a more inclusive environment for deaf or hard-of-hearing employees.

The study builds on prior research that says employees with [hearing loss](#) experience isolation at work, which can be detrimental to their career outcomes, and finds that tailored support can counter those experiences.

The results suggest that the severity of an [employee's hearing](#) loss influences the degree to which they rely on professional connections for their sense of self, which then has downstream consequences for career outcomes. This is especially true among employees who have an unsupportive supervisor.

The study found that employees with more severe hearing loss tend to fare better, in large part because they tend to disengage from relationships with others at work. The researchers suggest that employees with more severe hearing loss are more likely to experience awkward, anxious and frustrating interactions with co-workers and have a harder time building and maintaining professional connections. Those workers often protect themselves by putting less importance on professional connections. When they care less and are less sensitive to fewer professional connections, their sense of isolation is not as high.

"We are not recommending that managers and supervisors stop worrying about supporting employees with more severe hearing loss; we're suggesting they offer tailored support," said Liu-Qin Yang, a professor of industrial-organizational psychology at PSU. She said that even if self-isolation is an effective coping mechanism, those employees ultimately have worse career outcomes in the areas of attitudes, commitment, satisfaction and salary levels.

Yang's co-authors Brent Lyons of York University and David Baldrige of Oregon State, who are both hard of hearing, offered insights into what that tailored support could look like.

Lyons, whose hearing loss fluctuates from severe to profound to moderate, says his needs vary and it's helpful when supervisors create a sense of openness for him to request certain accommodations. In one meeting, he might need to be seated next to the speaker; in another, he might need closed captions on the screen.

"That might not always be the case for me and my needs may change," Lyons said. "But I really appreciate when supervisors are open and touch base on a regular basis: 'How are things going? What can we do to make sure that you can fully participate?'"

Baldrige, who has experienced full hearing, deafness and now restored hearing with [cochlear implants](#), said flexibility—focusing on the results and not how the work is done—is also important.

When it comes to facilitating professional connections, Baldrige said that organizing a one-on-one meeting or lunch in a quiet location would be more effective for an employee with hearing loss than trying to introduce them to people at a cocktail party. Supervisors can also connect them with employee resource groups or organizations such as the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) and the Association

of Late Deafened Adults (ALDA).

Lyons also said that it's important for supervisors to create a culture of respect and understanding among all of their employees.

"They can advocate on my behalf so co-workers don't start to think negatively about me if I don't attend a loud, busy event," he said. "That could lead to fewer opportunities, which would negatively affect my career."

The researchers are clear that, regardless of the severity of an employee's hearing loss, managers can play a critical role in making them feel included by working to understand their abilities, perceptions and limitations and helping them build professional connections that will be helpful throughout their careers.

The study was published in the *Journal of Management*.

More information: Brent J Lyons et al, Disability Severity, Professional Isolation Perceptions, and Career Outcomes: When Does Leader–Member Exchange Quality Matter?, *Journal of Management* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/01492063221143714](https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063221143714)

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