

# How workplaces can create more inclusive environments for employees with deafness and hearing loss

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Hearing loss is a critical diversity, equity and inclusion issue for managers and employers. Persons with hearing loss are a growing

population around the world. According to the World Health Organization, over [five percent of the world's population](#)—or 430 million people—have disabling hearing loss. This number is expected to rise to over 700 million by 2050.

Despite the increasing number of persons with hearing loss in the workplace, [only 20.6 percent of Canadians](#) with hearing loss are employed full-time. Discrimination, a lack of accessibility and isolation still prevent equity and inclusion at work. Persons with hearing loss also [experience higher levels of stress](#) and fatigue and earn lower incomes.

Persons with hearing loss have diverse preferences and skills that can [affect their career outcomes](#). Knowledge of disability, reasonable workplace accommodations, effective communication skills and support from mentors and peer networks all contribute to positive career outcomes.

However, experiences can vary greatly by hearing loss type and job demands. For example, sign language users may have more access to Deaf communities and resources, but less access to mainstream opportunities. Spoken language users may have more access to mainstream opportunities, but less access to Deaf communities and resources.

## **How do persons with hearing loss cope with isolation at work?**

[Our new study](#) examines how employees with hearing loss cope with feeling isolated at work. We found that how employees cope depends on both the severity of hearing loss and the quality of their relationship with their supervisors.

Specifically, our results suggest the severity of an employee's hearing loss influences the degree to which they rely on professional connections for their sense of self. This, in turn, has consequences for their career outcomes, especially for those with less supportive supervisors.

Surprisingly, we found that employees with more severe hearing loss tend to fare better in terms of the impact of isolation on career outcomes. This is because employees with more severe hearing loss were more likely to experience awkward, anxious and frustrating interactions with co-workers and have a harder time building and maintaining professional connections.

As a result, employees with more severe hearing loss usually placed less importance on professional connections and more importance on connections with other persons with hearing loss, making them less sensitive to isolation from professional connections.

## **What can persons with hearing loss do to support themselves?**

Our research found that persons with hearing loss use a number of strategies to help themselves thrive in their careers. One thing persons with hearing loss do is accepting and embracing hearing loss as part of their identity. This positively changes how they view themselves and their relationship to work.

Many persons with hearing loss also redefine their personal definitions of career success. They shift from material achievements to social contributions, personal growth and well-being. Some end up moving to new roles or occupations that better match their changing skills, interests and values.

Some even turn their hearing loss into an asset. For instance, attorneys, doctors or therapists with hearing loss can focus on serving clients and patients who share their condition.

Persons with hearing loss often expanded their professional networks to include others in the community. This may involve affiliations with organizations like the [Association of Late-Deafened Adults](#), [Canadian Hard of Hearing Association](#), [Canadian Association of the Deaf](#), [Hearing Loss Association of America](#) and the [National Association of the Deaf](#).

Our research underscores the resilience and adaptability of persons with hearing loss in the workplace. By redefining success, shifting their perspectives and expanding their networks to include supportive communities, persons with hearing loss are able to lead rich and fulfilling professional lives.

## **What can co-workers and supervisors do to help make workplaces more inclusive?**

There are a number of practices supervisors can adopt to [support employees with hearing loss effectively](#). These practices include: avoid assuming an employee with a disability is less able, ask persons with hearing loss about their preferred communication methods and [provide reasonable accommodations](#) for them, such as interpreters, captioning, assistive devices and flexible work arrangements.

These can help persons with hearing loss to communicate effectively, participate in meetings and training sessions, access information and resources and perform their jobs effectively. Supervisors should create a sense of openness and flexibility so employees feel comfortable requesting accommodations as needed.

In addition, supervisors and co-workers should learn more inclusive communication skills. For example, they can learn basic sign language, use clear and articulate language, speak more slowly and clearly, and avoid covering their mouths when speaking as this can hinder lip-reading. Many persons with hearing loss also find it easier to communicate one-on-one in well-lit, quiet locations.

Regular check-ins with employees to see how things are going, what challenges they are facing and if they need any support are also essential. Supervisors and co-workers should raise awareness, educate others, challenge stereotypes and promote accessibility at work. They should advocate for a more inclusive and respectful work environment for all employees, especially those with hearing loss.

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