Column

Work transition tips: Inclusion for workers with hearing loss: Actions for work practice professionals

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The global prevalence of adult hearing loss was estimated to be 538 million \cite{1}. In the United States 20 million workers experience hearing loss \cite{2}. Yet hearing loss at work is often unnoticed, underreported, and unaddressed. The hidden nature or invisibility of hearing loss can lead to overlooked work disparities. For instance, workers with hearing loss either withdraw early from work due to lack of accommodation or work longer, out of necessity, than other workers. They also experience lower work productivity (presenteeism) due to fatigue and/or can be mistaken for a worker who is disengaged in the workplace when in fact they purposefully limit participation in social events or teamwork to manage the stress associated with communicating in group settings. Recently, however, the World Health Organization has played a role in raising hearing loss as a global chronic health issue of concern \cite{3}. The WHO is advocating for the advancement of competencies in the health care workforce to enhance the health, wellbeing, participation and inclusion of persons with hearing loss in society.

This global call to attention on the burden of hearing loss presents a key leadership opportunity for work practice professionals to promote ‘hearing at work’. The time is right for a renewed emphasis on evidence-informed wellness and rehabilitation approaches to prevent disability and marginalization of workers with hearing loss. This tip sheet offers insights into how work practice professionals can inform change. Knowledge innovations in this special
Establish Networks with key stakeholders to provide leadership in their communities that can support innovations in ‘hearing at work’:
- Create a community of practice
- Increase access to information on hearing loss
- Write an article in local newspaper
- Contribute to a blog to raise awareness
- Consider the expertise needed from others

Accessibility professionals can assist with technology
- Audiolists can offer HATs AR and UDH assessment
- Psychologists and other mental health professionals can provide coping strategies
- Occupational therapists can support accommodation plans
- Local business representatives can share best practices
- Consumer organizations can provide education and support
- Social workers can support access to funding
- Occupational physicians can implement hearing surveillance
- Primary Care Physicians can make referrals to specialists
- Architects and interior designers can support inclusive design in the built environment

Partner with employers and worker representatives to develop and/or disseminate information on:
- ‘Hearing and communication’ accommodation and accessibility plans for workers and customers
- Recruitment plans to hire persons with hearing loss
- Ongoing access to accommodation supports to support retention
- Disclosure strategies
- Co-worker training
- Awareness-raising of the benefits of hearing and cost benefits of proactive planning
- Universal Design Guidelines for Hearing principles
- Environments that support hearing
- Prevention of hidden consequences of managing hearing loss (stress, fatigue, continuous concern, mental distress)
- Psychosocial dynamics of hearing loss and importance to rehabilitation success
- Complexity of hearing function (worker characteristics & the work environment)

References

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