

Hearing loss in the workplace

A BEST PRACTICE GUIDE FOR MEETINGS, CONFERENCES AND EVENTS



Hearing Ready Workplace is a
Better Hearing Australia (Brisbane) Program

bhabrisbane.org.au

BETTER
HEARING
AUSTRALIA



hr
hearing
ready

\$33b

The estimated cost of hearing loss in Australia.

1 in 6

The number of people suffering from hearing loss.

1 in 5

The number of people who could benefit from hearing aids who actually use one.

7 years

The time it takes someone to address their hearing loss on average.

50%

The prevalence of hearing loss in men aged 50+.

\$6.9b

The loss in productivity due to hearing loss.

Why we can't ignore hearing loss in the workplace



When we look at the statistics around hearing loss – the prevalence, the cost, the impact on society – employers simply can not ignore the impact hearing loss has in the workplace.

Research and statistics tell us that more often than not, workplaces are dealing with people who are hard of hearing on a daily basis. This is not just customers but also employees, management and business owners.

BHA Brisbane provide training and audits for workplaces wanting to become “Hearing Ready”. We also provide freely available resources, like this best practice guide to hearing loss accommodation in meetings, conferences and events.

We encourage all members of your organisation to review the content in this guide, and we encourage the organisation to commence taking the steps to make hearing access more equitable in the workplace.

Addressing hearing loss in the workplace will become a bigger challenge in the future as a greater proportion of the population will be affected by hearing loss.

By adopting the policies and practices in this guide you will help everyone, not just those with hearing loss, communicate better.

Tony Whelan

Business Manager
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We recognise...

We are not the first to talk about how businesses can accommodate hearing loss in the workplace.

We would like to recognise the following organisations whose work has helped inform our own.

- Queensland Government
- Deaf/Hard of Hearing Technology Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center
- University of Melbourne
- National Deaf Center
- Australian Government Department of Health
- Ideas for Ears

Employer's Obligations

Employers today need to understand their obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) in relation to hearing loss.

The DDA makes it **unlawful to discriminate against a person**, in many areas of public life, including employment, because of their disability.

Disability discrimination occurs when a person is **treated less favourably, or not given the same opportunities**, as others in a similar situation because of their disability.

Employers are required to **take all reasonable steps** to prevent disability discrimination, including in the areas of:

- recruitment;
- work conditions and salary;
- promotion;
- training and development; and
- disciplinary action and termination.

Most employers have policies in place that meet their industry's various legislative requirements including the DDA but indirect discrimination can sometimes still occur.

Indirect discrimination happens when employers put in place procedures or practices that appear to treat everyone the same but disadvantage some people because of their disability.

Examples of indirect discrimination:

- A keynote speech at a conference is delivered in a room with no hearing augmentation system (eg a hearing loop) for people who rely on this technology to hear in public spaces.
- Where accommodation is provided at a conference venue, it is often the case that the rooms are not supplied with caption enabled television or visual emergency warning systems.
- Where public demonstrations or entertainment events are organised, the needs of sign language users are neglected.
- Requiring a deaf employee to attend a meeting without providing an Auslan interpreter.

Employers **should make any reasonable workplace adjustments as soon as possible** and in consultation with the employee once a need has been identified.

The accommodations outlined in this document will help ensure your workplace communicates effectively with all staff, not just those experiencing hearing loss.

Addressing hearing loss means everyone benefits.



Understanding Hearing Loss

It's important to understand that hearing loss is experienced differently by everyone. Certain types of hearing loss will impact in different ways and people with hearing loss will develop their own strategies and coping mechanisms that are unique to them.

Reading through the points below will give you an understanding of the most common communication barriers people with hearing loss face, particularly in meetings and conferences.

Challenges for People with Hearing Loss

People with some hearing loss

Usually described as mild or moderate hearing loss and affects as many as one in six of the general population.

- Background noise, especially when caused by the chatter of other people. Open plan office environments can be challenging.
- Speaker facing away and/or mouth covered by hands/ mug etc so not visible for lipreading.
- People not speaking clearly or lowering their voice mid-way through words or sentences to create inaudible gaps for the listener.
- People speaking too fast.
- Room acoustics being poorly managed so sound echoes/reverberates.
- Ambient noise caused by air conditioning units, open windows, office equipment and appliances.
- PA system/mics not being used (at all or properly) when they should be.
- Being too far from the speaker to hear or lipread due to room layout or number of attendees.
- Failure to provide a working & effective hearing loop (though this tends to be less important than provision of a PA system).
- No written materials or visual aids to support what is said.

People with substantial hearing loss

Usually described as severe or profound hearing loss and affects up to 1 in 70 of the general population.

All of the previous challenges noted, plus:

- Lack of a working & effective hearing loop tends to be a greater barrier than lack of a PA system.
- Failure to offer/provide transcription of speech through a language professional can be as much a barrier as failure to provide written notes.
- Poor lighting for lipreading is a significant barrier.
- Failure to offer/provide support from other language professionals (e.g. Electronic Notetaker, Auslan/ English interpreter) can be a barrier.

People who are Deaf sign language users

Auslan is the sign language of the Australian Deaf community. It is a unique language to Australia. The number of Auslan users is around 6,500.

All of the above challenges, including:

- Speaker facing away or not speaking clearly.
- Being too far from the speaker to lipread.
- Poor lighting for lipreading.
- No written notes to support what is said.
- Failure to offer/provide support from an Auslan interpreter.

Plus:

- Lack of awareness that Auslan is a separate language that is unrelated to English and does not translate in a literal way.
- Lack of provision of inclusive written materials that are suitable for people for whom English is not their main language.



General Recommendations

Whether some staff experience hearing loss or not, improving communication skills and implementing Hearing Ready strategies within your organisation will improve communication outcomes for all.

These recommendations are strategies you can incorporate into your day to day communications, whether in a meeting or having a one to one conversation.

Share the checklists contained in this guide throughout your organisation to ensure everyone benefits from being part of a Hearing Ready workplace.

And be sure to leave a copy in all your meeting rooms.

Good Communication Strategies

For organisers and presenters

- ❑ **Ask the participants about the most effective way to communicate with them.** This will encourage self-identification and can help you make the relevant accommodations for your audience.
- ❑ **Get the participants' attention.** Whether a room full of people or a single person, make sure you have their attention before beginning to communicate.
- ❑ **Face the audience.** Make sure your audience can see you and especially your mouth.
- ❑ **Be expressive with your body language** to help convey and reinforce your message.
- ❑ **Reduce background noise.** Any form of noise can make it increasingly difficult for your audience to hear you and understand your message.
- ❑ **Get close.** Be as close to your intended audience as possible to help carry your voice.
- ❑ **Ensure you are well lit.** Lighting is important to make sure your audience can see your lips and facial expressions.
- ❑ **Speak clearly and naturally.** There's no need to slow down your speech or speak loudly. Speak normally but pay attention to your pronunciation.
- ❑ **Check for understanding.** Ask questions of your audience to ensure they understood your message.
- ❑ **Repeat, restate and write down key messages and themes** to ensure your audience are aware of your communication priorities.
- ❑ **Ensure any hearing augmentation tools or devices are working** and in use.
- ❑ **Schedule breaks to avoid or reduce fatigue.** Understand that listening is more demanding for people with hearing loss.

For participants and audience members

- ❑ **Self-identify.** If you are comfortable, let people know you have a hearing loss. Most will be happy to oblige with better communication accommodations if they understand your needs.
- ❑ **Use an augmented hearing solution** such as an FM, induction loop, or Bluetooth system, if available.
- ❑ **Use visual clues** such as facial expressions, body language and lip reading to help understand context and meaning.
- ❑ **Focus on the context** and less on the individual words. This will allow you to fill in missed words if you understand the general theme of the conversation.
- ❑ **Ask for clarification** if something seems out of context or you didn't pick up on a point.
- ❑ **Ask for repeats or rephrasing** of anything you have difficulty understanding.
- ❑ **Make an effort to fully focus** on the conversation or presentation.
- ❑ **Respect the other attendees and speakers** by keeping still and silent when you do not have the floor.
- ❑ **Ask for the information in writing** if possible.
- ❑ **Keep calm.** It can be frustrating when you miss part of a conversation or presentation, but frustration can cause you to miss more of it.

Remember, it is in the speakers best interest to ensure you understand their message fully. They will usually be very happy to accommodate a request for repeats, clarification, or the information in writing.

In-person Meetings

Meetings are a staple of the corporate environment. In order to get the most out of them, for all parties, accessibility should be considered no matter how informal the meeting may seem.

In-person Meetings Checklist

For organisers

- Do a status check** prior to the meeting. Proactively list and inform the participants of anything you are doing to make the meeting more accessible. Ask if participants require any additional accommodations to assist with their communication needs.
- Distribute agenda and other materials** as early as possible and at least 24 hours prior to the meeting.
- Reduce background noise.** Close windows or doors and turn off any equipment not in use.
- Manage participation in the meeting** ensuring only one person is speaking at a time.
- Employ sign language interpreters.** For critical meetings, or meetings with a large number of participants where you know in advance you will have participants with a hearing loss, consider engaging an interpreter.
- Record and transcribe the meeting** and make available to all participants at the conclusion of the meeting.
- Consider having your meeting live captioned.** This is a great way to ensure everyone can hear (see) what is being said.

For participants

- Review agenda and supporting documents** in advance of the meeting and seek clarification on any issues on or questions about agenda.
- Use your hearing aids** if you wear them.
- Use any augmented hearing solutions** in the meeting room if available.



Online Meetings

COVID-19 saw the use of video conferencing explode for both in-house and external meetings. As people were forced to work from home this method of communication gained considerable popularity.

It also saw its fair share of ridicule via social memes and commentary highlighting the issues people face when using these types of tools.

Who hasn't said the words "I think you're on mute?" at some stage in the last 24 months?

If those with normal hearing face challenges communicating via this method, imagine the challenges faced by those with hearing loss.

The recognition that those with adequate hearing still have issues and concerns using video conferencing, only highlights the need for establishing best practices within the organisation for the use of these tools.

By investing a little bit of time and establishing good meeting practices, you will get a better outcome from your on-line meetings and everyone in your organisation will have a much better experience.

Online Meetings Checklist

For organisers

- Do a status check** prior to the meeting. Proactively list and inform the participants of anything you are doing to make the meeting more accessible. Ask if participants require any additional accommodations or if they have a preference for video conferencing software more suited to their communication needs.
- Establish and adhere to participant protocols.** Protocols should include items such as when to mute, how to "raise a hand" to contribute, who has the "floor", and more.
- Manage participation in the meeting** through a "turn-taking" protocol.
- Utilise remote captioning.** If remote captioning is not possible you should enable auto-captioning. Both Zoom and MS Teams will offer auto captioning.
- Distribute agenda and notes** at least 24 hours prior to the meeting.
- Use a good quality microphone or headset** to ensure the best possible audio quality for your audience.
- Use built-in feedback tools** like Zoom's ability to provide non-verbal feedback, including 'yes', 'no', 'go slower', 'go faster', 'like', 'dislike', 'clap', 'need a break' and 'away'.
- Employ sign language interpreters.** For critical meetings, or meetings with a large number of participants where you know in advance you will have participants with hearing loss, consider engaging an interpreter.

- Ensure presenters describe what they are presenting if using slides.** This ensures everyone is on the same page.
- Schedule breaks.** Screen fatigue can affect everyone. Take a break if it's a long meeting.
- Record and transcribe the meeting** and make available to all participants at the conclusion of the meeting.

For participants

- Review agenda and supporting materials** in advance of the meeting and seek clarification on any issues on or questions about the agenda.
- Check and test all technology** to be used before the meeting.
- Use appropriate hearing devices or augmentation** if you normally use them.
- Use hard-wired Ethernet connections** rather than Wifi if possible to maximise transmission quality.
- Turn off video** when not interacting to preserve audio quality, especially for meetings with a large number of participants.
- Reduce background noise.** Close windows or doors and turn off any notifications on your phone and computer.
- Make use of the chat box** for "offline" commentary and feedback to keep the audio channels clear and on subject.

Conferences

Conferences and large meetings present their own unique set of challenges for hearing accessibility.

The check list below is just an overview of what organisers and presenters should consider when preparing for or presenting at a conference or meeting with a large number of participants.

Conference Checklist

Organisers

- Select an appropriate venue** taking into consideration the number of attendees, the suitability of seating, room layout, lighting, acoustics and hearing augmentation solutions.
- Be prepared to adjust or compensate for lighting and acoustic issues** on the day.
- Do a status check** prior to the conference. Proactively list and inform the participants of anything you are doing to make the meeting more accessible.
- Ask if participants require any additional accommodations** to assist with their communication needs. Highlight this is for the benefit of all audience members.
- Know the accommodations you can provide** and which you can't in case you get any special requests.
- Audience members may not disclose hearing loss** so, while you may not have anyone self-identify, you may still have people experiencing hearing loss in your audience.
- Allow attendees to select their own seating.**
- Promote and sign post any hearing augmentation systems** including hearing loops, FM or Bluetooth systems.
- Ensure all presenters use a good quality microphone or headset** and make sure it is connected to any hearing augmentation system in use.
- Consider having your conference live captioned.** This is a great way to ensure everyone can hear (see) what is being said.
- Provide interpretation services** where possible.
- Provide an agenda or programme** to inform audience members of scheduled presentations and breaks.
- Allow adequate breaks** to prevent fatigue by scheduling presentations and breaks appropriately.
- Separate refreshment areas** to ensure setup and packdown of breaks don't interfere with the presentation.

- Distribute copies of the presentations** in written form after the conference.

Presenters

- Face the audience when speaking.** Try to refrain from facing any presentation screen or other presenters.
- Avoid moving about the stage** too much to ensure people can focus on your face as you speak.
- Distribute notes on your main points** prior to your presentation to ensure everyone can follow them as you present.
- Speak one at a time** if there are multiple presenters.
- Use the microphone** or any other amplification technology available.
- Present important points visually** to increase understanding amongst your audience.
- Use captions on any video clips** that are part of your presentation. At a minimum make transcripts available to your audience.
- Be mindful of ambient noise,** poor acoustics and other distractions. Pause if you have to until the interference is removed.
- Make sure your face is well lit** and stands out from the background.
- Pace your delivery** to ensure it is clear and intelligible.
- Check your pace and clarity** with the audience, especially if someone is using speech to text transcription, and with any interpreter to ensure the pace is right for them.
- Summarise or repeat any questions from the floor** to ensure everyone has heard the question.
- Provide your presentation** to the organisers for distribution to attendees.

More Help

There are many resources available online to assist with making your organisation hearing ready. Better Hearing Australia Brisbane can provide advice on these and in many cases provide the technology, resources, tools and training required to make your workplace hearing ready.

Technology and Tools

A range of technology solutions — both permanent and temporary — are available to improve hearing accessibility for meetings and conferences. BHA Brisbane can advise, supply and install a solution that is right for your workplace.



Hearing Loops

Permanent and temporary (portable) hearing loops support people who use hearing aids with a T-switch (telecoil).



Portable Hearing Loops

Mobile or desktop hearing loops can be set up instantly and are perfect for one-to-one communication.



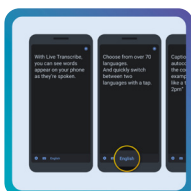
FM Systems

FM systems support personal hearing augmentation through a dedicated wireless signal, which can be broadcast to multiple receivers and supported headsets.



Bluetooth Systems

Similar to FM systems, Bluetooth devices can connect to dedicated headsets. Some hearing aids also support Bluetooth connection.



Speech Transcription Apps

There are several apps available and downloadable for both Android and iOS devices.

Resources and Training

BHA Brisbane provide a range of resources and training options to help make your workplace hearing ready.

The Australian Government also provides grant funding to organisations to improve hearing accessibility for their employees.



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