

**Have you Heard “A Listening Project”**  
**Episode #11 - Hearing Loss in the Workplace**  
**Hosts: Audra and Betsy**

Audra (0:02) Hello and welcome to “Have you Heard a Listening Project.” On this podcast we share tips, stories and practical advice to help people with hearing loss stay connected. If you or a loved one have a hearing loss or maybe you know somebody with a hearing loss this podcast is absolutely for you and we’re super excited to have you join us so thank you so much for being here. I’m Audra, I’m one of your hosts and today I’m joined by my wonderful friend and co-host Miss Betsy Randle.

Betsy (0.29) Oh, shucks...Hi, it’s Betsy.

Audra (0.32) Thanks for being here guys. So today, we’re actually going to cover a pretty important topic but I feel like it’s one that may not get talked about very often and that topic is “how to advocate for yourself as an employee with a hearing loss.” And don’t forget to stay to the end because we’re going to give you seven tips to help you excel at work with a hearing loss. So why this topic? Well, I think most people know that hearing loss is really prevalent for those who are over 65. But, did you know that there are 26 million people in the U.S. between 20 and 65 who have a hearing loss? (Betsy...unbelievable) right, it’s not just something that affects people who are older and 20 to 65 is really prime working age. So there are millions of people in the U.S. right now who are working with some level of hearing loss and we actually did a little informal, informal Facebook survey on this topic and we asked people who are currently working with a hearing loss what some of their biggest struggles were and here are some of the things that they shared with us. So one responder said that they often feel very isolated in group conversations because they can’t always hear what’s being said. A few people noticed that masks makes things really really difficult because they can’t read people’s lips when they’re talking. Several people said that when they’re in meetings and people are talking over themselves that is confusing and very difficult to understand what’s being said and who’s saying it. And they had a

similar issue with zoom meetings when people turn their cameras off because then they can't read lips or context clues to understand what's being said. One person said that it's difficult for them because co-workers think because they have hearing aids that they can hear just as well as everybody else when that's not always the case. And this very last one was that somebody said that they haven't told anyone at work that they have a hearing loss because they feel embarrassed to bring it up (Betsy...mmm) Yeah, so you know, just listening to some of these responses, I mean, it's obvious that working while you have a hearing loss definitely has its challenges. But the good news is, is that the Americans with Disabilities Act or the ADA for short, has a lot of provisions that actually cover disabilities in the workplace including hearing loss and hearing impairment. So what that means for you guys is, if you have a hearing loss there are accommodations that your employer can make to assist you. The only caveat to that is that, the accommodations they must not impose an undue hardship on the employer. So, we're going to cover what some of those accommodations might look in just a bit. What's most important right now is, if you have a hearing loss you should get really really familiar with the provisions provided to you under the ADA.

Betsy (3:15) Okay, that's a great idea Audra. That's a good point I mean, how do you know if you're covered under the ADA?

Audra (3:22) Well, if you're completely deaf you'll likely fall under the ADA. If you're not completely deaf, you still may fall under the ADA if you can show that you are substantially limited in your ability to hear or if you can show a record, so these are medical records, of a hearing impairment that has substantially limited a major life activity in the past. If you can meet either of those qualifications then you should be falling under the ADA.

Betsy (3:47) Okay, Well I was just thinking back to the survey results that you were talking about earlier (Audra...mhmm) and it is heartbreaking that there are people who feel uncomfortable disclosing their hearing loss at work (Audra...I know, that's really sad) But I think it's important to remember that the ADA really does protect them (Audra...yeah, absolutely) the ADA, yeah, it protects you from discrimination in all employment practices, including job application, hiring, firing,

training, pay, promotion, benefits and leave. And you have a right to be free from harassment because of your disability. And an employer cannot fire you or just discipline you for ascertain your rights under the ADA, that's really great to know (Audra...that's huge, yeah) yeah. And most importantly you have a right to request a reasonable accommodation, for the hiring process and on the job as well.

Audra (4:45) And this is why we're having this conversation cuz I think that that's something that could be easy to miss because you may feel like well, you know, I was hired and then I didn't tell them that I had a hearing loss but there is no like statute of limitations you are protected at all times. So (Betsy...yeah) if you did not disclose your hearing loss during the hiring process or training, it's not too late. If you've been at your job for weeks or months or even years and you haven't disclosed it or your hearing loss is recent, it's never too late. You absolutely are covered under the ADA and you can absolutely bring this, to your, you know, your boss and talk to them and try to get some accommodations for yourself (Betsy...yeah). So, we've mentioned the phrase reasonable accommodations a lot, so let's just break that down a little bit so we can kind of see what it means. A reasonable accommodation according to the ADA is any change or adjustment to a job. The work environment or the way things are usually done that will allow you to either apply for a job, perform job functions or enjoy equal access to benefits available to other individuals in the workplace (Betsy...cool) so when, yeah it's nice, so it really does kind of cover all parts of your job. So from, you know, the interview process all the way through. So some of the most common accommodations for people with hearing loss are these, so one is just, you know, it could be something as simple as a work area adjustment maybe you're working in a common space and you legitimately need an office because you can't hear and you can't pay attention when there is a lot of, you know, background noise. So sometimes just moving where you work can make a huge difference (Betsy...mhm) Another accommodation is an assistive listening device so that can be something like a loop or an FM system that just makes it easier for you to hear what's being said around you. Another common accommodation and this is one we're very familiar with is just having another

telephone (Betsy...yeah) Whether it's a phone that's compatible with your hearing aid or a captioning telephone like we, you know, provide at CapTel that can make a world of difference because then you're able to read and actually hear what's being said (Betsy...life changers, yeah) they're really helpful. Another thing is just getting things in written format from people so whether that is more memos or having your co-workers email you more often rather than trying to tell you things getting a meeting bullet points and maybe notes after meetings just so that you have things written down making it easier for you to actually grasp the content rather than it being verbally spoken. Another option is CART and CART actually stands for communication access real-time translation and that's a very fancy way of saying that somebody is actually taking notes and transcribing what's being said in a meeting or a presentation and then it's coming up on a screen so it's essentially getting captions at a live meeting which can be very helpful if you're in a place where you're getting lots of either not just meetings but also presentations, it can be really helpful (Betsy...yeah) Another accommodation is interpreting services so if you are and I know you already know it, if you're completely deaf and sign language is the language that you use you can absolutely ask to have the accommodation of having a sign language interpreter be with you at work if you need it. And then the last accommodation that we have listed is just time off for medical appointments as they relate to your hearing impairment. So you, as Betsy said earlier, you shouldn't have to worry about being fired because you need to go to, you know, your hearing instrument specialist or your audiologist during the work day. So those are some of the accommodations that are available.

Betsy (8:11) That's really cool and so, how do you request reasonable accommodations? What we thought about was when it comes to requesting accommodations this part is pretty easy really, simply let your employer know that you need an adjustment or change because of your disability. You don't need to complete any special forms or use technical language to do this.

Audra (8:35) And that's good to know, so you don't have to stress out just bring it up to them (Betsy...yeah exactly) So, Betsy, what happens after somebody makes a request for a reasonable accommodation?

Betsy (8:44) Well, once you've made a request for reasonable accommodation your employer should discuss available options with you that's the first thing. Your employer may request documentation from you demonstrating that you have a disability and explaining why you need a reasonable accommodation. So you and your employer should work together to come up with (Audra...yeah) an appropriate accommodation. Yes, so as they don't be surprised by that.

Audra (9:10) And I like, I love that too because it's kind of like a co-creative (Betsy...mhmm) it's you and your employer figuring out what's going to work best not only for you but for your work environment so it's really a really nice process that you guys can kind of come up to see what works best for you.

Betsy (9:23) Yeah, and it just takes the shame out of it for you (Audra...yeah no shame, shame free zone, exactly) this is team work, no shame, bad shame, yeah, don't do that no shame, okay.

Audra (9:33) So, now that we are little bit more familiar with the ADA we've actually got seven quick tips to help you guys excel at work with a hearing loss and these tips are actually from the winter of 2017 issue of Hearing Health Magazine and you can look up that issue online if you want to learn more. So, what's our first tip Betsy?

Betsy (9:53) Okay, number one Acknowledge. Hello, acknowledge your hearing loss. Acknowledge your hearing loss so you are better prepared for whatever communication challenges you face at the workplace.

Audra (10:08) And I feel like that's so important and it's, it's actually kind of ironic because I have a vision impairment, I'm, I'm blind as a bat let me just say it that way (Betsy... really?) it's illegal for me to drive without my glasses, my vision is that bad (Betsy...wow) And, could you imagine how it would be if I refused to acknowledge that I had a vision problem? I would pos, I, you know what I mean like people getting glasses, there seems to be a little bit less stigma around acknowledging that you can't see and getting glasses or Lasik then it is about getting hearing aids. So, it's so important to be able to acknowledge that so that you can get the accommodations that you need.

Betsy (10:42) Yeah, that's a really good point.

Audra (10:45) And that bring us, oh sorry I cut you off.

Betsy (10:50) No that's alright, I was just going to tell you about this, educating yourself about like accommodations such as the CART that you had talked about earlier or the captioned telephones, which are wonderful.

Audra (11:00) They make a huge difference (Betsy...mhmm) and you guys you want to remember too, like you are bringing so much experience and skills and strength to the workplace every single day and having a hearing loss does not change that. You are still as awesome as you always were with or without a hearing loss so remember that (Betsy...mhmm) And then, tip number four is keep backup batteries on hand whether you're traveling for work or you're just, you know, you're in an office every day make sure you always have extra batteries for your hearing aid or cochlear implant or anything and actually I have a story about that. I was back in the day, my first job outside of college I was the public relations director at this small advertising firm and one of the graphic designers was deaf and he had a cochlear implant. So he and I hit it off really quick because sign language was my foreign language in college and when he came to the office and we met I was like, oh you sign and he was like I sign so we just became like fast friends really, really quick (Betsy...mhmm) And then one day we were having a strategy meeting trying to come up with a campaign for a client and the batteries in his cochlear implant died (Betsy...oh oh) and I, yeah, it was kind of big deal but it actually worked out perfectly because I was there and me and my rudimentary two years of sign language were able to try to, try to make the most out of it and that's, that's when I realized I did not want to be an interpreter because it was very difficult and just to sum up the people in the survey said earlier like trying to interpret while several people are talking and they all want you to say, you know, what they're saying at one time it's, it's so overwhelming. So I kind of got just a little bit of a taste of what it must be like when you can't, you can't hear everybody at once, you can't respond to everybody at once (Betsy...mhmm) And so we got through the meeting it was like pulling teeth but we got through it and at the end of the day my boss says, you know what, I think it's mimosa Monday and she went out and she got us all mimosas it had been such a stressful meeting and we ended it on this lovely, this lovely high note (Betsy...oh well you, well you earned that) so keep, yeah we did,

keep your batteries on hand if you have a hearing device. What's tip number five, Betsy?

Betsy (13:09) Yeah, which it can also lead you to advocate for yourself it's up to you, asking the appropriate person in your workplace for reasonable accommodations, emphasize the benefits to your employer (Audra...for sure) and I have, I have a little story to tell you because I had a really neat experience where I recently installed the CapTel captioned phone which we do a lot, for a woman who had hearing loss and she worked at the reception desk in a public library very quiet place to work and I was so impressed with the efforts made by her boss and the technical crew to get the phone installed properly with my input about telling them how this works and (Audra...mhmm) where it needs to go and they made it work for her and so she could read what she was not quite hearing and didn't have to have a blasting speakerphone in the middle of (Audra...mhmm) quiet the library so it was really quite wonderful and she was thrilled because of course, you know, she had to, she had to know to request an accommodation and that's what's great that she took the step and her hearing aid specialist or audiologists recommended she get the phone and they filled out a form for her and she submitted it and that's how I knew to reach out to her to get this phone set up for her and it was a really good win-win story. It was wonderful.

Audra (14:34) I love that cuz she knew to ask (Betsy...yeah) and that's the thing like you just being able to ask and advocate for yourself. She was able to do that get this phone and now it's a benefit to her because she's able to hear and it's a benefit to her job because I'm sure she's more effective now without like you said having this incredibly loud, you know, speaker blasting while people are in the library. So it's a win-win for her and the employer (Betsy...duh) Which brings us to tip number six and that is, tell your co-workers about your hearing loss and the best way for them to communicate with you cuz you, honestly you might be the only person in their life as the moment who has a hearing loss and if you're somebody who's not used to speaking to somebody who has a hearing loss, you don't know simple things like, you need to make sure that you're facing them and looking at them directly when you're speaking to them. You can't be looking at

them and kind of looking off to the side trying to talk to them because they're, they're going to miss words that you say.

Betsy (15:27) Yes, so be bold even wear a sign, at certain like hearing loss meetings like HLAA, I'll see a lot of people with signs that say "please look at me while you speak" it's actually a little thing they put on their like a pin or a necklace or something like that. I don't know if you've heard of that but....

Audra (15:45) I haven't but I mean it's helpful because then that way people know (Betsy...yeah) And also another tip is to maybe instead of just like repeating yourself at the person with hearing loss can't understand you rephrase try saying what you said slightly different and it might be easier for them. So when you're telling your co-workers this, then they may know. Hey, if you want so-and-so to do something I should probably shoot her and email. I can't just walk pass her desk and be like, hey give me those files by four, they may not hear you send them an email, send them a slacker, or a text, communicate with them in some other way (Betsy...yeah) so that they can understand you but your co-workers will not know how to do that unless you tell them (Betsy...yeah) And then that brings us to our last tip, tip number seven is make arrangements. There might certain things that you have in your office whether is, you know, a fire alarm or pages over the PA system. You want to make sure you have an office buddy in the event something like that goes off or there's an important message over the PA that you, you know, might hear but not, may not be able to understand completely (Betsy mhmm) just find a friend, somebody who can say, hey that was saying this or hey the fire alarm's going off, we need to get out of here. So definitely see if you can identify at least one person in your office who can provide you some assistance especially in an emergency situation. So those are our tips.

Betsy (17:02) Yeah, that's really great. So I just want to sort of wind down with saying, if you have only, if you only take away one thing from this episode it should be this you, you are your best advocate when it comes to addressing your hearing impairment in the workplace (Audra...absolutely) the more you know about your rights, what accommodations are available to you and how to best maximize your workspace and your relationship with your employer the better



position you'll be in to advocate for yourself effectively really is true.

Audra (17:41) Absolutely nobody's going to advocate for you like you so don't be afraid to do that (Betsy...yeah) do you have any final thoughts Betsy?

Betsy (17:49) I think that was it, that was my last final thought, ha ha, forever.

Audra (17:55) It was a good thought (Betsy...yeah) We should end on this high note, this a high note (Betsy...yeah) we're going to end it here (Betsy...okay)

For further information on hearing health resources, please visit [oeius.org](http://oeius.org) that's [oeius.org](http://oeius.org) and click on contact. And make sure you guys don't forget to join us next month on "Have You Heard" as we address "Better Hearing and Speech Month" with a very very special guest who I think you guys are going to love (Betsy...oh boy) so until next time this is Audra and (I'm Betsy) reminding you to stay safe and stay connected.

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