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From the Executive Director's Desk

Everything being equal ...people with hearing loss must be able to participate in the workplace on video conferencing and voice conference calls.



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Planning is well underway for the 2010 HLAA Convention as you will see from this special issue. Part of the excitement at our conventions is that all workshops and events are made hearing friendly through captioning and assistive listening devices with sign language interpreters for major sessions and on request for other events. For attendees this is an experience like none other when they can follow all the presentations and feel totally a part of what is going on.

As a result of the *Americans with Disabilities Act* that was passed to prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability, public facilities and state and local governments are making their programs and services more accessible to people with hearing loss, relay services are increasingly innovative and employees are more aware of their rights on the job. Though, still not 100 percent hearing friendly, communicable-accessible environments are more common than 20 years ago when the law was passed.


However, there is still one key area where people with hearing loss who prefer to speak and listen do not have equal access and are lagging far behind, and that is during teleconference calls. This is a huge issue, since these kinds of calls are mostly used in the workplace and not being able to participate fully in them could seriously impact a person's ability to do his or her job.

In this economy, companies are cutting down on travel budgets and conference calling is being used more than ever; and, in many cases, video conferencing. There are ways to make conference calls accessible but, depending on an employee's needs, none of them today is easily obtained, affordable or totally effective. Further, because of the range of functioning among people with hearing loss there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

For some people a hearing aid may be enough. A telecoil-equipped hearing aid or cochlear implant may be even better because the telecoil cuts out background noise and feedback. Hearing with both ears, which some people prefer, can be enabled with assistive technology either wirelessly or plugged into the phone. For those with limited speech discrimination, captioned relay services, of which there are several types, work best.


All of these methods work fairly well when the call is limited to two or three people. Beyond that number we still don't have an affordable method that is effective. Relay services cannot always keep up with the conversation when several people are on the call. There are strategies to "manage" the call that help; such as agreeing at the start of the call that only one person speaks at a time, speaking slower for the captioner to keep up, all callers identifying themselves before speaking, speaking right into the mouthpiece, turning off background noise, and not using speakerphones.

Although helpful, these strategies do not solve the problem because people forget to use them after a while during the call. The person with hearing loss should feel free to interrupt to remind participants when they do forget. Also, when the captioning is lagging behind the speaker's voice, it is difficult for the person with hearing loss relying on the captioning to interject when they wish to say something as the conversation has already moved on. There is a "hand raising" tool developed by the Trace Center at the University of Wisconsin designed to put people into a queue to speak that is visible to all callers on the computer screen that gives everyone on the call a chance to speak.

HLAA is going to push for better ways of teleconferencing and also making what is already out there more available and easily accessed. If you have found a satisfactory way to teleconference at work please describe what you use to Lise Hamlin at lhamlin@hearingloss.org. 

Brenda Battat is executive director of the Hearing Loss Association of America. Read her blog, which includes her Hearing Loss Magazine columns, at www.brendabattat.blogspot.com. She can be reached at battat@hearingloss.org.

By the Playbook: Strategies for Teleconferencing When One or More Callers Has a Hearing Loss

- Take time at the start of the call to set ground rules
- All callers identify themselves before speaking
- Only one person speaks at a time
- Put phone on mute setting when not speaking
- No side conversations
- Speak slowly and clearly
- Sometimes it may help to speak a little louder, but do not shout
- Speak directly into the mouthpiece
- If asked to repeat, rephrase with different words
- Do not talk on the speakerphone setting
- Do not open any other extensions
- Turn off background noise such as TV, radio; close the door
- If using a mobile phone, move to a quiet place
- Spell proper names using A as in apple, B as in baby, C as in canary
- Say numbers in a string and stop at the number you are trying to communicate; e.g., for 321 say 123, 12, 1
- If captioning is being used, remember there will be lag time for what you have said to show up as captions
- Use the Trace Online Hand-Raising Utility (TOHRU) so that everyone, including the person with hearing loss, can get a turn to speak. For more information go to <http://tohru.trace.wisc.edu/> 



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