

When will you listen? Deaf Awareness in the workplace

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Abstract

Deafness is perceived by many in the workplace to be a barrier to employment. The imagined inability of a person with hearing loss to be able to communicate with hearing colleagues causes concern and deters managers from employing new staff who may be deaf. The enactment of the British Sign Language (BSL) Act 2022 has raised the awareness of the need for effective communication between the deaf and hearing.

Regular Deaf Awareness training and consultations with employees who have identified themselves as having hearing loss can overcome this barrier. Employers and colleagues must not assume that they know what is best for the deaf person. Some knowledge and patience are all that is required.

Keywords: employment, deaf, hearing loss, deaf awareness

Introduction

Deafness is the third most common disability in the world but you probably would not spot a Deaf/deaf person in a crowd.

The recent publicity around British Sign Language Act 2022,¹ has raised the awareness of the need for Deaf Awareness in all areas of everyday life but particularly in the workplace. The BSL Act 2022 received its Royal Assent in April 2022, and passed into law on the 28th June 2022.

Although the numbers of the Deaf Community working within the Biomedical Research industry and who rely on BSL will be limited, the figures for deaf and hard of hearing employees will be much higher.

To enable everyone to work more comfortably and productively and because people encountered in

everyday life may be suffering from hearing loss, all employers should instigate a programme of Deaf Awareness Training.

The impact of hearing loss at work

Being deaf or having hearing loss should not be a barrier to applying for and excelling in most jobs. However, when employers lack understanding about hearing loss and do not offer support, employees get both left out and left behind.

The Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID) research,² shows that more than half of people who are deaf or have hearing loss have felt that they have been treated unfairly at work and experienced teasing and mocking from their colleagues. RNID also found:

- 7 in 10 said colleagues have not communicated effectively with them.
- 60% had retired early and, of those people, 56% said that this was related to their hearing loss.

The RNID 2018 survey of people with hearing loss shows that when managers and colleagues lack empathy and understanding it can lead to exclusion from social conversations in the workplace, isolation, stress and bullying. We also found that employees who are not supported to manage their hearing loss in the workplace can have fewer opportunities for promotion and are more likely to retire early due to the difficulties they face at work.

According to this same research, concerns about employer attitudes towards hearing loss result in 54% of employees choosing not to tell their employer about their hearing difficulties which further distances staff from the support they need to reach their potential.

What is Deaf Awareness?

Deaf Awareness is about promoting the positive aspects of deafness and social inclusion. When access and communications are good, deafness ceases to be a barrier to anything in life.

Deaf Awareness is important, at its most fundamental level it facilitates a bridge between hearing and deaf people. Indeed, concentrated efforts to champion and utilise inclusivity will create a more diverse and open society and workplace.

How do you know if someone is deaf?

They may use sign language, or seem to ignore you, mishear you or repeatedly ask you to repeat things or to speak up. They may wear hearing aids, be accompanied by a Hearing Dog for deaf people (dogs wear dark red jackets with the Hearing Dog logo).³

How deaf are you?

Based on British Society of Audiology definitions of hearing loss,⁴ this is the decibel hearing level range which each of these levels of deafness refer to:

- mild (21–40 dB)
- moderate (41–70 dB)
- severe (71–95 dB)
- profound (95 dB).

All sounds are made up of different frequencies, measured in Hertz (Hz). The frequency of a sound affects the pitch that it is heard at. For example, the high notes on the right-hand side of a piano keyboard are examples of high-frequency sounds.

It is possible to have the same level of deafness for all frequencies or to have different hearing levels at different frequencies. For example, someone may have more difficulty hearing higher frequency sounds.

Speech consists of vowels (a, e, i, o, u) and consonants (the remaining letters), are made up of a range of frequencies.

Consonants communicate most of the information when a person speaks and they are also what make speech intelligible and appear in the higher frequencies.

Some Statistics

The UK Census shows the UK population to be approximately 87 million,⁵⁻⁷ amongst this number there are approximately 12 million people with varying degrees of hearing loss, which is 1:6 of the population.⁸

Sources of information vary in the number of people who use BSL as a first language but estimates give the figure at between 50-70,000. However, of the 12 million, 150,000 are classed as **deafened** (becoming **profoundly** deaf after learning a spoken language).



Figure 1. A hearing Dog with his deaf friend.

There are also 24,000 people who are registered Deafblind but who are unlikely to have a profound dual loss. They may use a communicator guide for hands-on **Block and Deafblind Manual Alphabet (DMA)**,^{9,10} 451,211 people have a dual sensory loss and were born deaf and visually impaired and who may use Hands on BSL or Visual Frame signing.^{11,12}

What is British Sign Language?

British Sign Language (BSL) is a visual means of communicating using gestures, facial expression and body language. Sign Language is used mainly by people who are Deaf or have hearing loss.

BSL has its own grammatical structure and syntax, as a language it is not dependent nor is it strongly related to spoken English. For example, the syntax of BSL is different to English. In English someone would ask “What’s your name?”. In BSL the question would be “Name you what?”. This is described as a subject, object, verb syntax. BSL is the preferred language of the Deaf community. Signs in BSL may be regional just as English dialects are regional.

BSL was recognised by the UK government as an official minority language in 2003.

Sign Supported English (SSE)

Another form of signing used in Britain is known as Sign Supported English (SSE). SSE is not a language in its own right; it uses the same signs as BSL but they use the same syntax as spoken English. SSE is used to support spoken English especially within schools where children with hearing loss are learning English grammar alongside their signing or by deaf people who mix mainly with the hearing community.

Fingerspelling

Fingerspelling (or dactylogy) is the representation of the letters and numerals of a language using the hands. There are many manual alphabets around the world, some using two hands as in BSL and others just with one hand. In BSL fingerspelling is used to spell names with either syllables being pronounced silently as the word is spelt or the whole word is pronounced again silently at the end of the finger spelling.

British Sign Language Act 2022

The British Sign Language Bill was introduced to the House of Commons by Rosie Cooper MP,¹³ and is now officially titled the British Sign Language Act 2022.*

* BSL is already legally recognised in Scotland.

The bill has three main clauses:

- Clause 1 provides legal recognition for British Sign Language (BSL) as a language of England, Wales and Scotland,
- Clause 2 requires government to prepare and publish BSL reports, describing what the departments have done to promote the use of BSL in their communications with the public. The first of these should be published by 30 April 2023. Subsequent reports should be published at least once every three years.
- Clause 3 requires the government to arrange for guidance to be published on how to promote and facilitate the use of BSL. This guidance could, for example, include advice for government departments on best practice for communicating with BSL users.

BSL has been recognised as an official language since 2003 but until now has not had the same legal status as other endemic British languages i.e. Welsh, Cornish, and Scottish Gaelic. The only UK region to have given full legal recognition to any form of sign language is Scotland, which gave BSL full support under the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015.¹⁴ In Northern Ireland, people have the option to use Irish Sign Language (ISL) which has the same status as BSL.

Now that BSL is fully supported and recognised by the government, it means that ministers must promote it, as well as “facilitate the promotion, understanding, and use” of the language.

The provisions of the Act include:

- Recognising BSL as an official language of the UK.
- Creating a BSL Council to promote and advise on BSL and the use of BSL.
- Create frameworks for the use of BSL in public services, such as healthcare.
- Make it legally necessary for public bodies to abide by these frameworks and other guidelines issued by the BSL Council.
- Giving the Secretary of State the duty of compiling regular reports on BSL, which must include descriptions on what each department has been doing to promote or facilitate the use of BSL when engaging with the general public.
- Public announcements about policies or laws, or public health announcements, for example, must be accessible to BSL users.

Based on these aims, the Act will improve access to interpreters, as well as enhance general awareness and maybe even BSL education. It may also improve access to employment for Deaf people.




























		 A.a.	 B.b.	 C.c.
		 D.d.	 E.e.	 F.f.
 G.g.	 H.h.	 I.i.	 J.j.	 K.k.
 L.l.	 M.m.	 N.n.	 O.o.	 P.p.
 Q.q.	 R.r.	 S.s.	 T.t.	 U.u.
 V.v.	 W.w.	 X.x.	 Y.y.	 Z.z.

Figure 2. RNID BSL fingerspelling card (available to download from [Fingerspelling-Alphabet-Card.pdf \(rnid.org.uk\)](https://www.rnid.org.uk/Fingerspelling-Alphabet-Card.pdf))

Terminology

The Deaf Community (Note the uppercase D)

The term Deaf Community refers to the 50–70,000 people born profoundly deaf BSL users. They are proud of their language and culture and see themselves only as a linguistic minority. They do not feel disabled or that deafness needs a cure. They share the same experiences of schools for the Deaf, social clubs, history and culture. English is their second language, like a foreign language to them. Their command of written and spoken English may not be as good as their ability to use sign language. They get little benefit from hearing aids.

Hard of hearing (HOH)

The vast majority (8 million) of deaf people are hard of hearing. They have some residual hearing and so most will use hearing aids to amplify sound. They will continue to communicate using spoken language and may be able to lipread. They do not associate themselves with the deaf community and will not normally use sign language.

Hard of hearing people may not want to admit that they are losing their hearing because they are afraid of being stigmatised, thought to be stupid or incapable, losing their jobs or promotion prospects, thought of being old or disabled or generally being treated differently.

Deafened

This term is used to describe people who have become severely or profoundly deaf after learning to speak and often happens as a result of illness or an accident. Becoming deafened in adult life is a life-changing event with far-reaching consequences, not only for the deafened person, but also for their work colleagues, friends and family.

Deaf-blind

Deaf-blindness is a combination of sight and hearing loss that affects a person's ability to communicate, access information and to move freely in their environment. It is also sometimes called 'dual sensory loss' or 'multi-sensory impairment'.

A deaf-blind person will not usually be totally deaf and totally blind but both senses will be reduced sufficiently to cause difficulties in everyday life. They may use a cane that is coloured with red/white stripes or checks and may use a communicator guide for hands on Block and Deaf-Blind manual Alphabet (DMB). If someone was born deaf and visually impaired they may use hands on BSL or Visual Frame.^{9,10}

Unacceptable terms

- Deaf and Dumb
- Deaf as a post
- Mutt and Jeff
- Cloth Ears

Causes of Deafness

The World Health Organisation (WHO) predicts that by the year 2050 nearly 2.5 billion people around the globe are projected to have some degree of hearing loss and at least 700 million will require hearing rehabilitation.¹⁵

Although these causes of deafness can be encountered at different periods across the life span, individuals are most susceptible to their effects during critical periods in life.¹⁵

Prenatal Period: Genetic factors - include hereditary and non-hereditary hearing loss; intrauterine infections – such as rubella and cytomegalovirus infection.

Perinatal period: Birth asphyxia (a lack of oxygen at the time of birth). Hyperbilirubinemia (severe jaundice in the neonatal period), low-birth weight, other perinatal morbidities and their management

Childhood and adolescence: Chronic ear infections (chronic suppurative otitis media), collection of fluid in the ear (chronic **nonsuppurative** otitis media), meningitis and other infections

Adulthood and older age: Chronic diseases, smoking, otosclerosis, age-related sensorineural degeneration, sudden sensorineural hearing loss.

Factors across the life span: Cerumen impaction (impacted ear wax), trauma to the ear or head, loud noise/loud sounds, ototoxic medicines, work related ototoxic chemicals, nutritional deficiencies, viral infections and other ear conditions, delayed onset or progressive genetic hearing loss.

Noise induced hearing loss

The second biggest cause of deafness is exposure to loud noise which can be of significance to staff within an animal facility for example noise from cage washers and other equipment. Some animals may also produce ear damaging noise in particular pigs who can produce noise well above 90 decibels when excited or frightened. Some Non-Human Primates (NHP) also produce high levels of noise.

Causes of noise-induced hearing loss

Noise-induced hearing loss is caused by being around very loud noises for a long time. This could include:

- being in a noisy workplace
- listening to loud music
- loud bursts of sound, i.e. gunshot or explosions

How to tell if sounds are too loud

Noise levels are usually measured in dB(A), which is a decibel scale that mirrors the sensitivity of human ears to different levels and pitches of sound. Long exposure to sounds over 80dB(A) can damage your ears.

In a real-life situation, you should be able to talk to someone who is 2 metres away without having to shout over background noise. If you cannot be heard over the background sounds, the noise levels could be hazardous. If you go somewhere where the sound level hurts your ears, you should leave.

Noise-induced hearing loss prevention

Employers have a legal duty to protect your hearing under the Control of Noise at Work Regulations (2005), which protect you if you are in a noisy job. See [the HSE website](#) for details.¹⁶

The regulations say that if you are exposed to loud noise at work, your employer must have noise levels assessed, and keep a record of the assessment. You will know that an assessment is needed if you have to shout to communicate with someone who is two metres away from you.

If noise exposure reaches 80 decibels (dB), employers are legally bound to start taking action.

If you work in a noisy environment – such as construction, manufacturing or in a music venue or if your work involves listening to loud sounds through headphones or earpieces – your employer should make sure that you have hearing protection.

To prevent noise exposure, it is best to avoid loud sounds at work, at home or when you go out. There are steps you can take to protect your hearing.

Hearing loss caused by exposure to loud sound is preventable.⁵ To reduce the risk of noise-induced hearing loss, adults and children can do the following:

- Understand that noise-induced hearing loss can lead to communication difficulties, learning difficulties, pain or ringing in the ears (tinnitus), distorted or muffled hearing, and an inability to hear some environmental sounds and warning signals
- Identify sources of loud sounds that can contribute to hearing loss and try to reduce exposure
- Adopt behaviours to protect their hearing:
 - avoid or limit exposure to excessively loud sounds
 - turn down the volume of music systems
 - move away from the source of loud sounds when possible
 - use hearing protection devices when it is not feasible to avoid exposure to loud sounds or reduce them to a safe level¹⁶⁻¹⁸

How can we help a deaf person?

The rules for communicating face to face are the same regardless of whether the person is Deaf, deaf or hard of hearing person. Much of normal speech is not seen on the lips so words with similar sounds are difficult to lipread, 80% of lipreading is guess work even for an experienced lip-reader.

Exercise: Using a mirror look at yourself as you silently say the following words and see if you can see any difference in your mouth shape:

Curl and Hurl, Hair and Pair.

To improve understanding:

- Get eye contact and face them 3-6 feet apart.
- Speak slowly and clearly without exaggerating your mouth movements.
- Do not cover your mouth.
- Repeat what they miss or rephrase it. Use a gesture or mime.
- Write letters in the air.
- Write down words that are still not understood.
- Draw a picture.
- Use plain English so that it is easier to lip read.
- Consider using a Human Aid to communication (HAC), an interpreter, lip speaker, speech to text reporter or guide to suit their needs.
- Wear plain clothes and avoid accessories that may distract their attention.

Making the working environment deaf friendly

Provide the best environment for communication

Effective communication requires a suitable environment with good lighting, soft furnishings to reduce vibration and a carpet (hearing aids amplify all sounds at the same levels and the sound of footsteps on an uncarpeted hard floor can sound like a series of explosions to a hearing aid wearer).

Ideally a loop system should be fitted in an area that can be used for conversations. Known as Audio induction loop systems, also called audio-frequency induction loops (AFILs) or hearing loops, they are an assistive listening technology for individuals with reduced ranges of hearing. Consisting of one or more physical loops of cable which are placed around a designated area, usually a room or a building. The cable generates an electromagnetic field throughout the looped space which can be picked up by a telecoil-equipped hearing aid, a cochlear implant (CI) processor, or a specialised hand-held hearing loop receiver for individuals without telecoil-compatible hearing aids.

There should be no background noise or distracting movement or smells.



Communication Tips for the general public

Remember that people who are deaf or have hearing loss have individual communication needs and you should ask someone how best you can communicate with them.

Not every tip below will be appropriate for every person who is deaf or has hearing loss.

Be patient and considerate, it is a stressful time for us all, but people with deafness and hearing loss who rely on facial expressions and lipreading are finding things especially difficult right now.

The below are particularly important when someone cannot use visual cues, such as on the telephone or when wearing a mask:



Re-phrase
If someone doesn't understand you, repeat what you said or phrase it differently, use plain language



Face to face
Make sure you are facing the person you are talking to and speak clearly – avoid shouting, speaking too fast or unnecessarily slow



Interpreter
If they ask, speak to a relative or friend



Write it down
Use pen on paper, text on device screens, or whiteboards



Full Attention
Use simple gestures such as pointing or waving to get someone's attention



Background noise
In a noisy place, move to a quieter area if possible

Please be aware that different rules apply in health and social care settings. You can find guidance for health and social care professionals on the **RNID website**.

RNID is the trading name of The Royal National Institute for Deaf People. A registered charity in England and Wales (207720) and Scotland (SC038926).

Figure 3. Communication tips.

Telephony

If both people have a text phone then they can obviously use text direct to each other. There are also apps available that will convert speech to text and many computer programmes such as PowerPoint also have this facility.

Next Generation Text (NGT) is a telephone relay system where a hearing person talks and listens to the operator who types the conversation to the deaf persons' text phone or mini com and then reads out loud the deaf persons typed reply to the hearing person.

It is also possible to use **Mobile messaging**, between mobiles or mobile to a landline that is SMS enabled or of course email can be used. Other services such as a **Video Sign relay service** also sometimes known as a **video interpreting service (VIS)**, is a video telecommunication service that allows deaf, hard-of-hearing, and speech-impaired (D-HOH-SI) individuals to communicate over video telephones and similar technologies with hearing people in real-time, via a sign language interpreter. Other modern technologies such as Web cam, Skype, Zoom or instant messaging on line are alternative ways to communicate with a deaf person depending on their preference.

Before making any changes to the workplace, managers and employers should consult members of staff who have identified as having hearing loss to identify specific problem areas.

Instigate a Deaf Awareness training programme. Many local Deaf Associations will run training programmes which will supply first hand experience of using lip reading, basic signs, fingerspelling, etc. There are also online courses available. The Royal National Institute for the Deaf has various advice sheets which can be downloaded for free.¹⁹

Making your meeting Deaf Aware

Simple steps will make a meeting more accessible for people who are deaf or have hearing loss.

- Check in advance if anyone needs communication support.
- Switch on any microphones and loop systems.
- Arrange seats in a horseshoe shape so all attendees can see each other and identify more easily who is speaking.
- Make sure anyone who has identified themselves as having hearing loss can sit without facing a window so that the sun is not shining in their face.
- On a teleconference, make sure you say your name before speaking.
- Use a meeting agenda to give a clear reference point for everyone to follow.
- Put your hand up before speaking, so everyone can identify the speaker.
- Make sure only one person is talking at a time.

Conclusion

Perceived difficulties in communicating with a person who has hearing loss can be overcome with relative ease if the will to do so exists. If 1:6 of the UK population are to be excluded from the workplace on the grounds of hearing loss then a wealth of ability, creativity and experience will be lost to employers. Deafness should not be a bar to employing a person nor should it affect progression in a job, the problem lies not with the deaf but with the hearing who have a preconceived idea of a deaf person's abilities. Open your ears and minds and listen.

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