

# Reasonable adjustments for Deaf and hard of hearing people in the workplace

When it comes to the office, it's important to make sure that things are as accessible as possible and that everyone feels included. Deaf people and those who are hard of hearing have a lot to offer companies but sometimes, job interviews, office spaces and meetings are not set up to be accessible.

As employers, it can often feel overwhelming when it comes to making sure that things are accessible for Deaf people or people with hearing loss. It's actually not as difficult as you might think as there are several different steps you can take.

## Understanding the Key Terminology

### Equality act 2010

The act legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society. There are nine protected characteristics under this act including disability, gender, sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity and age.

The act defines disability as 'a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities.' Reasonable adjustments need to be made to make the office or meetings accessible and to improve their experiences.

## Reasonable Adjustments

Reasonable adjustments are changes that an employer makes to remove or reduce a disadvantage related to someone's disability. This could mean any number of changes from providing equipment to changing someone's work arrangements. Each person will have individual access needs so you need to discuss with them to find out what these might be.

## Deaf Culture

Some Deaf people will refer to themselves as part of the Deaf community. This small, unique community has a strong identity with members who have been deaf their whole lives. It is usually referred to by a capital D at the start of the word Deaf. They are proud of and celebrate their Deafness with the community giving them a sense of belonging. Deaf culture includes the views, traditions, values, beliefs and language of those involved in the Deaf community.

They use British Sign Language as their first language instead of English. The language will change depending on where you are. For example: if you are in the US then you would use American Sign Language (ASL).

**\*Throughout this resource, we use the term D/deaf to mean anyone with any level of deafness whether or not they belong to the Deaf community.**

## Age-related hearing loss

Age-related hearing loss gradually occurs over time, and it can take people several years to realise that they find it hard to hear. This may affect their work and productivity. Someone experiencing hearing loss may need adjustments such as assistive devices.

Hearing loss, according to Age UK, affects 12 million people in the UK. The number of people experiencing hearing loss is set to rise as we have an increasingly older population and many of us wear headphones with loud music.

## Hearing aids

A hearing aid is a small, wearable electronic device that allows a person **with** hearing loss to hear sounds better. This can help them understand speech more clearly. There are lots of different types of hearing aid - some are more discreet than others. It can take time to get used to them meaning you feel extra tired or overwhelmed. Some aids have different settings for different environments, such as a group, personal conversation, quiet rooms or noisier spaces.

## Cochlear implants

A cochlear implant is a surgically implanted electronic device that can transmit the sense of sound. This is usually used by people who have severe or profound hearing loss. A person has to have surgery to fit the implant. The implant bypasses the portion of the ear that doesn't work to stimulate the auditory nerve. This signal from the auditory nerve passes to the brain which recognises the signal as a sound. They do not cure hearing loss or deafness, but they can help someone to receive and process sound better.

## How you can make the office and work life accessible

### Job interviews and hiring process

#### **Business contact details**

Make it clear who needs to be contacted and the best way to do this. This could be a form or email that people can clearly access. Someone will need to keep an eye on whatever email is used in case there is a query, and they need to be fully briefed on what to do.

#### **What do I need to include in the job advert?**

- Stating that you have an equal opportunity employment policy in place is good practice. It will communicate that you will consider applications from people regardless of race, disability, religious beliefs, age, gender or sexuality.

- Check the job description only includes skills that a person needs to be able to do their job. An example of this could be adding that someone needs to be able to answer phone calls if it is not a key and crucial part of the job?
- Openly stating that you welcome applications from disabled and/or D/deaf candidates can encourage people to apply. Disability Confident is a government scheme that encourages employers to recruit and retain disabled people and those with health conditions. Similarly, adding that you have signed up and what level you are at on the scheme can make D/deaf people feel confident that you are dedicated to improving your business and office culture.

You can find out more information on the by visiting the website for [Disability Confidence Scheme](#)

### **Attitude and friendliness**

We've all been there - job interviews are incredibly stressful! Whatever your role in the hiring process, your first impression on a candidate is as important as theirs on you. Being positive and friendly can make a huge difference to how relaxed someone feels going into an interview and how they feel about potentially joining your company. Deaf people may have experienced discrimination in the past which could make them worried about how they will be treated both at interview stages and if they are successful. Don't panic or overreact, just be friendly, professional and relaxed- treat someone like you would like to be treated at a job interview.

### **Disclosing**

Don't expect someone to disclose a disability or that they may have hearing loss in advance. Some candidates may feel comfortable, but others may not. Many D/deaf candidates may disclose as they may need interpreters or other have other access requirements.

## **Less background noise**

Check that the room where you are holding the interview is free from background noise. This could be the whirring of a fan or noise from outside the window. Try to limit the amount of noise which will make it easier for someone to concentrate or hear you.

## **Lip reading**

If someone is lip reading in a job interview: make sure you are facing them, in a well-lit room with nothing covering your mouth area. Avoid positioning yourself in front of a window as the light can make it difficult for someone to see and be aware that light changes throughout the day. If you are unsure if the lighting works - ask and be prepared to make changes if required.

## **Interpreters**

If you are using an interpreter, remember to book in advance and address your questions to the interviewee, not the interpreter.

## **Video Content**

If you are using video as part of the interview, providing captions is essential. It can be easy to add subtitles to a video through different apps such as Veed or Capcut. Some social media apps may also allow you to add captions. You could also consider providing a link to where candidates can watch it outside of the interview.

## **Break up the day**

If an interview is going to take longer than an hour, then you need to factor in breaks.

Let the candidates know that they can ask for a break if they need one. Concentrating on lip reading, listening extra hard or signing for any period of time can be exhausting. Extra breaks can allow someone the chance to rest and not experience concentration fatigue.

## **Loop systems**

Ensure that you have loop systems available for hard-of-hearing candidates. They are inexpensive devices which can make such a difference. A hearing loop is a type of sound system for use with hearing aids. It provides a magnetic, wireless signal that can get picked up by the hearing aid when it is set to 'T' (Telecoil) setting.

## **BSL videos**

The application process may need to be adjusted for people with hearing loss such as alternative forms like BSL videos. When shortlisting employers take into account that British Sign Language (BSL) may be their first language.

## **Providing an information pack**

You can reduce the number of questions that someone has by providing a detailed job description or pack. Use plain English which could make it easier for some people who use BSL as their first preferred language.

## Technology

### **Smartphones for relay service**

Relay UK is similar to a text relay service, but it can be accessed using a tablet or computer or through an app.

A D/deaf person makes the phone call and types a message to the relay assistant who speaks the words to the person at the end of the phone call. The assistant then types the response so it can be read on the display on the app.

### **Speech-to-text reporters (STTR)**

These help people who are D/deaf to access information via a laptop or large screen.

The reporter types, using a specialist keyboard, a phonetic account of audio information and the information appears as text that can be read.

## Phones

Some deaf people can understand speech over the phone but would prefer one that amplifies sound. There are lots of different makes and models on the market that have features such as extra loud ring tones, easy-to-understand and clear receivers that can work with hearing aids. Some may even have flashing lights to attract attention when someone is calling you.

Phones will vary depending on make and year but here are some of the features you might find:

- LED Flash

The LED flash on a phone can blink when your device is locked, and you receive a notification. It helps someone not to miss a notification while their device is locked.

- Facetime/video calls

Most devices come with FaceTime or video calls, so you can see the other person wherever they are. This means someone can lip-read or use sign language.

- RTT calls

Real-time text (RTT) phone calls provide instant transmission of messages as you write them. It creates real-time text exchanges as an alternative to voice calls.

- Texts

Text messaging was actually invented for D/deaf people! Using messaging systems such as Slack means that you can facilitate conversations and reduce the need for someone to make phone calls.

## **Flashing light alarms**

We often react automatically to a fire alarm by getting up and out as quickly as possible.

However, D/deaf people may not hear the fire alarm leaving them in the building. Having a flashing alarm can help alert someone that there is danger and that they need to evacuate.

If someone is using machinery or technology, they may not hear an audible safety alarm. Can you fit a machine with lights or set up technology to do the same?

It is helpful to have fire officers who are aware that there are D/deaf employees in the business who will need notification. Alternatively, you could provide staff with a vibrating fire alarm pager that they can keep with them.

## **Hearing loops**

A hearing loop is a type of sound system used by some people with some hearing aids. It provides a wireless signal that is picked up by the hearing aid when it is set to the T (telecoil) setting. The sound is clearer and there is no or reduced background noise. Not everyone has the T-setting on their hearing aid so cannot use hearing loops. There are also portable options that can be given to employees who need to go on training courses or meetings away from the office.

## **Radio aids**

A radio aid works alongside hearing aids and cochlear implants to help people communicate. It has two parts - a transmitter and a receiver. The transmitter has a tiny microphone which can be worn by the speaker and transmits their voice to the receivers wirelessly.

The receiver is then attached to the hearing aid or cochlear implant. This can help to eliminate unwanted background noise.



## **Headphones**

A larger ear cup on a pair of headphones can help to take hearing aids and implants can sit more comfortably.

## Meetings and office layout

### **Acoustics**

It can really help to take the acoustics of a building/room into consideration. Think about how to reduce the impact of sound making it easier for people with hearing loss to hear what is being said. This means considering background noises such as air conditioning units, projectors as well as music. Positioning desks in quieter areas of the office can help as well and adding soft furnishing such as carpets can reduce echos. You could also consider fitting acoustic panels and rubber caps on chairs and table legs.

### **Breaks**

Lip reading can be exhausting! Make sure you factor in breaks throughout long meetings so that someone can rest when they need to. Consider the pace of the session, regular breaks and give people enough to process information throughout a meeting.

### **Presentations**

Make sure you ask about people's access requirements in advance of the meeting. Sending out slides before or after the meeting may help some people who are deaf or have hearing loss. Keep the content to a minimum on each slide. This will help someone to focus more. Allow people the time to read the screen, pause where possible and give them time to process each slide. Also, announce that a copy will be given/email to each person after the meeting where possible.

## **Disability or Deaf awareness training**

Disability or Deaf awareness training can help staff feel more confident and informed about how to support a D/deaf/disabled colleague or employee. It can help to remove stereotypes and answer any questions they may have

Interested in booking disability or Deaf Awareness Training? [Visit our website](#) to see what type of courses we offer.

## **Room layout**

Adjusting the layout of a room can make a big difference. Take into consideration the light both natural and artificial. Some people may lip read so try to avoid spaces where the person speaking has a window behind them. A person who is lip reading needs to be able to see the person speaking clearly without any obstacles or people in the way. The light may need to be adjusted throughout the day so make sure to check the levels.

## **Time off**

Allow someone time off to attend audiology or hospital appointments.

## **Speak naturally**

Sometimes when people talk to D/deaf people they over-enunciate their words or speak louder.

They don't realise that as well as looking a bit strange, this also makes them harder to understand. Speak normally, don't shout and just relax.

Similarly, D/deaf people may find it harder to follow what is happening in a meeting if multiple people are speaking at once. This could be because they are trying to lip-read one person. Make sure people speak one by one at meetings and not over each other.

## **Disclosure**

Employees do not need to disclose hearing loss. It is a person's choice when or if they choose to do this. It is good practice to ask someone for their access needs ahead of a new role or a job interview. As someone's needs may change over time, having regular check-ins may also help.

## **Access to Work scheme**

If someone indicates that would need communication support, then this could be funded through the Access to Work scheme. This could help you to get practical support or money to help you pay for communication support at job interviews or meetings. It may also include specialist equipment or assistive software, support workers, like a BSL interpreter. Raise awareness of the scheme and help support colleagues who wish to apply. The scheme will not pay for reasonable adjustments as this is considered the employer's responsibility to pay for and implement.

## **Booking BSL or communication support**

Ask if your colleague or teammate may need communication support and what they would prefer. Under the Equality Act, it is the responsibility of the employer to arrange this provision. BSL interpreters are often booked well in advance so get in touch as soon as you know you will need one as they may often be booked up in advance.

## **Social opportunities**

Socialising can help build a sense of being a valued part of the team.

This can sometimes happen in places that are not accessible for D/deaf people. Sometimes D/deaf people may feel excluded from conversations. Being mindful to include all colleagues while discussing with the person if a venue is suitable can help. Be conscious and invite D/deaf colleagues to events, conversations and to be part of the group.

## **Intercoms**

If someone is D/deaf, they may not be able to hear an intercom system. Alternatives could be asking someone to go and get them or make them

aware of any information they need. It could also be sent as an email or text message alongside the intercom announcement.

## Working from home

### **Captions**

Can you provide captions for any video meetings that you conduct? This will help to cut down on the amount of time someone needs to lip read or cover any periods where they cannot be heard. Some online meeting software allows captions, live transcripts or post-meeting transcripts to be generated as you go and allow time for people to read the captions or catch up.

### **Lighting**

Where you position yourself to take an online meeting is important. If someone cannot see you because your desk is near a window which is behind you - they won't be able to lip read due to glare.

### **Practise runs**

Test any digital platforms that you propose using for meetings ahead of schedule. Things like a bad internet connection, poor sound or signal could really affect an online meeting. Check what accessibility features are on offer from the platform and that they really work. You could meet with the D/deaf member of staff to ask them what features would help and if they have a preferred platform.

Consider switching your meetings to that platform where possible and encourage people to have their videos on so they can be seen for lip reading.