

The Dollars and Sense Addressing Hearing Loss in the Workplace

By Sergei Kochkin, PhD, Executive Director of the Better Hearing Institute

Hearing loss doesn't win many headlines. Nor does it win much time in the doctor's office. But maybe it should. And perhaps America's employers should be the first to listen up. Consider this:

- The majority of people with hearing loss are still in the workforce. That's more than 20 million Americans.
- Workers with hearing loss are five times more likely to take sick-days due to severe stress than their co-workers without hearing loss. Perhaps this is because most people with hearing loss don't get tested and treated.
- Hearing loss is linked to a three-fold risk of falling among working-aged people (40 to 69) whose hearing loss is just mild. Falls and fall-related injuries cost billions in healthcare costs in the United States each year.
- Unaddressed hearing loss often leads to isolation, anxiety, and depression. For employers, the estimated annual economic burden of depression, sadness, and mental illness is \$348.04 per employee. More absences from work are due to depression, sadness, and mental health issues than any other illness.
- Hearing loss is linked to heart disease. Some researchers even hypothesize that hearing loss could be an early warning against heart disease-America's number one killer-potentially presenting an opportunity for early intervention, better outcomes, and contained healthcare costs. Heart disease is a huge expense for American businesses, tallying \$368.34 per employee per year when averaged across all employees.

Perhaps the most eye-opening statistics for workers themselves to consider, however, are these:

- People with untreated hearing loss lose up to \$30,000 in income annually, depending on their degree of hearing loss. That's a loss to society of \$26 billion in unrealized federal taxes; and an estimated aggregate yearly income loss of \$176 billion due to underemployment.
- People with hearing loss who do not use hearing aids are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed as their peers who use hearing aids.

Moving people to acknowledge and address their own hearing loss has long been an uphill battle, largely due to the fear that people have of growing or appearing old. And because most hearing loss progresses gradually-and is not acutely life-threatening-people tend to put off dealing with it.

Too often, people ignore their hearing loss for far too long, allowing it to take its toll on their quality of life, cognitive function, mental and physical well-being, relationships, and their effectiveness and opportunities in the workplace. Unfortunately, fewer than 15 percent of people are screened for hearing loss by their doctors during their annual physical exams.

For both workers and employees, the stakes on hearing health are high. Over the past generation, hearing loss grew at 160 percent of the U.S. population growth. We now live in an age in which MP3 players, ear buds, and loud recreational activities abound. What was once considered age-related hearing loss is being seen more frequently at younger ages. American workers are losing their hearing earlier on in their careers. And America's baby boomers are aging. What's more, as global financial conditions remain uncertain, people are staying in the workforce longer, delaying retirement. The financial and human resource risks of leaving hearing loss unaddressed in the workplace have never been so high.

The good news is that the vast majority of people with hearing loss can be helped with hearing aids. Quality of life improves for three out of four who use hearing aids. And for people with milder hearing loss, studies have shown that the use of hearing aids reduces the risk of income loss by 90 to 100 percent, and from 65 to 77 percent for those whose hearing loss is severe to moderate.

We know from experience that good communication enhances performance, productivity, job satisfaction, and results. Simply put: unaddressed hearing loss is an unnecessary and not insoluble barrier to good communication.

Employers have a responsibility to create working environments in which individuals with hearing loss are unafraid to acknowledge and address their hearing impairment. By encouraging workers to have their hearing checked as part of the company's workplace wellness program, those with hearing loss will be far less likely to hide it, and will be far more likely to seek treatment. Together, the employer and employee can identify the most appropriate accommodations to help ensure that a worker's hearing loss does not interfere with job performance, productivity, safety, quality of life, morale, opportunities, or success in the workplace.

June is National Employee Wellness Month. I urge all employers across America and leaders throughout the business community to recognize this month by recognizing the benefits that hearing health and proper hearing healthcare bring to both the employee and to the company's bottom line. Making hearing health an integral part of America's workplace wellness programs simply makes good business sense.

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