

## ***Getting a Job: Let's Put You in the Successful Employment Picture***

**- Brenda Battat**

*This is article is number one in a series of four articles on Strategies for Successful Employment for people who are hard of hearing. It was originally published in the SHHH Journal July/August 1995 and is used with permission of the author. Brenda Battat is the deputy executive director of SHHH.*

There is no single way to handle hearing loss in an employment setting. Each individual is unique. The strategies I offer here are based on my 32 years in the workforce in four different occupations and four different countries. All this, combined with my own progressive hearing loss, impacted on and precipitated my interest in and study of laws affecting people who are hard of hearing.

As indicated in the statistics in the chart on page 28 released by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), getting a job is clearly a problem for people with hearing loss. They believe they encounter more discrimination in the hiring process than do people with other disabilities. Although EEOC statistics do not separately itemize deaf and hard of hearing populations, the problems these populations encounter and cite indicate that such discrimination is a serious, ongoing problem.

With the above facts in mind, here are some criteria for entering and succeeding in today's competitive job force.

### ***Only Apply for Jobs for Which You are Qualified***

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a civil rights law to prevent discrimination on the sole basis of disability in a *qualified* employee. It is not an affirmative action law, and does not require employers to establish quotas for hiring people with disabilities. This may seem like

common sense, but, when job hunting, make sure that the essential functions of the particular job and your skills are a good match. You can request a list of the essential functions of any position you are interested in. The EEOC refers to four principle issues to consider when determining if a function is essential:

- Does the job exist to perform one specific function? For example, a telephone operator's position has only one essential function.
- What is the degree of expertise or skill needed to perform the essential function?
- Could another employee(s) perform the marginal tasks that are not essential?
- What is the work experience of other employees in this job?

### ***Focus on Your Skills and Not on Your Hearing Loss***

We can get so obsessed by our hearing loss and the barriers it creates to employment that we lose sight of how skilled we are and what we can bring to the organization/company. It is essential to spend time to remind yourself of the positive contribution you can make with your particular assets, training and background by listing your specific job-related skills and experience.

Be sure to also include skills which you may have developed through pursuit of

a hobby as well as direct job-related skills. Examples of valuable capabilities which can be transferred from job to job and are an asset for an employee to have may include organizational skills required as a homemaker and mother, or record-keeping skills acquired as scorekeeper of your local basketball team.

### ***Plan How You are Going to Hear at the Interview***

Plan well ahead of time how you are going to hear and handle the interview. Get as much information as possible about the interview. You need to know how many people will be present, where, how many, and what type of interviews will be held. You might be able to get some details from a secretary or receptionist about the environment of the room which will be used, such as room size, acoustics, and level of background noise from an air conditioning or heating system.

Use assistive listening devices at the interview only if you are comfortable with them. Practice ahead of time if you are new to them. If you don't own the necessary ALDs, look for places to borrow them - a friend, your local SHHH affiliate, the library, the state Technical Assistance Center, a university speech and hearing center, or an assistive devices demonstration center. If you are a client of a vocational rehabilitation facility, a device may be provided if it is found to be integral to your being able to participate satisfactorily in the job interview, get the job, and, later on, the job itself.

According to the law, you can request that the employer provide accommodations for the interview. My own personal feeling about this is that I want to provide everything *myself* for the interview if at all possible. It gives you the chance to show how resourceful you are, and gives management the chance to see you in action

and get to know you before being confronted by requests for accommodations. You need to maximize the opportunity of the interview to show that you can take control to manage your hearing loss. It is far more effective to do this by example than by lengthy explanations.

The interview is the opportunity to showcase you, your assertiveness, and your skills and qualifications. It is definitely *not* the time to get into a tussle over accommodations which mayor may not be provided for the interview by the potential employer, and the added risk that they may or may not work properly at the last minute. You need to be in control at this early stage. Practice being assertive in handling the interview. Be prepared to make any necessary on-the-spot changes to the interview room setup. If your seat faces the window with glare, be prepared to ask for a rearrangement of seating or to ask to pull down the blinds. Do it in a matter-of-fact way without making a big issue of it. Briefly explain the reason without too much detail at this point.

### ***Psych-Out Your Interviewer***

Try to put yourself in the shoes of the interviewer, and, in so doing, establish a mutually beneficial, calm atmosphere. Be sensitive to management's attitude. It will be related to their comfort level of 'being around a person with a hearing loss. They may not know how to behave. They may not be sure if the same ground rules apply, whether they need to make things harder or easier. They may be wondering if the presence of a worker with a hearing loss will affect the "chemistry" of the department - is the worker with a hearing loss going to be less efficient, slower, more dependent, more demanding, less capable? Can the individual with a hearing loss really do the job? How will this job candidate, co-workers, and management communicate on a regular

basis? Will the necessary accommodations cost a lot of money? Why hire you when there is lot of extra effort involved and they have other equally qualified applicants?

Remember, the management team is human, too, and must consider a lot of elements in the decision-making process. If several applicants on the short list are equally qualified, there comes a point at which the decision is determined less on objective criteria and more on the overall impression of the individual. This is the same for any person interviewing for a job, hearing or otherwise, and this is where your inventory of skills, resourcefulness, assertiveness, and general presence come into play. You've got to convince them that they want you!

Keep all this in mind as you prepare to interview. Know what the law is on interviewing strategies for employers. They **cannot** ask about the existence, nature or severity of a disability. Among the questions they may not ask, for example, are:

- Are you taking prescription drugs? .
- Are you HIV positive?
- How many sick days did you take last year?
- Have you filed for worker's compensation?
- Do you have a disability that would interfere with this job?

An employer **can** ask:

- Can you perform the functions of the job?
- Can you meet the attendance requirement of the job?
- Describe how you would perform this job?
- Do you have the required experience for this job?
- Are you using illegal drugs?

Your own attitude will also color the way you behave in the interview. Obviously,

you have to deal with your hearing loss but don't make it the main focus. If you are still in the denial stage, then you will bring that denial into the interview and find it difficult to be open about your hearing loss and handle it in an easy, light way. And, if and when you do start to tell that you have a hearing loss, you may end up belaboring the issue so much that you scare off the interviewer. Another self-inflicted injury could result if you are not ready to reveal your hearing loss, and try to bluff your way through. This is counterproductive. Although you did not disclose your hearing loss, it will be obvious that something is strained in the conversation. The interviewer may not suspect you have a hearing loss, but may attribute the difficulty to poor communication skills which is considered a disadvantage in many jobs.

Hearing loss strips away our self-confidence. Day in and day out we deal with communication difficulties which can make us feel inadequate. Gradually, like peeling away the layers of a wound, we are stripped down to a very sensitive inner core. This is particularly true in the employment arena. Sometimes an individual with hearing loss may not even be personally convinced that he or she is really capable of doing the job well or moving upward on the job ladder. As a result, they may elect to stay underemployed for years because they feel lucky just to have a job, any job, not necessarily one where they can fully utilize their talents and be compensated equitably. Others retire early, no longer able or willing to continue to face the hassles associated with their hearing loss.

When do you reveal you have a hearing loss? Each individual should decide based on his or her own unique situation and comfort level. I personally prefer to have it up front from the very beginning. The last job I applied for I even put it on the application form. That was before the ADA,

and employers were allowed to ask prospective employees about any physical conditions. It did not stop me getting an interview or finally being hired. Maybe that was luck, but it suits me best to be open from the very beginning.

I was interviewed for that job in a very old, noisy office with a window air conditioner. I was interviewed by five people, one man and four women, and I used an FM assistive listening system for the interview. I briefly explained why I was using it and, after a few seconds, I think everyone forgot it was there. I was able to position the microphone in the center of the table we were all sitting around, so we did not have to keep passing the mike.

I continued to use the FM system the whole time I worked at that job, which was counseling freshman students at a major state university in the Midwest. My office was in one of the older buildings which had noisy ventilation systems. I had a case load of 200 students, and felt, everyday, that I was educating someone new about hearing loss and assistive technology. Using the FM in my office, I used to position the mike propped up in my in-box which I placed right in front of where the students would sit when they came in to see me. Some students thought I was recording our sessions. Once they knew it was to help me hear them, they were accepting of the technology.

I also used the staff newsletter to write an article about my hearing aids and the FM system for the benefit of all the counselors on staff. I did not have day to day contact with many of them but we would meet at a weekly staff meeting and during summer freshman registrations when all hands were on deck.

### ***Get Hold of Your Fear***

Job seeking is a stressful process for anyone but doubly stressful for people with hearing loss. The thought of the interview

becomes a nightmare because we are so worried about hearing. Put all your energy into good planning and identifying your skills which will help to boost your confidence.

Don't be modest about yourself. Sit down and list your strengths; ask friends to help you discover other strengths you hadn't even thought about. Be ready with concrete examples of your accomplishments both on-the-job and in other areas of your life. Don't wait until you are in the interview to try to come up with these on the spur of the moment. By having some ready, you can use examples which are most appropriate to the position you are applying for. Keep your focus on why you are very employable and, therefore, of value to some organization. It's just a matter of finding the right fit.

Practice stress-relieving activities - relaxation, exercise, positive thinking, or whatever works best for you. Relaxation and stress-reducing activities should be a continual part of our lives as we are subject to the state of ambiguity on a daily basis, and ambiguity has been shown by research to be the most stressful state any human being can be subjected to.

Try to detail what your real fears are and work through how to handle each one. "What is the worst thing that could happen" can often help us to get things in perspective and greatly reduce our anxiety.

### ***Take Courses in Resume Preparation and Cover-Letter Writing***

Initially, you will be judged by your resume and cover letter. You have to find a way to make yours stand out among all the others which will be received. Assess how well prepared you are to look for a job and, if necessary, take a course of study to improve your job-seeking skills such as resume preparation and cover-letter writing.

### ***Do Some Interviews for Practice***

Start out by applying for jobs which you are only marginally interested in. If you get called for an interview for a job which might not be your first choice, go along and use it for practice. It will be a good learning experience and get you ready to interview for the jobs that you really want.

### ***Get Experience Through Volunteering***

There is always the Catch-22 situation for people coming new to the job market. The position calls for experience, but you don't have any yet and you can't get it because you don't have it. This is particularly true for displaced homemakers, and newly graduated or trained students. An excellent way to get experience is to offer to volunteer. It can boost confidence for someone who has been away from the workforce for years raising children, for instance; or someone who has never worked but now finds it necessary to work or wants to work.

For someone with a hearing loss, a volunteer job can provide a chance to realistically assess just what the problems related to their hearing loss are likely to be in an actual job setting. Some can be predicted but not all. It offers the chance to try out assertive skills needed to get the reasonable accommodations you are going to need. And, most of all, volunteering provides an opportunity to develop new skills. For someone not quite sure what work they want to do or can do well, this type of work is an excellent aid in making that decision. Volunteering is not always an option, of course. It depends on the situation; but if you have the time and some financial support, it can be an excellent stepping stone to employment.

### ***Be Your Own Boss***

Setting up your own small business, perhaps starting out in your own home, eliminates a lot of the struggles associated

with getting reasonable accommodations approved. It could be worth enrolling in a course in how to set up your own business and plunging into it if you feel your skills lend themselves to such an approach.

### ***To Recap***

There is no single, totally encompassing, infallible way to handle hearing loss in an employment setting. But, there are a number of practical, tried and proven strategies listed here. I have described nine:

1. Only apply for jobs for which you are qualified.
2. Focus on your skills and not on your hearing loss.
3. Plan how you are going to hear at the interview.
4. Psych-out your interviewer.
5. Get hold of your fear.
6. Take courses in resume preparation and cover-letter writing.
7. Do some interviews for practice.
8. Get experience through volunteering.
9. Be your own boss.

Make them your own. Personalize them. Add to them. And, when you have done so, share with us and with others. Some years ago, 1988 to be exact, the theme of an SHHH *Journal* was, "All that is missing is YOU!" Let's put YOU in the successful employment picture.