

Accepting and adapting are keys to sustaining a career after acquired hearing loss

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For adults who acquire severe hearing loss, accepting and adapting to the loss play key roles in sustaining a career and thriving in the workplace, new research from Oregon State University indicates.

"People who are successful at adapting to hearing loss tend to accept that they are now biologically different from how they used to be," said David Baldrige, an associate professor of management in the OSU College of Business.

"People who remain successful tend to adapt what they do at work and how they do it," he said. "They also tend to stay abreast of medical and workplace technologies such as hearing aids, cochlear implants, video relays, speech to text and interpreters."

Hearing loss is a common disabling disorder that affects more than 360 million [people](#) worldwide. In the United States, more than 50 million people have hearing loss, including 60 percent of military veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Hearing loss also is part of many people's life course and careers. The percentage of the population with hearing loss increases exponentially as people age: 3.2 percent of people age 20-29, but 44.9 percent of those age 60-69.

The population overall is aging and people are working longer and delaying retirement, which leads to hearing loss becoming more prevalent in the workplace. Environmental noise also plays a role in the increasing prevalence of hearing loss. How well employers and employees adapt to this change may have significant implications for both a healthy economy and healthy aging, Baldrige said.

"One of our goals with this study was to understand how people who acquire a severe hearing loss can remain productive and sustain their careers," he said. "We found that there are some key traits to successfully doing so."

The findings were published this month in the journal *Human Relations*. The co-author of the study is Mukta Kulkarni of the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore, India. The work was supported by Oregon State University, Indian Institute of Management and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf.

Baldrige and Kulkarni interviewed 40 professionals, including doctors, lawyers and consultants, who had acquired a severe hearing loss as adults in an effort to pinpoint how their hearing loss has affected their careers and identify strategies that helped them remain productive and successful.

"It was not a random sample—these are the best and brightest, most successful folks we could find," Baldrige said. "We wanted to know what they did to survive and thrive. The hope is that lessons learned from them might help others."

The researchers found that those who tried to hide or deny their hearing loss tended to struggle more in the workplace, avoided social engagements and often became isolated.

Those who were able to sustain their careers tended to accept and adapt to their hearing loss using a wide range of strategies, including communicating more via email and less by phone, or holding individual meetings rather than participating in group meetings.

The researchers found that those who were most satisfied in their careers found ways to adopt a new work role or craft a new career around their hearing loss, sometimes becoming advocates for others. They also tended to redefine their own success, with a shift away from economic success and toward social success through service to others.

"Some people are able to figure out that the hearing loss can be a positive," Baldrige said. "Those are probably the people with the highest satisfaction in their work."

Additional research is needed to better understand how employers adapt to [hearing loss](#) changes among employees, with an emphasis on the roles of managers, supervisors and human resources personnel, Baldrige said.

More information: David C Baldrige et al, The shaping of sustainable careers post hearing loss: Toward greater understanding of adult onset disability, disability identity, and career transitions, *Human Relations* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0018726716687388](https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726716687388)

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