Anyone who has any degree of hearing loss deals with a number of unknown issues and faces many anxieties when it comes to finding a job or being successful on the job. This article offers in-depth explanations of the findings of a related study which can help readers put issues they face in perspective.

It has long been recognized that a hearing loss can have a pervasive and profound impact on the lives of both the affected individual and his or her family. In addition to making oral communication interactions more challenging, a hearing loss can also impact upon such diverse dimensions of the human condition as mental, emotional and physical well being, social skills, self-esteem, family relationships, as well as work and school performance.

While not as obvious as communication problems, research studies and personal experiences over the years have amply demonstrated these other possible consequences of a hearing loss. We also know that many of these problems can be ameliorated with personal amplification—hearing aids and/or cochlear implants. This was convincingly demonstrated a few years ago in a classic study involving thousands of people commissioned by the National Council on the Aging.

The study showed that people with treated hearing loss (i.e., hearing aids) were less socially isolated and more emotionally secure than a comparable group with untreated hearing losses. Further, these positive effects were not only felt by the person with a hearing loss, but were also apparent to family members while easing family tensions—demonstrating once again that a hearing loss is truly a family affair.

**Employment Obstacles**

In addition to its effect on psychosocial status and interpersonal communication, a hearing loss may also influence a person’s employment status. Most jobs in our society require some degree of interactive verbal communication; one must be able to communicate effectively with co-workers, the public, and most important, one’s supervisors. Any
The study showed that people with treated hearing loss (i.e. hearing aids) were less socially isolated and more emotionally secure than a comparable group with untreated hearing losses.

A Study of Amplification in the Workplace

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that this study focused on people currently in the workforce. This refutes the common stereotype that hearing loss affects only elderly people, or those whose working days are long behind them. In point of fact, fully 60 percent of the people with hearing loss are either in the workforce or in educational settings. The study's findings, therefore, are relevant to the majority of people with hearing loss who are presently employed, or who will soon be looking for a job (good luck!).

The study examined the workplace compensation of three groups of people, those wearing aids (about 1,800 of them), those with hearing losses (about 3,000) but who were unamplified, and a large cohort of normal hearing people as controls. To ease the analysis, the respondents with hearing loss were broken into ten groups (termed deciles) depending upon severity of hearing loss. Great care was taken to ensure a representative demographic sample from all areas of the country. Thus, the results present the best and most current knowledge we have regarding the economic status of people with hearing loss in the workforce.

General Findings

One basic finding of the survey was the not unexpected observation that employment income is related to the degree of hearing loss. While the people with the mildest hearing losses show little or no drop in income compared to their normal hearing peers, as the hearing loss increases, so does the reduction in compensation.

This decline is the most rapid and most apparent for the groups with the more severe hearing losses. The income level of the worst group (the tenth decile) was about $14,000 less than that earned by the group with the mildest hearing losses. This figure does not consider whether or not the person used hearing aids, just the effects of the hearing loss itself was taken into account. For an “invisible” disability, it’s clear that a hearing loss can have some very “visible” consequences.

Economic Consequences

The key question in this study, however, was whether this effect can be ameliorated with amplification. The short answer is a resounding “yes”—ameliorated, but not completely overcome.

The study compared the salary differential by degree of hearing loss for both the aided and unaided groups compared to those with normal hearing. The results clearly demonstrate the economic advantages of a person with hearing loss in using amplification on the job. While no advantage of amplification is seen for the decile with the mildest hearing loss, as the hearing loss increased so does the income gap between the groups. This gap between the groups widens with increasing hearing loss.

Finally, for the group with the most severe hearing losses (10 percent of the total), the income differential between the aided and unaided groups reaches the rather astounding figure of $31,000 a year! This is how much less people with the most severe, unaided hearing loss make compared to a comparable group of hearing aid users. This is clearly a horrendous and discouraging figure.

Even for hearing aid users, it’s not as if the hearing loss has no effect. The results indicate that even with amplification, the group with the most severe hearing losses (10 percent of the total) still earns about $11,000 less than their normal hearing peers. While the gap can be narrowed with hearing aids, it was not completely overcome.

What we have learned so far is that a hearing loss has economic consequences, but that a hearing aid can ameliorate, but not completely overcome, these consequences. This is hardly a surprise, though one that is important to document as this study has. We’ve always known that a hearing aid does not replace normal hearing. Indeed, one of the myths we’ve had to confront over the years, probably from the time the first electronic hearing aid was used, was the myth that a hearing aid would “correct” a hearing loss in a somewhat comparable way that eyeglasses correct visual problems. Unfortunately, it just isn’t so. Particularly for the people with the most severe hearing loss, residual listening problems are still manifested in some circumstances. In short, a hearing aid is an aid—and one to be grateful for—but it is not a replacement for a normal ear.

Fairness in Compensation

The survey asked the respondents a number of additional questions regarding their experiences in the workplace. These questions concerned such topics as their perception of compensation compared to their normal hearing peers of comparable training and education continued on page 28
We've always known that a hearing aid does not replace normal hearing. Indeed, one of the myths we've had to confront over the years, probably from the time the first electronic hearing aid was used, was the myth that a hearing aid would "correct" a hearing loss in a somewhat comparable way that eyeglasses correct visual problems. Unfortunately, it just isn't so. Amplification is, it is often not enough. A particular job or function may make communication demands that exceed the capabilities of conventional hearing aids. Other forms of hearing assistive technologies (HAT) are often needed to meet this challenge.

Each workplace makes its own communication demands, and these may be different for each person, with or without a hearing loss. Thus, the first step in selecting what specific hearing assistive technology can be helpful is analyzing the nature of the communication interactions on the job, and to isolate those that are proving difficult for the person with the hearing loss. Solutions can only follow an accurate analysis of the problems. Such solutions can vary from something as simple as moving a desk away from a noisy hallway, to reversing one's desk to keep the sun out of one's eyes.

One major challenge confronting people with hearing loss on the job is the need to communicate effectively on the telephone. Fortunately, in this and for many other job requirements, there are hearing assistive technologies that can be brought to bear. Help is available, but must be actively sought. An audiologist can be helpful in isolating specific communication needs and providing specific suggestions.

Mark Ross, Ph.D., is an audiologist and associate at the Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center (RERC) at Gallaudet University. He was awarded the HLAA Lifetime Achievement Award. He and his wife, Helen, live in Storrs, Connecticut. To find more Dr. Ross articles, go to www.hearingloss.org and www.hearingresearch.org.

This article was developed under a grant from the Department of Education, NIDRR grant number H133EO80006. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

Need an Employment Toolkit?
The HLAA provides information on applying for jobs, interviewing, communication tips, and more. Go to http://bit.ly/hW8va

Sign up for the HLAA e-News!
The HLAA e-News gives you continuing updates along with breaking news and legislative actions in which you can participate. There's no cost and no obligation! Sign up on our website today at www.hearingloss.org.