

THE HEARING-IMPAIRED LAW LIBRARIAN: NAVIGATING SILENT SPACES

Tips and strategies to help you succeed.

BY MARI CHENEY

The stereotype of a librarian shushing her patrons is exactly the opposite of what happens when I interact with a patron in the library. Despite my powerful hearing aids, I'm often saying "What?" or, "I didn't catch that." I dread teaching in certain classrooms because of the terrible acoustics, and if I do have to teach in those rooms, I first weigh the pros and cons of telling the room full of students that I have a hearing impairment and that I need them to speak up.

I don't hide my hearing aids, and only one is noticeably visible. When I wear my hair up, I experience pitying looks, and I want to shout that just because I have hearing aids, I'm not any less qualified to help the person in front of me. I'm proud that I'm navigating a profession that requires paying acute attention to detail,

answering many verbal questions by phone and in person, and having frequent interactions with students whose mouths are hidden behind computers or tablets (and now masks) in the classroom. While I'm proud of my accomplishments, navigating this profession with an invisible disability is isolating, lonely, frustrating, and as Shonda Rhimes says, "an extra responsibility—whether you want it or not."

An Invisible Disability

The Invisible Disabilities Association defines an invisible disability as "symptoms such as debilitating pain, fatigue, dizziness, cognitive dysfunctions, brain injuries, learning differences, and mental health disorders, as well as hearing and vision impairments. These are not always obvious to the onlooker, but can sometimes or always limit daily activities, range from mild

challenges to severe limitations, and vary from person to person." I was unwilling to believe that I was the first or only law librarian living with this invisible disability of hearing impairment; while I may be different than the colleagues at my own institution, I was sure other librarians around the country had similar experiences to mine simply based on the alarming statistics about hearing loss and impairment.



The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders reports that approximately 28.8 million adults in the United States could benefit from the use of hearing aids, and that about 15 percent of adults in the United States (37.5 million) age 18 and over report some hearing issues.

I put out a call for hearing-impaired law librarians to share their experiences with me, and the responses came swiftly and enthusiastically. Thanks to their willingness to share, I no longer feel first, only, or different. If you have a hearing loss or impairment, or work with someone who does, this article is for you.

As one librarian put it: “Working with people who have a disability shouldn’t be any different than hiring someone without a disability; if the candidate is competent, then hire them.” The more we talk about hearing loss and impairment in the workplace, the more we can squelch the unsound fears of employers and the resentment, isolation, and loneliness that employees are experiencing. In the end, most of us want the same thing: to provide the best possible customer service to our patrons, and even with a hearing impairment, this can often be accomplished with small changes.

It is important to note that all hearing loss and impairment is different. The law librarians who responded to this survey have a wide variety of impairments, including age-related hearing loss, single-sided deafness, auditory processing disorder, bilateral mild hearing loss, bilateral severe hearing loss, and tinnitus.

Navigating the Workplace

Some hearing loss accommodations are as simple as rearranging a reference desk, while other accommodations may require time off for surgery and recovery, or an extensive wish list for office renovation. The U.S. Department of Justice’s Disability Rights Section has published a helpful fact sheet on effective communication under ADA

“I am what I have come to call an F.O.D.—a First. Only. Different. We are a very select club, but there are more of us out there than you’d think. We know one another on sight. We all have that same weary look in our eyes. The one that wishes people would stop thinking it remarkable that we can be great at what we do while black, while Asian, while a woman, while Latino, while gay, while a paraplegic, while deaf. But when you are an F.O.D., you are saddled with that burden of extra responsibility—whether you want it or not.”

—Shonda Rhimes, *Year of Yes*

requirements, including hearing disabilities. (View the ADA requirements at bit.ly/JF21ADA.) Regardless of the type of accommodation—whether it is required under the law or a strong preference by the hearing-impaired person—most librarians recommend being open, honest, and upfront with employers, supervisors, and co-workers. This allows them to understand why a hearing-impaired person may be asking for help in certain circumstances and makes them feel comfortable with the hearing-impaired individual’s communication techniques. Additionally, this prevents misunderstanding by others, as sometimes hearing loss is perceived as a lack of attention or that the hearing-impaired person is intentionally ignoring a co-worker or patron. This is a small (and free) way to reduce frustration on both sides.

Other low-cost and simple accommodations include: 1) installation of an amplified or volume-enhanced telephone; 2) a designated notetaker at staff meetings who provides written notes to anyone who wants them; and 3) allowing the hearing-impaired individual, particularly someone with hyperacusis (a reduced tolerance for sound), to temporarily move offices or move to a quiet area in the library if necessary to accommodate noises that can be distracting. These suggestions may involve interacting with Human Resources (HR) as well as having conversations with the supervisor, but all are easily accomplished, especially if co-workers

are supportive, as has been the case for most law librarians who responded to my questions.

Expensive, time-consuming, and wished-for workplace accommodations include: 1) employer assistance in purchasing hearing aids (they are expensive—hearing aids range in price from just under \$1,000 to over \$4,000 per device); 2) the standardization of captions on voice-over recordings, or adequate written documentation that can replace these voice-over recordings, especially on vendor-provided trainings; 3) closed-captioning of live virtual meetings, such as interviews and committee meetings; and 4) significant alterations to the reference or library desk setup, which may require that built-in furniture be removed.

Regardless of the type of accommodation requested, it’s best to be upfront about what you’d like to see changed, whether it’s a small thing, such as a new phone, or a larger issue, such as furniture placement. One law librarian commented, “It is wise to be proactive about this issue,” a statement echoed by another responder who said: “I have found that being open and honest about my hearing/processing issues with my supervisors and co-workers has really made it easier for me whenever difficult situations arise.”

Reference desk interactions can be complicated for the hearing-impaired law librarian. Some law librarians suggest asking the patron to submit their question via email or chat, especially

NAVIGATING HEARING LOSS IN THE WORKPLACE

Here are some additional tips for working and thriving with a hearing impairment:

- Join a support group, such as the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Bar Association.
- See a hearing specialist as soon as you suspect you may have a hearing problem.
- Check if you qualify for a free CaptionCall phone; visit bit.ly/JF21phone.
- Determine if you're eligible for financial assistance in purchasing or replacing your hearing aids by consulting Funding Sources for Audiology Services and Hearing Aids at bit.ly/JF21funding.
- If you have hearing aids, wear them as much as possible. When you strain to hear, it's easy to get exhausted and you may have additional issues such as headaches and an inability to pay attention and focus.
- Make sure you know your rights under federal and state law. If you need assistance, consult with your state's disabilities office and your local Equal Employment Opportunity Commission office to help understand what rights you have at work. If your employer has a disability center—even if it's geared toward students—ask them what services are available to you as an employee.
- Ask your employer about medical and protected-leave benefits such as sick leave pools and optional insurance. Work with Human Resources to ensure they provide employer-wide training on invisible disabilities, including hearing impairment. Volunteer to speak.
- Recommend a low-cost AI caption integration for video calls, such as Otter.ai. During the pandemic, it's become increasingly apparent that many employers do not have the tools to support hard of hearing employees. If your employer is unable to pay for a Zoom integration, work with your employer to use a service that provides free AI captioning, such as Google Meet or Skype. Other options are available; check out a comparison chart at bit.ly/JF21meryl.

if the patron has a hard-to-hear vocal range. If possible, invite the patron into a quiet area to answer the question in person. In this setting, the patron may be more comfortable speaking as loudly as the hearing-impaired law librarian would prefer. One simple accommodation is to install a volume-enhanced phone at the reference desk and in the hearing-impaired law librarians' office. Thankfully, phone technology is improving and it's likely an office phone that can stream directly into Bluetooth-enabled hearing aids will (hopefully) be available in the near future.

Classroom teaching can also be difficult for hearing-impaired law librarians due to the layout or acoustics of the room, or simply because students' mouths are hidden behind computer screens. As one law librarian suggests, "I encourage the students to raise their hands until I make eye contact—this suggestion seems to go well." It's okay

to remind students to speak clearly and loudly as most people forget and return to their normal speech levels quickly. If possible, work with HR and the Registrar's office to ensure the classes you teach are in the classroom with the best acoustics. If you have classrooms where the students' voices can be amplified, request those.

Outside of the classroom and reference desk, there are other work-related situations that require careful navigation. If you supervise students, it might be necessary to let them know you are hearing-impaired. When giving tours of the library, you might decide to put up signs warning students in quiet areas that a "loud" disruption will be happening at certain times—for some hearing-impaired law librarians, it's impossible to hear whispers. However, the better accommodation would be to post signs any time a tour is scheduled to take place by any law librarian,

rather than singling out the hearing-impaired tour guide.

Additional Helpful Tips

If you own a Connect Clip or similar streaming device, consider asking people speaking in a meeting to wear the clip or pass it around so that their voices can be transmitted via Bluetooth to your hearing aids. If you attend a lot of meetings for work, discuss with your supervisor whether the library would purchase the device on your behalf.

Another tip to help navigate small group meetings is to ask for written confirmation and follow-up to make sure you're all on the same page. In an ideal situation, supervisors and co-workers would avoid scheduling meetings at restaurants or other noisy environments, but if this is impossible, ask if you can pick a meeting place known for its quiet ambiance. As one law librarian notes, "The saddest thing about being hearing-impaired is that you miss all the jokes and the gossip because the first thing people do when they have a good punch line or a piece of information to share is lower their voices. Also, in a group setting (such as a conference) when everyone laughs, but you don't, because you didn't hear the joke, it's the loneliest feeling. You just have to get used to it, though, and appreciate the things you do hear because it could be a lot worse." Another librarian echoes these sentiments: "It can be isolating, and I often have to push myself to get out socially knowing how exhausting it can be."

Many employers are not aware of the availability of CART (Communication Access Real-time Translation) technology. CART is a service performed using a stenotype machine, computer, and real-time software to produce text that can be displayed on a computer. While smaller employers may not be able to afford it, you could still advocate for the use of CART technology at major events (such as commencements) and conferences. The real-time captioning will likely benefit more than just those who experience hearing impairment.

At conferences, there are several ways to make attendance easier for



BEST PRACTICES FOR EMPLOYERS

hearing-impaired law librarians. Encourage all speakers to ask if the sound level is okay, then adjust accordingly, and remind members of the audience to use a microphone when asking questions. Schedule small-group meetings off-site or move breakout sessions away from main meeting areas that have a lot of foot traffic. Give yourself permission to leave large noisy gatherings early and to schedule meetings with vendors in quiet locations—not the exhibit hall. Use the conference session recordings, such as the American Association of Law Libraries AALL2go, to re-listen to the program to make sure you didn't miss anything important, and encourage conference sponsors to provide closed captioning for the recorded programs.

Creating a Greater Understanding

For the most part, supervisors and co-workers are supportive of hearing-impaired law librarians. As one law librarian notes, “I am very lucky that all of my co-workers are caring individuals who truly want to help me succeed.” Another says, “While the level of my impairment doesn't interfere with most conversations, I want to ensure my patrons and colleagues that when I ask them to repeat something it is because of my hearing limits, not their delivery (in most cases).” At the end of the day, our goal is the same as that of the person living and working without an invisible disability: to do our jobs and do them well. Thankfully, technology is available to help with many hearing impairments, and, for the most part, frustration and misunderstandings can be prevented by open and frank conversations with both co-workers and patrons. Small changes, such as a new office phone or having a notetaker at meetings, can make a world of difference to the hearing-impaired law librarian.

If you happen to find us at a conference talking in a group about our shared experiences, ask to join us. We want to tell our stories. It's time to stop being silent about the disability that makes us feel first, only, and different, and, thanks to a community of

- Ensure you are familiar with your institution's accommodation-related policies so you can support your hearing-impaired employee to the best of your ability and knowledge.
- Collaborate with HR and your hearing-impaired employee to ensure the employee has an HR contact if they have questions or concerns. This includes making sure the employee has time to meet with HR during their workday.
- Familiarize yourself with the ADA-required accommodations for hearing-impaired employees and advocate for those accommodations if your institution is falling short.
- Make sure your hearing-impaired employee's workspace is as accommodating as possible. Do they need a different phone? Is the placement of their office furniture best situated for hearing when people come into their office, or for the hearing-impaired law librarian to read lips?
- Do not single out the hearing-impaired employee in meetings. Make it a best practice to have a notetaker at meetings and to distribute the notes to everyone who attended the meeting. If the meeting is held virtually, check if the software has a built-in transcription option.
- Encourage your employee to share their experience as a hearing-impaired law librarian. Make work a safe space to educate others about what it's like to live with an invisible disability.
- Do not penalize your hearing-impaired employee for requesting accommodations. This also means not discriminating when it comes to pay increases or promotions.
- If you're advertising for an open position, consult with HR and your hearing-impaired employee to ensure the job posting does not contain implicitly biased language. Your hearing-impaired employee is a great resource for this.
- Do not pressure your hearing-impaired employee to attend in-person conferences, since many conferences do not provide adequate accommodations. Do encourage your employee to attend virtual learning opportunities if they are more comfortable learning that way.
- Apologize when you get it wrong, then move on.

librarians willing to share their experiences, we can, as Shonda Rhimes says, “dance it out” together.

Thank you to the law librarians who responded to my questions about living and navigating our profession with a hearing impairment, to the 2019 Boulder Conference participants, and to Kristina Alayan, *AALL Spectrum* editorial board member, for their comments.

 Information Management

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READ

Rena Seidler's article “Shedding Light on Legal Research Issues,” from the January/February 2019 issue of *AALL Spectrum* at bit.ly/JF19Seidler.

Dolly M. Knight's article “Providing Disabled Patrons with Access to Legal

Resources,” from the November/December 2017 issue of *AAALL Spectrum* at bit.ly/ND17Knight.

Filippa Marullo Anzalone and Cameron Vann's article “Mental Health and the Role of the Law Librarian,” from the March/April 2018 issue of *AALL Spectrum* at bit.ly/MA18Marullo.



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