

# Can you hear me?

**I have significant hearing loss, 40% in both ears over the higher pitches. I wear a hearing aid on my right ear, writes James MacPherson, the GGF's H&S expert**

The long and short of it is it impacts my life a lot, it makes interactions with people very anxiety provoking, it means I can't make out what you are saying if we are in the pub having a chat or if you have a strong accent or at a party or anywhere that there is a lot of background noise.

It's awkward a lot of the time, having to say: "Sorry, I'm hard of hearing, can you please speak up?"

This is even more difficult when the person who is trying to speak to you is wearing a face covering. On these occasions, it can be almost impossible to understand a word.

### Why am I telling you this?

Well I went to a site recently where the noise was really loud. I could tell straight away it was over the upper levels set in the health and safety legislation. I wasn't given hearing protection as a guest and some of the employees working there were not wearing hearing protection, a few of them were, so the business obviously acknowledged the risk and need for action but it wasn't nearly enough.

The risk exists and the challenge is clear, employers must take responsibility and make sure they are operating safely when it comes to sound. It is disappointing that many companies don't seem to take this risk seriously. Most just issue some PPE to employees and instigate disciplinary procedures against employees who do not comply. Employers might have some paperwork such as a noise assessment, risk assessment, checks etc, but frankly PPE alone is not compliant and often an employee's safety can simply be down to luck not design.

### The legislation is clear

Two key terms in the legislation are: *deal with noise at source* and *establish a programme of organisational and technical measures*. These measures do not include the provision of personal hearing protectors and clearly create a duty to do more than just issue PPE. Employers have a duty to tackle the source of noise and this is always going to be the more sustainable way to deal with any risk; dealing with the risk at source is what a resilient and high reliability organisation does and what all companies should do.

### Fail safely

If you simply rely on PPE you have no capacity to fail. Humans are amazing, innovative, quick thinking problem solvers but they are none the less fallible. Once they fail, (e.g. they don't wear the PPE), then employers also fail because they are now exposed to the risk and if you have not done anything reasonable or practical to deal with the noise at source, then you don't have a resilient or even compliant organisation that has the system to fail safely.



**James MacPherson**

### Royal Opera House

I have interviewed the head of safety for the Royal Opera House in London about their journey through a court case with a musician who had suffered hearing loss from a work activity. For many of us noise is an unwanted by-product of work, but at the opera house it was the opposite. Far from being unwanted, music (the sound/noise) was the key selling point. In fact so much so that they don't call it noise because that was offensive to the musicians that had trained their whole life to create sounds not noise. It was eye opening to see the levels of innovation that can be made when a company focuses on dealing with a risk instead of being just compliant.

The Royal Opera House could not simply eliminate the risk because if they did, they wouldn't have a business and they couldn't use PPE because it affected how the musicians played. Faced with these challenges, they had to think outside the box and the work they have done across the business is a game changer when it comes to managing noise/sound in the workplace.

So next time you are telling yourself that PPE is reasonable and practical think about the Royal Opera House. Think about the impact that noise and hearing loss has on employees every day and then ask yourselves. What happens if and when we fail? Are we safe with sound?