

The GGF's Health & Safety expert, James MacPhearson (pictured) has hearing loss. He doesn't want anyone in the workplace to suffer in the same way.

Be Safe With Sound In The Workplace

I have significant hearing loss – 40% in both ears over the higher pitches. I wear a hearing aid on my right ear, writes James MacPhearson, 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.

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 if the employees don't wear the PPE they are often

facing disciplinary procedures. Employers might have some paperwork such as a noise assessment, risk assessment, checks etc, but frankly PPE alone is not compliant and often an employees' safety can simply be down to luck not by design.

The legislation around noise in the workplace is clear

Two key terms in the legislation deal with noise at source and establish a programme of organisational and technical measures 'excluding the provision of personal hearing protectors'. This is clearly putting a duty to do more than just using 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.

Fail safely

If you simply rely on PPE you have no capacity to fail. Humans are amazing 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.

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. 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 use PPE because it affected how the musicians played. So what did the Royal opera house do when all conventional mitigations were not possible? Well that had to innovate, amongst other mitigations, they worked with a university and using 3D technology made for gaming they were able to map out the sound as it filled the auditorium. They then developed technology that acted as a type of early warning alarm system when the sound was reaching levels they needed to react to enabling them to be proactive. They are still early on their journey but this innovation shows the potential of companies when they put their minds to dealing with risks.

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? [f](#)