Motivating Employees to Wear Hearing Protection Devices

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The preceding EARLog, #61, presented evidence suggesting that reduced employee noise exposures could have tangible health and safety benefits in addition to protecting employee hearing. Although this could provide an incentive for stronger management support of hearing conservation programs (HCPs), other approaches are necessary to motivate employees to conscientiously utilize hearing protection devices (HPDs). A review of the Literature 2-10 suggests that the pivotal characteristics of a successful HCP are:

- support of management
- enforcement
- education
- motivation
- comfortable and effective HPDs

Support by all levels of management is crucial since it sets the tone for the entire program. It demonstrates to employees that hearing conservation is important to their company and to their jobs. Hearing conservation should be viewed as an important and integral part of the overall safety program. Furthermore, management must be responsive to employee problems and complaints so that they can be sincerely and effectively answered.

The next three elements of an HCP are inextricably related. Education and motivation modify employees’ behavior, and enforcement provides a constant reminder about that which is deemed acceptable. Enforcement alone can engender resentment and attempts to circumvent HCP requirements, as for example, modifying HPDs for greater comfort and less protection.

Enforcement must be firm and consistent. A four step disciplinary procedure for failure to wear HPDs might consist of (1) verbal warning, (2) written warning, (3) brief suspension, no pay, and (4) termination. Although the latter steps are necessarily a form of discipline, the verbal warning can and should be handled in a positive manner. Front line supervisors should also be held responsible for the performance of their employees and must set a good example by regularly wearing their HPDs when in posted areas. In fact, all personnel in hearing protection posted areas should wear HPDs, be they visitors, managers, or temporary employees.

Education should consist of topics pertaining to the function of the ear, how it is damaged by noise, and training on use of HPDs. Many short films11, are available which are useful to highlight these topics and maintain employee interest. Posters12 are also useful as reminders and training aids. These are generally available from HPD manufacturers. An example appears in Figure 1.

Unfortunately, education alone is of little value unless it is integrated into the employees’ daily experiences. This can be accomplished by making their education personally relevant, either by demonstrating how noise directly affects them or by inducing them to use hearing protection for a long enough time to become adapted, and to appreciate its benefits.

Motivational Techniques

The best motivational resource is the person or persons in the HCP who are responsible for direct employee contact, those who fit HPDs and administer monitoring audiograms. The annual or biannual audiometric examination provides an excellent opportunity for this person to reinforce good HPD utilization habits. The employees should bring, or preferably wear, their hearing protectors to the test where they can be examined for fit, cleanliness, and signs of deterioration or abuse. After the audiogram is administered, it should be shown to the individual and the results explained. If, for example, the hearing levels are normal and unchanged from previous tests, and the HPDs are in good condition, the individual should be complimented. On the other hand, significant hearing level shifts, should they occur, can be pointed out. This provides an ideal opportunity for reinstruction of HPD fitting procedures and a reminder of the importance of their use. Worn out or abused HPDs should also be replaced at this time (and generally more often).

A very successful behavioral modification approach utilizing employee audiograms has been discussed by Zohar, et
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and supervisor expectations. It became 
continually reinforced by peer pressure 
usage emerged as a behavior that was 
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attribute to a permanent modification 
formance of the experimental group was 
back was maintained for only a limited 
ments as shown in Figure 2. A con-
trol group at the same plant, which re-
strated to the employees the effects of 
formation feedback procedure demon-
employees participated in these tests on 
tions and promotion to sell the pro-
program, as for example, offering free 
forced hearing loss. Employees 
noises. Audiometric results were also posted on 
information feedback procedure demon-
ployees to those who correctly wear the de-
early and difficult to detect learning dis-
visions. Articles are available\(^1\) that pro-
personal noise exposures\(^6,13\) is to ask him 
their hearing. Another motivational 
approach that has worked for 
early and difficult to detect learning dis-
agement by distributing tokens or lottery tick-
Finally , we must consider that all efforts 
their Hearing Protectors, presented at the 
National Symposium on Personal Hearing 
protection, and enhances the likelihood 
employees can choose a device that 
preferably at least an earmuff and two 
search the available products and 
successful approach that has worked for 
noises. Audiometric results were also posted on 
the employees to those who correctly wear the de-

**Figure 2**

- **EARPLUG USAGE LEVELS FOR AN EXPERIMENTAL GROUP IN AN ISRAELI STEEL PLANT (After Zohar, et al.)**

The authors stressed the fact that feed-
back was maintained for only a limited 
period of time. The improved perfor-
ance of the experimental group was 
attributed to a permanent modification 
of the work environment, so that HPD 
usage emerged as a behavior that was 
continually reinforced by peer pressure 
and supervisor expectations. It became 
"respectable" to wear HPDs, whereas 
previously it was not. The program be-
came a self-sustaining activity.

An alternative method of clearly relating 
an employee's hearing loss to his own 
personal noise exposures\(^8,13\) is to ask him 
to set the volume on his car radio to a 
just audible level upon arriving at work. 
He should then turn off the ignition, leav-
ing the volume untouched. After return-
ning to his car for the trip home, he should 
carefully listen to see if he can still hear 
the radio. If he cannot, this is evidence 
that his ears have been fatigued by the 
day's noise exposure. Another motiva-
tional approach that has worked for 
Zohar\(^8\) and others\(^8\) is to reward HPD us-
age by distributing tokens or lottery tick-
gets to those who correctly wear the de-

A final motivational tip is to use good 
public relations and promotion to sell the 
program, as for example, offering free 
audiometric testing to the immediate 
families of employees.\(^1\) \(^4\) Discovering 
hearing impairment in an employee's 
child, an impairment that could cause 
early and difficult to detect learning dis-
abilities, is a good deed that strongly 
emphasizes the importance of preserv-
ing one's hearing.

**Comfortable and Effective HPDs**

Finally, we must consider that all efforts 
will come to naught unless comfortable 
and effective HPDs are available for dis-
tribution. Articles are available\(^1\) that pro-
vide information useful in the determina-
tion of the assets and liabilities of vari-
ous devices. Not all devices are wear-
able or provide adequate protection. 
Therefore the HCP coordinator must re-
search the available products and 
preselect the best. More than one HPD, 
preferably at least an earmuff and two 
types of earplugs should be available so 
that employees can choose a device that 
appeals to them. Providing workers with 
this input increases their involvement with 
the program and enhances the likelihood 
of achieving their willing participation.

**CONCLUSION**

Hearing conservation is a concept that 
is viable, but to work it must be vigorously 
supported by management, and couched 
in a holistic framework that includes en-
forcement, education, motivation, and 
the availability of comfortable, effective 
HPDs.

**References and Footnotes**

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11. Aearo Company has available five films on 
hearing and hearing protection. Also available, 
upon request, is an annotated movie list of 
approximately 70 films produced by both 
manufacturers and professional organizations 
in the U.S and abroad.
12. Many manufacturers and organizations have 
posters available. The one depicted in Figure 
1 is available upon request from Aearo 
Company.
tion. These should be screening and not 
diagnostic audiograms. They are only for 
purposes of referral to a qualified physician.