

CHAPTER ONE

LOSING LOYAL EMPLOYEES

Sarah works in IT. She first joined the company through its graduate scheme and decided to stay with the business to continue her career. This was her first job after leaving university, and it has been a challenging three years, but Sarah is hard-working and good at her job.

Sarah is partially deaf and wears hearing aids – and quickly realised that she was the only deaf person in the workplace. Initially, her colleagues were super keen to understand and support her after attending deaf awareness training. However, over time, this enthusiasm dwindled; some colleagues left, others joined, and Sarah found herself in a team who had no idea how to include her.

These new colleagues had never met a deaf person before, and their priority was focusing on their new role and not on learning how to communicate with Sarah. The other big

challenge was the working environment. Part of Sarah's role was contacting clients on the phone, which she could do easily with the use of the technology in place. However, the high levels of background noise from the open-plan office often meant that office banter could be picked up by her hearing aids, making it impossible to hear the customer on the other end of the line.

Many of the conversations in the office happened across and between desks, so hearing colleagues could remain at their desks and access everything being said around them. Sarah couldn't. She felt like she was missing crucial information, and it was easy to lose track of what was happening in the business. She was also feeling increasingly isolated.

She decided to talk with her manager about these issues and explain how she felt. Her manager agreed to look at workplace adjustments and book some more Deaf Awareness Training. Unfortunately, it didn't happen.

Sarah reminded her manager during 1:1s and explained that she would contact the training provider and cover the costs through her Access to Work budget. He said he would take care of it and promised he'd get to it soon. Sarah felt terrible; she couldn't keep reminding him as he was really busy managing the rest of the team and juggling several projects... so she left it.

Social events would happen within the team, and Sarah was always invited, only to sit in a noisy pub, attempting to lipread a table full of people and not understanding a word of what was said. So she decided to stop attending these social occasions, as they were too difficult, and she would go home feeling worse every time. Then the realisation hit: if she withdrew from these

informal networking opportunities, she would not be noticed, and as a result, her career progression would be affected.

She already suffered from a lack of self-esteem, which stopped her from asking her manager for a promotion; plus, she felt that as communication was a struggle, she would be incapable of taking on yet more responsibility.

Although hard-working and ambitious, working in an inaccessible environment and being with colleagues who didn't understand her needs, the isolation finally got to Sarah. Regretfully, after three years with the company, she left. The business has not only lost a valuable member of the team but will now need to go through the recruitment process all over again.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has detailed the main reasons for the lack of retention of employees in the workplace:

- not being valued
- lack of development and progression
- unrealistic or overwhelming workloads
- low staff morale
- poor conditions
- poor levels of job satisfaction
- constant organisation or policy practice change.

You can begin to see where things went wrong for Sarah.

There are 12 million people in the UK who are deaf or have a hearing loss, and five million of those are of working age.² If we look at it another way, this number could represent 1 in 12 of your workforce. **1 in 12 of your team or colleagues could either be deaf or have a hearing loss.**

So you may think you would know if anyone in your team was deaf or had a hearing loss. Surely? But that's not always the case. You see, *deafness is a hidden disability*. You can't see it. For example, if one of your colleagues has long hair covering their ears, would you know if they are wearing hearing aids? Probably not.

Let me put this into a scenario to give you context. If you have a colleague who is a wheelchair user, you are immediately aware as it is visible. It enables your brain to prepare for any adjustments that may need to be made to create an accessible and inclusive working environment.

So, imagine, if you will, a colleague who seems entirely unresponsive when you say a cheery "Hi!" as you pass them in the hallways. Immediately, your (perfectly natural) response is to think they have ignored you. But it *could* be because they have a hearing loss they haven't told you about, and they prefer not to wear hearing aids when out and about as the background noise makes it uncomfortable to wear them.

Currently, there are 2 million people who wear hearing aids in the UK – but over 6.7 million people could benefit from wearing them.

Research by the University of Manchester taken from an analysis of National Survey for Wales data showed that around 20% of adults who have been given hearing aids don't use them.³ In addition to this, 30% use them some of the time, and the remaining 50% use them most of the time. This shows it is very likely that you have colleagues within your business who are deaf or have a hearing loss, and you just don't know about it.

In addition to the fact that deafness is a hidden disability, 54% of employees with hearing loss are reluctant to tell their employer.⁴ Over my years of working alongside deaf people as a colleague, interpreter and collaborator, I have heard every single one of the reasons listed earlier in this chapter as those given by deaf people who choose to leave their current employer.

Deaf people make decisions about where they work based on an entirely different set of criteria from hearing people. Their priority is to find businesses that understand their specific needs. Sarah decided to leave the company because her employer, manager, and colleagues had no idea how to communicate with her. She felt misunderstood and isolated.

Sarah's experience is just one of many stories surrounding the experiences of deaf employees. For every story, there are ten more, and I will share a few more throughout the book. I will be using stories because it is a fact that we gain a deeper understanding and insight when things are presented in an experience we can relate to. When deaf people find an employer who understands their needs, they are more likely to remain loyal, as finding a position like this elsewhere is likely to be challenging.

I know from many years of experience that knowledge is power; having the correct knowledge will be a game-changer for you. So, in the following chapters, I will walk you through the three criteria that deaf people are looking for in an inclusive deaf employee experience. I will also show you how to build a highly engaged team from an untapped diverse talent pool if you focus on these essential considerations.

The three key considerations that deaf people make are:

Accessible environment

Creating the right environment is crucial for all staff, but even more so for deaf employees. You may be surprised how a few minor changes to the office layout and working space can make a BIG difference to the happiness and productivity levels of deaf employees.

Clear and consistent communication

Communication is the biggest barrier to a happy work-life for deaf employees. I will explain why putting the appropriate systems and support mechanisms in place will help deaf staff thrive; that means your business can too!

Team integration

This section will help you develop the necessary rapport between your hearing and deaf employees. It's essential for building a strong, supportive team and creating high levels of employee engagement.

As well as getting to grips with these three areas, by the end of this book, you will understand what makes up communication, the differing needs of deaf people and how to communicate with deaf people. I will also debunk myths along the way and provide a link so you can master some essential, easy-to-learn workplace signs in British Sign Language.⁵

I can promise you that that if you apply the small changes that I talk about in this book to your environment and work practices, this will be repaid tenfold in the ability and loyalty deaf people will demonstrate when working for you.

But before you begin your journey into understanding how to create a better experience for your deaf employees (in fact, ALL your employees), I imagine you would want to know a little more about me. You can, of course, skip this chapter if you wish ... I'll never know! But if you have the patience, I think it will explain how and why I get to do what I love every day and have the drive and knowledge to fulfil my ambition to change the world for deaf people.