Accessibility guidelines for hard of hearing peoples

Submission paper to the Day of General Discussion in Geneva 2010 on
"Article 9 of the CRPD – the **Right to Accessibility**"

This submission is being made by the International Federation of Hard of Hearing People. IFHOH provides a platform for co-operation and information exchange for hard of hearing persons worldwide and interested parties. As an umbrella organization and through its individual organizations, IFHOH works to promote greater understanding of hearing loss issues and to improve access for hard of hearing people worldwide. We are a voluntary organization with 47 general and individual and sponsoring members in 30 countries. IFHOH is registered at Vereinsregister Amtsgericht Hamburg, Germany (Nr. 69 VR 10 527) and has special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

To Be Hard Of Hearing

The term "Hard of Hearing" is used to define all groups of people with some level of hearing difficulty, including those with mild to profound hearing losses to those late deafened. According to 2005 estimates by the World Health Organization, WHO, 278 million people worldwide have moderate to profound hearing loss. Hard of Hearing people's preferred mode of communication is spoken language.

Mild Hearing Loss: People with a mild hearing loss can often manage without a hearing aid, but are dependent on specific conditions that enable good communication, such as good room acoustics, no background noise, ample lighting, subtitling and clear speech. People with mild hearing loss have a similar need for visual information as those with more severe hearing loss.

Moderate to Severe Hearing Loss: People with moderate to severe hearing loss can often not manage without a hearing aid. A good hearing aid fit is the most crucial factor to consider for those people. A hearing aid can be used in conjunction with other assistive listening devices, such as FM systems, induction loops and desk loops.

Late deafened people: Late deafened people are those who have lost all or almost all hearing ability after they have developed spoken language. Cochlear implants have proven to be a good solution for most of these people while others in this group depend on listening devices that can be connected to or used in conjunction with the hearing aid. In many situations the extra equipment is not enough so text interpretation (captioning at real time) or supportive signs are needed.

Conditions required to improve listening and communication

- A well fitted hearing aid that is suitable for the person and his/hers hearing loss
- Good room acoustics
  Many hard of hearing people without a hearing aid need a good acoustic environment in order to be able to hear what is being said in a physical environment, such as conference halls, arrival and departure halls, waiting rooms, and ticket counters.
- Good lighting

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- Induction loops including desk loops and neck loops or others means of hearing assistive devices
- Visual information
- Subtitling

IFHOH Recommendation 1: Building owners and stakeholders shall ensure good acoustic environment, i.e. low reverberation and low noise background.

Assistive listening and Induction loop systems

Even if the acoustic environment is good, it is not enough for many hard of hearing people. They also need to listen to the given oral information through an induction loop or an assistive listening system known as an FM or IR system.

An FM transmitter is a portable radio wave system (with a microphone, transmitter and receiver) that can be used in all settings. The Hard of Hearing individual wears the receiver with either headphones or a neck loop and the transmitter which includes a microphone is given to the individual that is talking. An Infrared system is similar to an FM system by conveys messages by light signals.

If there is no loudspeaker system, for example at ticket counters, a small induction loop desk system or other assistive listening device is of great benefit for hard of hearing people. In elevators it is extremely important that hard of hearing people in case of emergency can alert and talk to an operator. Therefore elevators shall also be equipped with an induction loop or assistive listening system.

By way of further explanation, an induction loop is a cable that circles the listening area and is fed by currents from a loop amplifier. The amplifier gets its signal from a microphone placed in front of the person speaking or by means of a direct connection from another sound source, such as a sound system. The resulting electric current in the loop produces a magnetic field, which corresponds to the sound. This magnetic field can be picked up by those sitting within the area of the loop whose hearing aids are switched to the T position. The listener controls the volume of the signal by adjusting their own hearing aid accordingly.

IFHOH recommendation 2: Every loudspeaker system shall also have an assistive listening or induction loop. The induction loop should be according to *IEC 60118-4:2006 Induction loop systems for hearing aid purposes*. This also applies to elevators according to *prEN 81-70:2003 Safety rules for the construction and installations of lifts - Particular applications for passenger and good passengers lifts - Part 70: Accessibility to lifts for persons including persons with disability*.

Visual information

Many late deafened people cannot hear. Therefore it is important that the information given orally also be presented in written form. This is especially important in emergency situations.

IFHOH Recommendation 3: All information that is given orally, shall also be presented visually.

Visual and tactile indication of alarm

Many hard of hearing people do not hear the alarms of different kind, for example fire alarms. Therefore alarms must be given both acoustically and visually.

When a hard of hearing person is asleep, he/she can neither hear nor see the alarm. To be able to wake up in case of an emergency situation, a vibrator connected to the alarm system must be put under the pillow.

IFHOH Recommendation 4: All alarm systems must alert both acoustically and with flashing lights. At hotels and other places, where hard of hearing people are supposed to sleep, the alarm must also be given in tactile mode.

Text interpreting

In many situations the extra equipment (as described above) is not enough, so text interpretation (captioning at real time) are needed. Text interpretation should be offered, preferably, without cost to the hard of hearing individual in any environment in which it is necessary including, educational settings, meetings, office visits, and any other situations where good communication is important. Text interpreting for television shows and public broadcasts are also vital.

IFHOH Recommendation 5: Text interpreting should be provided both in public communication systems and as a means of access.

Conclusion: Integration of Accessibility for Hard of Hearing Persons in all Social Plans

As noted in IFHOH's Accessibility Guidelines (posted on our website www.ifhoh.org) "accessibility and inclusion for hard of hearing persons should be a key part of all societal planning, design implementation and deployment".

All theaters, cinemas, concert halls and rooms for public meetings should have induction loops or equivalents. All museums and exhibition halls should have listening systems. If visitors use "audioguides" or receive other voice information, the ticket office should provide a neck loop or similar equipment for people wearing a hearing aid. If the visitors watch films, DVD or video shows of some kind, a loop system or equivalent should be installed in the showroom.

All parts of the public transport systems, including information and ticket offices and the relay of information during travel should be made accessible to hard of hearing persons. All television programs and films should be subtitled. Equipment for both standard and high definition televisions should fully support closed subtitling. All telephone networks and services should support real-time text and provide access to a text relay service.

Your deliberations are an important step in this process and we welcome your support. For further assistance please contact IFHOH as indicated below.

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Appendix – recommendations

Good acoustic environment

IFHOH Recommendation 1: Building owners and stakeholders shall ensure good acoustic environment, i.e. low reverberation and low noise background.

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Visual information

IFHOH Recommendation 3: All information that is given orally, shall also be presented visually (such as subtitles on TV).

Visual and tactile indication of alarm

IFHOH Recommendation 4: All alarm systems must alert both acoustically and with flashing lights. At hotels and other places, where hard of hearing people are supposed to sleep, the alarm must also be given in tactile mode.

Text interpreting

IFHOH Recommendation 5: Text interpreting should be provided both in public communication systems and as a means of access.