Do You Hear What I Hear?

From ringing bells to fireplace logs crackling, the sounds of the holiday season is a near-distant memory. However, for employees in loud workplaces, these sentimental noises may become an even more faint memory of the past if the proper precautions aren't taken. To encourage businesses to develop and maintain effective hearing protection programs, Cintas Corp. [1], a leader in first-aid and safety products, has identified a checklist for selecting a hearing conservation partner for testing, training and hearing protection equipment.

"Unfortunately, hearing loss is an invisible threat within many workplace environments," said John Amann, vice president, Cintas. "It's important to establish a comprehensive solution for hearing protection, and partner with experts who provide employers with helpful tools and knowledge. We've combined our training and hearing protection equipment offerings with the on-site testing expertise of accredited professionals from Examinetics to ensure hearing conservation is an ongoing priority at work."

The top must-have attributes for a hearing conservation partner include:

1. Industry knowledge. Partners should understand workplace hazards and be positioned to share that expertise with customers' employees through on-site training sessions. For instance, many safety directors don't realize that employees typically wear too much hearing protection. This backfires because employees either can't hear, putting safety at risk, or remove

earplugs or earmuffs in order to hear, thus compromising hearing health. Research also shows exposure to toxic agents like carbon monoxide and organic solvents, such as those found in paint thinners, can impact hearing, especially when combined with noise. Partners with industry knowledge can share this information with safety directors to encourage everyday safety.

2. Onsite testing. Offsite hearing testing can lead to reduced productivity from workers and unnecessary stress for managers. Partners with mobile testing units simplify the process by bringing testing directly to worksites. Onsite testing also allows organizations to see results right away.
3. An extensive database. Since hearing loss is often gradual, it’s important to track the progression of employees’ hearing health over time. Partners can assist by using a secure database to keep baseline exam results on file to compare with new test results. Employers should have 24/7 access to test results and reports, and understand how employee testing results compare to industry standards.
4. Testing in a calibrated environment. In some cases, noises may disrupt the accuracy of a hearing test. Hearing conservation partners can ensure results are precise by continuously monitoring the test environment during testing. This makes it easy to identify if a loud noise has compromised accuracy and the worker needs to be retested.
5. Proper certifications. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requires hearing testing to be conducted by an audiologist, physician or technician. Preferably, technicians will be certified by the Council for Accreditation in Occupational Hearing Conservation (CAOHC). However, many offsite clinics have high staff turnover rates and choose to forego CAOHC certification for employees. Individuals should have knowledge of OSHA, MSHA (mining) and FRA (railroad) hearing regulations. Ideal partners will also employ CAOHC-certified professional supervisors who have specific expertise in hearing testing compliance.
6. Multilingual options. Testing needs to accommodate employees whose first language is not English, so organizations should look for partners with testing in alternate languages such as Spanish.
7. National reach. Consistent testing is important, especially for organizations with locations that span across cities and states. Partners with national reach can conduct testing at each location and compare results from one area to another. This allows companies to determine which locations need to improve hearing conservation efforts.
8. Personal protective equipment options. Personal protective equipment (PPE), such as hearing earmuffs and earplugs, keeps employees safe in noisy environments. A partner should be able to recommend the correct type of protection, have a variety of options to fit different needs and people, and regularly replenish inventory so stock is never low. This will ensure employees have proper fitting and appropriate protection.

“A great hearing conservation program includes top-quality testing performed under the direction of an experienced and certified supervisor,” said Cindy Bloyer, manager of audiology services, Examinetics. “Combining this with proper training and equipment means that workers will be able to hear everything from job instructions to seasonal sounds for years to come.”

For more information, please visit www.cintas.com/firstaidsafety *[2].*

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