

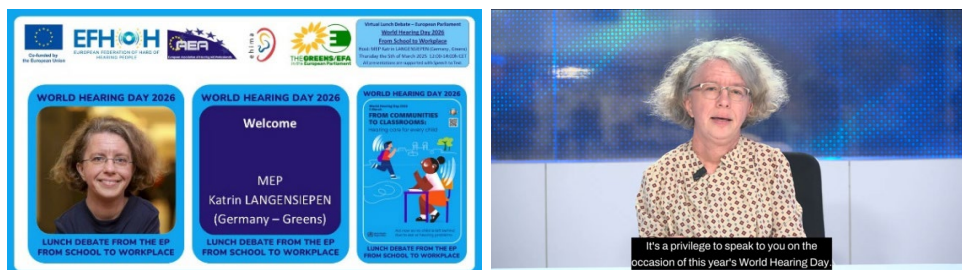
Lunch Debate from the European Parliament for World Hearing Day 2026

Report by Mark Laureyns



The Lunch Debate from the European Parliament for World Hearing Day 2026, with the theme “FROM SCHOOL TO WORKPLACE” and special focus on Employment, was hosted by MEP Katrin LANGENSIEPEN (Greens) from Germany and was organised by AEA (European Association of Hearing Aid Professionals), EFHOH (European Federation of Hard of Hearing People) and EHIMA (European Hearing Instrument Manufacturers Association) in strong cooperation with the World Health Organization on Thursday the 5th of March 2026.

In total 143 participants from 33 countries around the globe, Portugal, Belgium, Netherlands, Spain, France, Malta, Slovenia, Finland, Germany, Italy, United States, Austria, India, United Kingdom, Argentina, Brazil, Greece, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Azerbaijan, Cabo Verde, Chile, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Georgia, Malawi, Nepal, Peru, Sweden and Switzerland (cited in order of the number of participants, starting with the highest) registered for this year’s virtual lunch debate.



Welcome – MEP Katrin LANGENSIEPEN (Germany , Greens – Host of this Lunch Debate)

MEP Langensiepen begins with a powerful statement: *“Hearing connects people not only to sound, but to community, to education, and to opportunity.”* She also emphasizes that *“for too long, hearing care has stood on the margins of health policy.”*

She argues that we need systematic, structurally anchored solutions. At the national level, this means better integration of hearing health into preventive medicine and primary care. Hearing checks should be as routine as eye tests or blood pressure screenings. Public procurement policies must ensure access to affordable hearing technology. Reimbursement systems should recognize not only devices but also rehabilitation, counselling, and follow-up care. Every digital platform, classroom, and workplace should be accessible by design, with hearing inclusion as a baseline rather than an afterthought.

On a European scale, maintaining robust national early hearing intervention frameworks would help ensure that no child falls through the cracks. Every child—regardless of hearing ability—deserves full participation in education and society. Early investments pay off through improved social inclusion and lifelong employability. For healthcare professionals and health systems, this is equally a matter of resource planning and service design.

WHO estimates that unaddressed hearing loss costs the global economy over **980 billion US dollars** annually due to lost productivity, unemployment, and social isolation. Preventing hearing loss and improving hearing care delivers an estimated return of more than **15 dollars for every dollar invested**. That should be a compelling argument for every finance minister, even in times of tight budgets.

She concludes that if we truly listen to the needs of our communities, we can build a future in which hearing care is universal, equitable, more affordable, and sustainable.



WHO World Hearing Day 2026 theme - Shelly Chadha (WHO Team lead for eye, ear, and oral health at WHO Geneva) & **Shirin Kiani** (Technical Officer for Disability, Assistive Technology, Rehabilitation, and Ear and Eye Care at WHO European Office in Copenhagen)

Shelly Chadha begins with the story of two brothers she encountered while practicing as an ENT surgeon in India. One brother—thanks to school hearing screening—was treated early at the age of ten for ear infections and underwent tympanic membrane repair. She recently learned that he completed his diploma and is now working in an office in New Delhi.

The other brother, unfortunately, was already seventeen by the time the same problems were identified. He also had bilateral ear infections and hearing loss, which were treated, but he had already dropped out of school. Although his hearing was restored, they could not give him back those lost years or the opportunities that came with them.

These two boys illustrate the rationale for this year’s World Hearing Day theme: **hearing care for every child**. Globally, more than 95 million school-aged children live with unaddressed hearing loss, and the vast majority—over 70 percent—live in low- and lower-middle-income countries where services, trained professionals, and hearing devices are often lacking.

Untreated hearing loss affects children’s language and communication, and it also impacts their learning and education. This, in turn, influences their future employment prospects,

financial well-being, and social relationships. Strategic action to prevent hearing loss is essential. Early identification is key to achieving successful outcomes because when problems are recognized early, they can be addressed with evidence-based, cost-effective interventions available in the field—including access to hearing technologies, rehabilitation therapy, medical treatment, surgery, sign language, captioning, and more.

Shirin Kiani goes on to explain the resources WHO provides to make this possible, particularly those relevant to the European region. These include the WHO **#SafeListening** standards for prevention, and awareness-raising tools for children, parents, and teachers—such as a new set of child-friendly cartoons and videos. They also include early identification tools, among them new joint guidance on vision and hearing screening in schools.

Soon, WHO will launch the **WHO EARS app**, a tone-based school hearing screening tool suitable for anyone above the age of five, requiring only a simple 15-minute training. This week, WHO Europe is organising a meeting of national focal points in the Ministries of Health and Education across its 53 member states to discuss how to promote health in schools, identify key issues affecting children, and strengthen hearing screening and early identification.

My story: From the school to employment - Nicole Sophie Marinos (AHEAD | Disability Advocate in Ireland)

Nicole informs us that she is hard of hearing and will talk us through what hearing care and inclusion feel like across a lifetime—from early intervention in childhood to education and, finally, the workplace. She states that *“inclusion is determined by the environment, not by disability,”* a principle that sums up her entire journey. Her hearing never changed, but her access, participation, and confidence changed entirely depending on the country or system around her. As she explains: *“I was born with sensorineural hearing loss, but the most defining challenges did not come from my hearing loss, but from other people's understanding of it.”*

Her hearing loss was identified early and followed by early intervention with hearing aids, which gave her access to speech and language, the opportunity to develop on an equal footing with her peers, and a strong sense of confidence and belonging at a young age. But at the age of seven, while living in Greece, she was denied access to mainstream education. Her family made the difficult decision to return to Ireland so she could attend a unique mainstream school with dedicated supports for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Classrooms were acoustically treated, teachers had specialist training, and a surround-sound field system carried the teacher’s voice evenly around the room. This physical environment worked with her hearing loss, not against it. It wasn’t just the room—her teachers understood the impact of hearing loss on learning. Her hearing loss wasn’t a barrier because everything around her was built to support her participation.

Even in Ireland, however, there was room for improvement at the university level. As chair of the Disability Advisory Group, where students with disabilities came together—each facing barriers invisible to others—they transformed individual coping strategies into collective solutions. As a result, the university revised its policy to guarantee students with disabilities access to lecture recordings or an approved alternative.

Education opens doors, but employment is where equality is truly tested. Today, working in disability inclusion, she sees the same patterns reappear during the transition to employment. What strikes her most is how many graduates fall through the cracks between education and work—a transition where inclusion often breaks down. She meets talented graduates whose success depends entirely on whether employers understand inclusive practices and whether workplace supports are available. Employers often want to be inclusive but do not always know where to begin.

She concludes by stating that when we build environments that work for hard-of-hearing students, we strengthen learning for every student in the room—enhancing the entire environment, not just supporting individual learners. In doing so, we lay the foundation for equal participation not only in education, but also in employment and society.



The role of hearing health in employment and job retention – Stefan Zimmer (Secretary General of the European Hearing Instrument Association EHIMA)

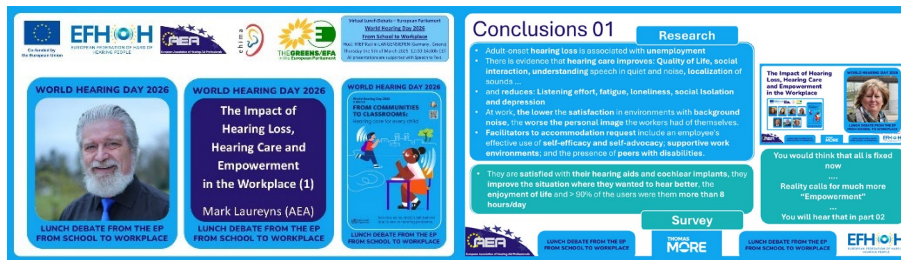
EHIMA has been running the EuroTrak surveys since 2009. To date, they have conducted surveys more than sixty times across eighteen countries, gathering responses from over 900,000 people worldwide. In this presentation, which focuses on the link between hearing health, hearing care, and productivity, the results are based on the most recent representative sample from nine countries (Belgium, Germany, Portugal, Poland, Spain, Denmark, France, Italy, and the Netherlands), with a total of 130,000 respondents.

The working-age population in the European Union is shrinking. Among people with hearing loss, those with untreated hearing loss have higher odds of unemployment or underemployment, further reducing the available workforce. Only 64 percent of working-age people with hearing loss are employed, compared to 77 percent of the general population. This comes at a cost: an estimated **55 billion euros per year** lost due to reduced productivity in the European Union alone.

Professional hearing care can help counteract this negative trend. When examining the relationship between hearing care and general health, 57 percent of people living with untreated hearing loss report that *“I often feel physically exhausted in the evening,”* compared to just 37 percent of hard-of-hearing individuals who use hearing aids. Similarly, 48 percent of people with untreated hearing loss often feel mentally exhausted, while this figure drops to 30 percent among hearing-aid users. These differences suggest a clear link between physical and mental well-being and the treatment of hearing loss.

Ninety-three percent of respondents stated that “my hearing aids are of significant use or at least some use in my employment.” More than 50 percent reported that “my personal success at work, my relationships at work, my sense of safety, and my ability to participate in group activities are higher than before being fitted with hearing aids.” In Germany, Italy, and Belgium, more than half of respondents said, “Because I have been fitted with hearing aids, I may be able to stay longer in employment.”

In conclusion, if people were made aware of their hearing status and encouraged to seek a professional diagnosis from an ENT specialist—and subsequently motivated to pursue professional hearing care—many of the challenges outlined above could be at least partially addressed. This would lead to higher employability and improved productivity.



The Impact of Hearing Loss, Hearing Care and Empowerment in the Workplace, Survey results part 1 – Mark Laureyns (European Association of Hearing Aid Professionals - AEA)

This is a joint project by the European Federation of Hard of Hearing People, the European Association of Hearing Aid Professionals, and the Audiology Department of the Thomas More University College in Antwerp.

First, what the research shows.

In the WHO *World Report on Hearing* (page 46), the impact on employment is clearly stated: “An association between hearing loss and employment in adults is evident. Overall, adults with hearing loss have increased odds of unemployment or underemployment.” This is echoed in a systematic review published in 2020 in the *Journal of Laryngology and Otology*.

Other peer-reviewed journals and systematic reviews show that hearing loss is linked with higher burnout scores. Hearing loss and difficulties understanding speech in noise lead to longer recovery times after work and an increased likelihood of being unemployed or unfit for work. Individuals with hearing loss also require more time to recuperate from work. The odds of being unemployed are **twice as high** for people with mild hearing loss and **three times as high** for those with moderate hearing loss.

In a study published in the scientific journal *Work*, which examined hearing impairment among workers and their satisfaction with hearing-aid use, workers were generally satisfied with their devices. However, those who still perceived hearing difficulties while using hearing aids or cochlear implants reported significant frustration when communicating with coworkers. Lower satisfaction was associated with a poorer self-image, and as attitudes and emotional responses worsened, overall satisfaction with hearing-aid use decreased.

Facilitators for receiving workplace accommodations include strong self-efficacy and self-advocacy skills, a supportive work environment, and the presence of peers with disabilities.

Barriers to receiving accommodations include fear of stigma, lack of knowledge about available accommodations, insufficient workplace support, and ineffective procedures, policies, and organizational structures.


Second, the results of the joint survey.

We used the IOI-HA questionnaire (International Outcomes Inventory for Hearing Aids), along with an adapted version for cochlear implant users (IOI-CI). We added questions about participants' experiences, needs, solutions received, information provided, and workplace support.

The English version was reviewed and commented on by native-speaking hearing-aid and cochlear-implant users, as well as audiologists. After translation into ten additional languages, this process was repeated for each language.

A total of **819 hard-of-hearing people** have completed the survey so far, with the majority having moderately severe, profound, or total hearing loss. Participants reported that their hearing aids and cochlear implants are **definitely worth the effort**; more than 90% use their devices for more than eight hours a day. Over 80% stated that *"in situations where I want to hear better, my hearing aids or cochlear implants really help,"* and more than 85% said that their devices improved their enjoyment of life (very much, quite a lot, or slightly).

However, what we have presented so far may be overly optimistic. The use of hearing aids or cochlear implants alone is **not enough** to guarantee success at work. That is why I am very pleased that the next talk will be delivered by Lidia Best, President of the European Federation of Hard of Hearing People. She will explore what more needs to be done to empower users and to better inform employers, audiologists, and other stakeholders—so that hard-of-hearing people can be more successful in the workplace.



Conclusions 02 Survey

- The hard of hearing participants in the survey have a high educational level and demanding jobs with active communication and interaction needs.
- At work, they still experience difficulties, impacted performance, concentration problems, mental fatigue and stress.
- 21% reported negative experiences related to exclusion or discrimination at work, but in 90% of cases, this did not result in resolving the issue.
- 53% of the participants were not informed on possible support or accommodations they could receive at work. Only 9% were informed by their audiologists.
- Accommodations such as, assistive listening devices, flexible work arrangements, captioning, instant messaging, transcripts, occupational health assessment, workplace adaptation and communication training are most used, effective, but not enough known and proposed by employers, audiologists and other health professionals.
- We all need to be better informed!

The Impact of Hearing Loss , Hearing Care and Empowerment in the Workplace, Survey results part 2 – Lidia Best (European Federation of Hard of Hearing People EFHOH)

And it is my pleasure to present the second part of this survey as the President of the European Federation of Hard of Hearing People, and also as a hard-of-hearing person myself who now uses a cochlear implant.

The majority of respondents to this survey were between 30 and 69 years old, with the median age falling in the 50–59 age group. Most participants are highly educated—holding secondary education diplomas, bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and even doctoral degrees. Seventy-four percent of respondents are either full-time or part-time employed.

When asked, “How often do you need to communicate with others at work?” 62% answered *constantly* and 32% *regularly*. In reality, this means that **95%** of all respondents are in ongoing communication with colleagues or the public in their professional roles.

When we asked, “In which areas do you experience the most impact of those communications?”, the most concerning responses were *mental fatigue at the end of the day*, feeling completely drained and unable to process information after a full day of listening, and experiencing *daily stress* related to communication demands.

On the questions “How challenging is or was communication at work due to your hearing loss?” and “Does your hearing loss affect your work performance?”, respondents indicated difficulties across the board. For some, these challenges were severe; for others, moderate or slight—but nearly everyone experienced them to some degree.

Thirty-one percent of participants reported negative experiences related to exclusion or discrimination at work due to their hearing loss. In 80% of these cases, reporting the issue did **not** lead to a resolution—and in some situations, it even made things worse.

Seventy-seven percent of respondents received accommodations at work, most commonly assistive listening devices (such as amplified phones or FM systems). Other accommodations included flexible work arrangements (hybrid or remote work, access to quiet spaces), captioning for videos or video calls, and the use of messaging or email instead of phone calls. Eighty-two percent of participants found the accommodations they received to be effective.

However, 53% of participants were *not* informed about possible supports or accommodations. Only 9% received this information from their audiologist or hearing-care professional—even though they are typically the first point of contact.

This is why we all need to be better informed. This is a shared responsibility; it should not fall on individuals alone.

Thank you for your attention, and let us change the world together. Let us create a positive employment experience for all hard-of-hearing people.



Debate & Conclusion

Mark: How do we step up? What are the next steps?

It is useful to understand the problem, but identifying the problem is not the same as finding the solution. So let me start with the most recognised policymaker here: **Shelly Chadha**, what concrete steps do you suggest to ensure people are more effective in the workplace?

Shelly Chadha

Thank you, Mark. For me, we need a **dual approach**.

First, awareness.

People who are Deaf or hard of hearing need to know how to advocate for themselves—what to ask for, what evidence to present, and which supports exist. Employers also need clear information about the accommodations and interventions required to create an effective working environment.

Second, policy.

Awareness must be matched with **strong top-down policies and regulations** that require and encourage employers to provide these accommodations. Only with both sides—awareness and policy—can we achieve real change.

Mark: Thank you, Shelly. Now to **Stefan Zimmer**. We know cochlear implants and hearing aids work, but workplace success requires more. We need assistive technologies like Auracast, but also broader support so people can contribute fully—to the economy and to their own confidence and empowerment. Stefan, what do you suggest?

Stefan Zimmer

Thank you, Mark. First, we must recognise that **hearing loss is not a comfort issue**—it is serious. Technology helps, but it must be guided by professionals who understand the person's daily life, at home and at work.

People must be encouraged to seek professional assessment. If a hearing aid or cochlear implant is appropriate, they should work with a specialist to ensure it fits their needs. With the right support, people can **sleep better, work more effectively, feel safer, and enjoy their jobs more**.

It is simple: proper assessment, professional guidance, and the right technology—matched to the individual—make all the difference.

Mark: Lidia, what will EFHOH do to inform and empower your members, and to help them inform employers? What are your plans?

Lidia Best

EFHOH is already finalising our **toolkit and guidance** for both employees and employers. It focuses especially on people newly experiencing hearing loss, who often don't know what to ask for, and on employers who may not realise where the gaps are. Many employers are well-intentioned, but not always fully aware.

Our aim is twofold:

1. **Inform employers and people with hearing loss** about accommodation options.
2. **Use these tools to advocate with policymakers**—highlighting gaps in employment policy, pushing for stronger regulations, and improving available support.

Experience in the United Kingdom has shown that even with good policies, the *human factor* remains: managers who are uncomfortable or unaware, workplaces that fail to implement what is required, and many people turning to self-employment because structures don't work.

People also hesitate to ask for support, or only seek help when situations have worsened—which is alarming.

EFHOH continues to work with the **European Commission**, including DG Employment, building on the guidelines on reasonable accommodation published two years ago. Our toolkit will also support the Commission and partner organisations across Europe.

And finally—this is very important—**hearing-care professionals must be involved**. They think they know what is needed in the workplace, but often they don't. This also came out clearly in the survey.

Mark: What I appreciate about the work of **Shelly Chadha** and **Nicole Sophie Marinos** is the focus on people and personal stories. We need more positive stories, because there are many misconceptions: that people with hearing loss are old, retired, uneducated, or not doing complex jobs. The reality is very different.

Shelly, as you did by opening with a personal story, how can we communicate these messages more effectively — highlighting not only what doesn't work, but what *does*?

Shelly Chadha

Thank you, Mark — Before answering, I'd like to reinforce what **Stefan Zimmer** and **Lidia Best** highlighted: hearing-care professionals need more than clinical and surgical skills. They should also understand public-health perspectives — awareness-raising, advocacy, and supporting patients in self-advocacy. These skills are rarely taught, even in medical schools, but they are essential.

Now, on communication:

1. **Our messages must be evidence-based.**
We need clear, factual communication grounded in solid data.
2. **We must illustrate these messages with personal stories.**
As we saw yesterday, stories bring evidence to life and remind people that *individuals* are at the heart of this work.
3. **We must always be sensitive to the people we serve.**
Communication should be accessible — technologically, linguistically, and emotionally — phrased respectfully and tailored to people's needs.

Because when hearing care is delivered properly, with timely intervention and evidence-based practice, **it works — and it changes lives.**