US Airways merges two best practice programs into one, unified Hearing Conservation Program

Best Practices in a Hearing Conservation Program

- Single unified, high-quality Hearing Conservation Program
- Greater employee involvement in selection of hearing protective devices
- Local deployment of audiometric testing for more accommodating scheduling
- Significant improvement in acceptance and proper fitting/usage of personal protective equipment

About Howard Leight®

Howard Leight/Sperian Hearing Protection, LLC, is a leading global provider of passive and intelligent hearing protection solutions, and the founder of the Hear Forever initiative. For over 30 years, Howard Leight has pursued the prevention of occupational hearing loss through innovation in hearing protection design, technology, performance, and comfort, and the promotion of progressive Hearing Conservation Programs. Leading solutions include the highest-attenuating Max® single-use earplug; patented Air Flow Control™ technology for optimal earmuff attenuation; QuietDose™ personal in-ear dosimetry; and the industry-changing VeriPRO® earplug fit testing system.


About US Airways

US Airways, along with US Airways Shuttle and US Airways Express, operates more than 3,200 flights per day and serves more than 200 communities in the U.S., Canada, Europe, the Caribbean and Latin America. The airline employs more than 33,000 aviation professionals worldwide and is a member of the Star Alliance network, which offers our customers more than 16,500 daily flights to 912 destinations in 159 countries worldwide. And for the eleventh consecutive year, the airline received a Diamond Award for maintenance training excellence from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for its Charlotte, North Carolina hub line maintenance facility.

The Challenge

Mergers and acquisitions are commonplace today, as competitors come together to expand their reach globally or complete a product portfolio. Pending regulatory or internal approvals, these new companies face several integration challenges, including consolidating workforces, information technology systems, finance and — just as important — occupational safety programs.

In the two years since America West merged with US Airways to become the number four carrier in the United States, the new US Airways has endeavored to consolidate and enhance its corporate safety program, and specifically its Hearing Conservation Program. “People are a core value in our safety program,” said Ron Miller, an employee of US Airways, and the Machinists Union ground safety director and former chairman of the Labor Division of the National Safety Council. The new organization, said Miller, has taken strides to incorporate its employees in many aspects of the hearing conservation program. “Employees are much more actively involved in the hearing protector device (HPD) selection process and are integrated into the training segment in a unique way,” he said.

While covering all bases of an OSHA-compliant Hearing Conservation Program, US Airways adheres to the following best practices in its program.
HPD Selection

“The original US Airways started a personal protective equipment (PPE) committee about eight years ago,” Miller said, and it has been maintained through the merger. The PPE committee consists of internal safety professionals, employees, union representatives, purchasing staff and operational managers who all collaborate on product selection and implementation of the PPE program.

In its selection process, the PPE committee evaluates new HPDs with a group of “frontline employees” who work in a variety of departments and geographic locations. These employees are exposed to various levels and types of hazardous noise. The employees are provided with three to five different earplugs, bands or earmuffs and asked to wear each over an eight-hour shift. Following the trial, each employee completes an evaluation form on each type of HPD, identifying comfort, usability and protection preferences. The PPE committee then reviews the evaluation forms and selects HPDs based on that feedback.

While pricing is a consideration in the decision, it is not always the primary factor. Selection is also based on personal comfort and usability. Miller said that while the selected earplug or earmuff may not be the lowest in cost, “if the employees find it comfortable and easy to use, it will be added to our approved product list.” This helps to ensure proper wear and optimal protection.

Audiometric Testing

US Airways runs more than 3,600 flights per day, employs over 33,000 employees and maintains a fleet of over 650 aircraft. Needless to say, managing the testing and training component of the airline’s Hearing Conservation Program requires great coordination to ensure efficiency.

All employees exposed to noise, from mechanics to baggage handlers, participate in the hearing conservation program. While many employees are exposed to noise at or above 85 dB, Patrick Ireland, manager of occupational safety and health, said, “It is more effective to have everyone take part. It improves overall personal safety awareness in the workplace.”

Continuing an America West practice, one-on-one employee training takes place on an annual basis, concurrent with their audiometric testing, Ireland said. When employees are tested, they must bring the earplug or earmuff they currently use, and they are asked to don the protector prior to the test. This helps the Hearing Conservation Program specialist to determine if the employee is achieving proper fit, needs additional training, or requires a different HPD. This activity can also help determine if a decrease in hearing may be the result of improper fit.

In the past, US Airways utilized mobile testing services for its annual audiograms at all domestic locations. While this was an effective method for employee audiometry, test vans were only onsite for limited periods of time, and scheduling employees was often disruptive to the overall operation. To increase operational efficiencies, US Airways purchased audiometric test booths and equipment for its larger locations, as well as portable equipment for testing the smaller locations. Trained, CAOHC-certified US Airways onsite staff can schedule employees in a more flexible manner that better accommodates active work groups.

Motivational Materials

US Airways takes an inclusive approach to its motivation and training materials. To ensure uniformity in both products and wear, large wall posters featuring photos of approved HPDs, ordering information and fitting instructions for each HPD that incorporate images of actual US Airways employees are hung throughout each facility. The airline also utilizes
its employees in an internally developed training video that is used to complement its annual one-on-one training. The message hits closer to home when the motivational images reflect the organization’s own people.

Since implementing these approaches, not just for HPDs but for other forms of PPE, Miller said that employee acceptance and proper wear of PPE has increased significantly.

The Results

Though the consolidated program has only been in effect for a little over a year, Ireland said that the Hearing Conservation Program has been a “good example of how to work together.” It has been one of the first company-wide safety programs to fully unify — successfully merging best practices from both previous programs and innovating where opportunities arose.