



## HEALTH

## HARD OF HEARING, HARD ON THE BUSINESS

Hearing loss can severely impair one's working life, but help is readily at hand. **Report: Jessica Gardner**

● It wasn't until his bad hearing led to a costly error at work that Rod McDowall decided to do something about it.

"I think it was about a \$2000 mistake," the managing director of Brisbane company P2P Construction Solutions says, "but it could have been \$10,000."

McDowall's site manager had called him to get the final go-ahead on the mixture of the concrete they were to lay. "I said, 'Yeah, that sounds right'," McDowall says. "So he went ahead and ordered the concrete on my say so. However, I had misheard what he said and when the first truck rolled up it was obviously the wrong concrete."

He had been aware of some deterioration in his hearing but until then had not paid much attention to the problem. Friends and colleagues had mentioned it to his wife, however, and

at work he was actively avoiding group meetings and conference calls.

"You're expected to make valuable, informed, intelligent input and if you can't hear the words clearly it becomes very embarrassing," McDowall says.

While it was frustrating for him, it also had an impact on those around him. "I wasn't a nice man to be around. I used to lash out all the time," he recalls.

Nicole Lawder, the chief executive of Deafness Forum of Australia, the national peak body for hearing loss, says situations like McDowall's are surprisingly common.

"One in six Australians has some form of hearing loss," Lawder says. The prevalence is expected to increase to one in four by 2050, she says. The increase is mostly due to an ageing population, but also because of an emerging trend Lawder calls "old ears on young bodies".

Many young people are putting themselves at risk of recreational noise injury because of their tendency to play loud music on their headphones, she says.

The impact of hearing loss in the workplace can be profound, Australian National University research fellow Dr Anthony Hogan says.

"People with hearing loss tend to be under-promoted," Dr Hogan says. "Because you can't follow the basic social

## Technology leads the way

Today's hearing aids come with a range of technological advancements, audiologist and general manager of Bay Audio, Andrew Campbell, says.

For example, users are able to connect their hearing devices wirelessly to mobile phones or personal music players using Bluetooth technology.

"What that means is they're getting a direct signal into their ears that is not mixed up," Campbell says.

Modern hearing aids also look a lot better than they used to.

"They tend to be

a lot smaller than hearing aids of the past, which were a bit like a pink banana," Campbell says.

One thing to be aware of is that hearing aids can be a bit destabilising initially as users adapt to the new range of sounds they can hear.

"There is also an acclimatisation period," Campbell explains.

"Most people find that their own voice sounds a bit different and they find that they're noticing sounds that they had completely forgotten even existed."

rules of communication – you talk, I listen, I respond – people think you're socially incompetent or stupid."

"We find that hearing loss can be quite isolating," Lawder says. "People sometimes feel they're being laughed at when they misunderstand instructions."

For McDowall, the answer to his problems came with a trip to an audiologist, who fitted hearing aids. "Each device is programmed to receive the frequencies you are missing in that particular ear," he explains.

While McDowall doesn't hear everything perfectly, the aids have had a huge effect on his life and his work. "I'm nowhere near as stressed. I'm a lot calmer and I make better decisions," he says. "My work environment is a lot better than it was and there's a lot less negative energy."

Before he tackled his hearing problem McDowall was emotionally and mentally exhausted by Thursday each week from constantly struggling to hear what people said at work.

"Nowadays I get to the end of the week and if somebody says, 'We'll meet you at the pub for a steak', I'll say, 'Yeah, no problem'," he says. "In days gone by, before the hearing aids, I would've said 'Forget it, I'm too tired and drained'. I didn't want to engage in conversation. It was all too hard." **BRW**