



WSBA Conference Center Gets Looped

New Access for Hard of Hearing Attorneys

BY JERRY PAULUKONIS

I am an attorney with a severe hearing loss. Obtaining my required continuing legal education credits has been an ongoing challenge. Hearing at live seminars is difficult at best, especially in larger venues. Webinars and other online presentations are usually not accessible to me because they are rarely captioned, and CD recordings are useless because there are no captions or lips to read. And, as for all attorneys, there are no “read-only” options for logging CLE hours. In part due to these obstacles, I was strongly considering letting my Bar membership lapse at the end of 2013.

But early last year, I mentioned these challenges to a friend who works at the WSBA. He asked me to write a letter to the WSBA and make some suggestions. I wrote that letter, and my primary suggestion was that the WSBA install an audio induction loop in its conference center, where many CLE seminars are held. The project was funded and the installation was completed in October 2013.

How Looping Works

A loop system is a specialized cable installed in a room, often around its perimeter. Sounds from microphones in the room create a magnetic field within the cable, and the cable then sends an audio signal directly and wirelessly to hearing aids and cochlear implants that are set to their telecoil mode. (Most hearing aids and all cochlear implants have telecoils.)

Normally, a hearing aid is just a microphone that amplifies all sounds in a room. Using the telecoil mode, however, the transmission of sound works differently. A telecoil is a tiny copper wire that acts as an antenna. When the telecoil mode is on, an electric current in the coil is triggered by the magnetic field in the loop. The hearing aid receives a clear, wireless signal from the magnetic field, and it is this signal that is then amplified directly to the listener. Because the audio signal is transmitted directly through the magnetic field, rather than from an exterior amplified microphone, the sounds that come via the telecoil are clear and precise.

Usually, a variety of acoustic distortions can make words spoken from a

Left: International symbol that indicates an audio induction loop is installed.

microphone in a large room very difficult or impossible to discriminate. The very amplification of sound distorts it and decreases its clarity. In addition, distance from the speaker, reverberation, bad acoustics, and background noise can all contribute to the unintelligibility of what is being spoken. A loop system eliminates virtually all of these distortions, and provides a quality of sound that traditional amplification cannot begin to match.

The Sound of Success

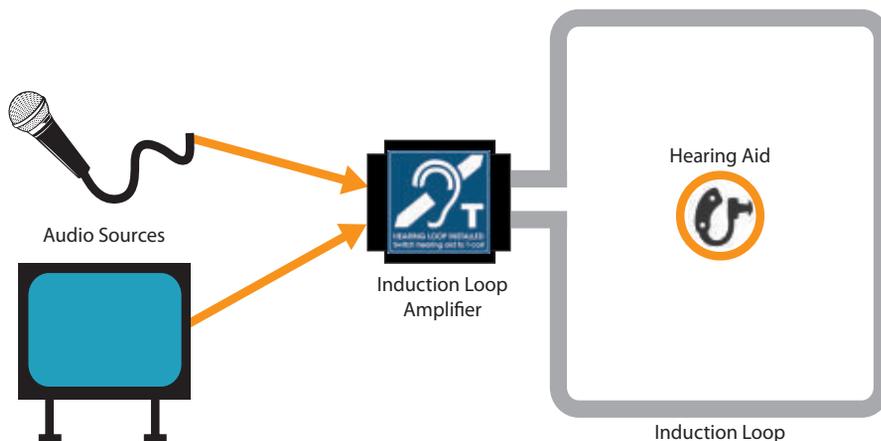
I attended my first post-looping CLE seminar at the end of October 2013, and wow! The speaker’s voice was as clear as if he were standing directly in front of me, instead of on the dais some distance away. The entire day, I heard speech with crystalline clarity. Questions both from people within the room and from webinar participants off-site were also within the loop and were clear. This was the first professional group setting where I had been able to easily hear nearly everything that was being said. It was elating! Suffice it to say, there was an emotional jolt — a very nice one.

The first seminar was a single speaker who spoke distinctly the entire day. I have now attended several additional seminars at the WSBA Conference Center with multiple speakers under various circumstances. Two of them featured 10–14 individual speakers throughout the day, and another included a panel discussion with five people on the dais. Regardless of my particular location in the room or the differences in the speakers’ voices, the loop has always worked like a charm.

So, in my opinion, the looping has been a huge success!

A Good Investment

The looping installation at the WSBA Conference Center cost about \$13,500. I am admittedly biased, but I believe this is a good investment for several reasons. First, it is a one-time, permanent installation with a 20-year life expectancy. Providing temporary audio assistance for a single seminar can cost hundreds of dollars, so this outlay strikes me as a steal. The benefit from the looping will be available for any and all seminars held at the conference cen-



How an audio induction loop system works.

ter for many years to come.

Second, the loop system promises to be inexpensive to maintain and requires little in staff training. It also requires no special attention or set-up for each use.

Third, it is extremely easy for people to take advantage of. Most people will have to do nothing other than turn on the telecoil switch of their hearing aid or cochlear implant. There are no additional assistive listening devices to bring along and no portable equipment to borrow. For those whose hearing aids don't have telecoils, headsets are available from the center's audio booth. The headsets can also be used by those who don't wear hearing aids or cochlear implants.

The looping of the conference center is a good investment for another important reason. Over time, it is likely that an increasing number of attorneys will benefit from the loop system. I have no idea how many Seattle-area attorneys have a hearing loss; however, the WSBA has previously published information about the aging membership of the organization, and statistics detail a sobering correlation between age and incidence of hearing loss. Also, with the ever-increasing noise pollution within our society, more attorneys who are younger will be dealing with their own hearing loss.

Of course, the loop system will prove its value only if people use it. For Washington attorneys who are hard of hearing, I cannot encourage you enough to attend a seminar at the WSBA Conference Center. If you have never before experienced a looped listening environment, you are in for a revelation. And if you do take ad-

vantage of it, please let the WSBA staff there know; they are interested in getting your feedback.

Kudos to All

I am humbled by, and enormously grateful for, the WSBA's quick responsiveness to my suggestion to install a loop system in the conference center. Its willingness to make this accommodation for attorneys with hearing loss is consistent with its long history of active service supporting attorneys in the state.

A growing number of churches, offices, and meeting rooms in Washington are now looped. (See www.loopseattle.org for a listing of looped locations.)

I am delighted and proud that the WSBA has joined them.

In addition to thanking the WSBA staff for the installation — especially Mike Jorgensen, the CLE webcast production manager — I want to acknowledge with great thanks Cheri Perazolli of Let's Loop Seattle (<http://loopseattle.org>) for her strong advocacy of looping in the Seattle area and for introducing me to it. A special shout-out is also due to P. Spencer Norby of HearingLoop NW, who installed the loop system.

And yes, I'm continuing my Bar membership. **NWL**



JERRY PAULUKONIS is a writer for LexisNexis Matthew Bender, focusing on tax law issues. He received his undergraduate degree from

Washington State University, graduated from the University of Washington Law School in 1975, and received an LL.M. in taxation from Golden Gate University in 1984. He can be reached at gwpseattle@yahoo.com.



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