

# iPhones and Hearing-Aid Compatibility: Re-Defining Accessibility?

Originally posted on [Hearing Health and Technology Matters](#) website.  
March 22, 2016.

By **Kathi Mestayer**

Apple has certainly been in its share of dust-ups lately. Now there's one that has raised eyebrows in the hard-of-hearing tech arena. It has to do with the iPhone, hearing aid accessibility, and the FCC.

In November of last year, the FCC started things rolling with a [Public Notice](#) that they intended to review their existing rules for wireless hearing aid compatibility. They also solicited comments on hearing aid compatibility and accessibility for wireless phone handsets.

## Hearing loss and wireless tech organizations respond

In short order, a consortium of hearing-loss and wireless industry organizations, led by HLAA, submitted a [consensus letter to the FCC](#). Signatories included: Competitive Carriers Association, CTIA – The Wireless Association®, the Hearing Loss Association of America, the National Association of the Deaf, Telecommunications for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and the Telecommunications Industry Association.

The letter recommended that: “Within five years of the effective date of the new rules adopted, 85% of wireless handsets offered to consumers should be compliant with Sections 20.19(b)(1) and (b)(2).” Those (existing) standards are detailed and quantitative, but [FCC's website](#) offers a simplified description: telephones are hearing-aid compatible if they “have an internal feature that works with telecoil or T-coil hearing aids.”

The consensus letter also made several other recommendations, including interim compliance dates, inclusion of consumer and industry groups, and considering innovation.

## A shot across the bow

Things got quiet for awhile. Then, at the end of January, Apple submitted its [comments to the FCC](#), proposing that the iPhone be exempted from the t-coil requirement.

Apple's proposed alternative is its proprietary Bluetooth connection protocol that links MFi (Made For iPhone) hearing aids to the iPhone. Although several manufacturers have acquired licenses to use Apple's Bluetooth pairing in their hearing aids, the link only works between iPhones and MFi hearing aids. And there is no hint in Apple's FCC letter that that is going to change any time soon.

Apple's arguments include the following:

1. *Bluetooth is better.* Apple's proprietary Bluetooth pairing “supports not only voice call output, but also lets individuals with MFi hearing aids access audio from FaceTime, VoiceOver, Siri (Apple's intelligent personal assistant), turn-by-turn navigation, stereo music and movies, and output from third party apps, including games, audiobooks, and educational programs.”

2. *It's not that expensive.* Although there are a few MFi aids on the market, a recent visit to Costco revealed a price of \$1799.99 for a pair of Kirkland's version, manufactured by ReSound. The Hearing Instrument Specialist told me that those aids do not include t-coils as an option. So, the train is pulling away from the station.
3. Allowing proprietary approaches "Further the Goal of Technological Neutrality." As Apple points out in their letter, "the FCC has not in the past, and should not now, require that manufacturers ubiquitously implement coupling technologies that can function with every hearing aid. To do so would undermine companies' ability to attract consumers with hearing loss by differentiating their products in the marketplace, and would severely constrain innovation." ([Section III.B](#))
4. We need new compatibility standards. Apple suggests adopting a new qualitative testing protocol – "[Method for the subjective assessment of intermediate quality level of audio systems](#)," which uses people (with normal hearing) to rate audio quality (Section 4.1.1.).

### **So, where does that leave the consumer?**

[Nick Hunn](#), Chair of Bluetooth's Hearing Aid Working Group, puts it this way: "This might be good for Apple, but it's an awful decision for everyone else."

One reason is that people generally get new mobile phones far more often than we switch hearing aids. Again, Hunn: "Apple actually encourages its users to upgrade their phones every year through its iPhone upgrade program, and most users upgrade at least once every 18 months. But hearing-aid users typically change their hearing aids no more than once every five years." So if you have Apple's MFi hearing aids, and decide to switch mobile phone brands, it might severely constrain innovation.

### **Not so fast!**

Hunn's primary argument is that Apple is jumping the gun by asking FCC to approve the proprietary system. Hunn's Bluetooth Working Group is developing a set of specifications that they anticipate "will be widely used and be interoperable for a variety of speech and music applications. Our aim is to make it generic so that all manufacturers will want to use it. It should add no cost to a phone, tablet or TV which already uses a Bluetooth chip, so we're hoping it will become the standard for the next 10 – 15 years of Bluetooth audio," Hunn points out.

As far as the timing goes, Hunn estimates that "We should have the spec complete sometime next year – it takes time to do all of the interoperability testing to make sure it works properly before we release it. Hearing loss is too important to make rushed decisions."

### **FCC: Ball's in Your Court**

Apple's letter to the FCC requesting an exemption from the t-coil compatibility standard reads like a good move for innovation and accessibility. But it's not that straightforward. Apple's decision to "go it alone" is, according to Hunn, "one that stands to disrupt the hearing-aid experience for millions – and fragment the hearing-aid business altogether."

Perhaps the FCC should take a few deep breaths and see what the Bluetooth Working Group comes up with. In practical, market terms, a proprietary solution to improving accessibility might be, in this case, an oxymoron.

*Kathi Mestayer writes for [Hearing Health Magazine](#), [Be Hear Now](#) on [BeaconReader.com](#), and serves on the Board of the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing. She uses her iPhone with a neckloop, audio jack, and t-coils which connects her to FaceTime, VoiceOver, turn-by-turn navigation, stereo music and movies, and output from third party apps, including games, audiobooks, and educational programs. Just like Bluetooth, only way, way cheaper.*

## **9 Responses to iPhones and Hearing-Aid Compatibility: Re-Defining Accessibility?**

1. *Linda S Remensnyder, Au.D.* says:

[March 24, 2016 at 11:38 AM](#)

Here in Lake County, Illinois (northern suburbs of Chicago, we have a looped city hall, a looped senior center, a looped senior residence facility, a looped auditorium, a looped meeting room in our community center, two looped places of worship, and a Landmark 5 cinema theatre in an adjacent suburb. The hearing aid industry will be ignoring the dual functionality of the telecoil by going down this route with Apple and I have serious concern why the American Academy of Audiology and the Academy of Doctors of Audiology is not making waves about this self-interested endeavor

[Reply](#)

2. *Rick Ledbetter* says:

[March 24, 2016 at 10:40 AM](#)

Apple did not define anything – they created their own system, paid for it them selves and put it on their phones at no extra cost. Android is free to create their own, just as any hearing aid maker is free to adopt the MFI or not. Apple is saying “here it is, it works great on our phones.” The trouble is not Apple, it is the hearing aid makers all wanting to stake out their own little fiefdoms and not agree on anything. They want to sell their overpriced BT conversion devices for extra money. Telecoil is vastly inferior and ancient tech. My MFI aids and my iPhone work great together. Frankly, when I had them on a previous set of aids, I hated telecoils. But if the industry hangs its hat on telecoil compatibility, very soon, Bluetooth will come along and render telecoils moot. Then the “wearables” which are BT compatible and on the market now, will deal a grievous blow to the hearing aid business.

[Reply](#)

- o *Gael Hannan* says:

[March 24, 2016 at 11:25 AM](#)

Many people do like their telecoils, Rick. It allows them to connect to many other devices and systems besides telephones. Looped rooms, for example, in theatres, churches, etc. I want my phone to have both in them....sometimes the bluetooth doesn't work as well for me on the iPhone as my telecoil.

[Reply](#)

- *Kathi Mestayer* says:

[March 24, 2016 at 5:14 PM](#)

Amen. I wonder whether the “tcoils are old” argument is just that...old. I thought my turntable was obsolete until recently, when I discovered.....my 15-year-old nephew wanted vinyl albums for his birthday.

[Reply](#)

3. *Grant* says:

[March 24, 2016 at 9:52 AM](#)

“Bluetooth is better.” Certainly there are many arguments for and against this. Bluetooth is only one of several wireless options. Other 2.4GHz and 900MHz options are as good or better and offer the same experience as Paul writes here in the comments. Apple controls interoperation with it’s devices with an iron fist. MFi will never ever be open nor will it be accessible to competing cell phone manufacturers. The only way the FCC should consider ever dropping t-coil support is if a truly open multi-manufacturer wireless standard is developed. Right now the t-coil is the only one.

The following quote is laughable, basically saying that anything coming out of the headphone jack is somehow special to Apple. Give me a break.

“Apple’s proprietary Bluetooth pairing “supports not only voice call output, but also lets individuals with MFi hearing aids access audio from FaceTime, VoiceOver, Siri (Apple’s intelligent personal assistant), turn-by-turn navigation, stereo music and movies, and output from third party apps, including games, audiobooks, and educational programs.””

[Reply](#)

- *Kathi Mestayer* says:

[March 24, 2016 at 5:17 PM](#)

...not to mention that rumors are circulating....again...that the next iPhone will not have a headphone jack. That will make me, and probably others, have to switch phones. Tough call? Not.

[Reply](#)

4. *Paul* says:

[March 23, 2016 at 2:48 PM](#)

Apple’s bluetooth solution is remarkable. It has changed my hearing aid experience and my life. Phone calls and music come right to my ears. I can listen to music thru my iphone and also cut out all background noise so i can use it in a gym. Clarity and vomprension is measurably improved and its binaural. I hope bluetooth capatibility becomes standard in hearing aids and i can link dirct to TV or movies. That is the wsy this technology should be moving.

[Reply](#)

5. *Juliette Sterkens* says:

[March 23, 2016 at 8:06 AM](#)

I agree with you Kathi that Apple should not be allowed to redefine hearing-aid compatibility and accessibility. Thanks for writing this blog. I too agree that the FCC should say a loud “No!” to this rather sneaky proposal, and couched in wording to make you believe that Apple truly cares for those with hearing loss. An on-line petition on Change.org was created by Abram Bailey where you can voice your opinion in this matter. Please take a minute to do so and send a message to Apple and the FCC. To vote click here: <http://bit.ly/fcchacpetition>

[Reply](#)

o *Kathi Mestayer* says:

[March 24, 2016 at 5:18 PM](#)

Well-said. How many signatures are on that petition now? I’m curious.

[Reply](#)