

Q&A Deaf People and Hearing People talk about Work

What are the views of Deaf people and Hearing people about work?

In this section, we explain different perspectives and views we obtained from Deaf people and hearing people in the same workplaces. Interviews and small groups were convened with Deaf and hearing people from the same workplace allowed to comment in separate groups. This was part of a research study carried out for the ESF SEQUAL project (2004).

Recruitment and Job Interview

The primary issues for Deaf people were the completion of the application form and the need to have interpreting (or other) support. People felt that it should be explicit from the outset, the level of support required for the job. Sometimes family members are keen to support the Deaf person and come to interviews – this is not always a positive strategy, as they are inclined to take over or where signing is required, may actually not be able to sign well enough to convey information. Interestingly, it is still the case that relatives and social workers are brought along to the interview.

Some Deaf people claimed that Deaf awareness training should start here. In one case, the employer requested that the mother attend – only to discover that the mother was also Deaf! It seems that employers are aware of their own communication limitations and are trying to build into the process a means of relaying information. However this may be at the expense of the independence of the Deaf person.

Hearing respondents identified the need to find the right procedure for advertising a job (but few jobs from their perspective would be solely targeted on Deaf people). Our respondents were more Deaf-aware indicating the need to ask about communication requirements in advance, to arrange interpreters and even to have Deaf people on the interview panel.

First Day at Work

Issues of nervousness on starting work and the feeling that hearing colleagues had unrealistic expectations were mentioned. Typically hearing people start out with good intentions (to learn to communicate) but these are seldom followed up. One person had a less than satisfactory experience:

“The problem was that he was rather patronising to me and embarrassed me in front of the other workers by using physical contact as a way of expressing himself – hugging me, patting me on the head, patting my back etc. This then extended to other members of staff My desk that I worked from always faced the wall and I hated this as I could not follow anything that was going on behind my back and People would throw bits of paper at me....” Deaf person

The hearing respondents were aware of the need to make preparations although two significant points were mentioned:

“To be honest, there is only one Deaf person on board – you can have a dialogue with him – you can get by. To employ more Deaf people we would need to make the effort to learn sign language ...” Hearing

“... I am aware that there are people who feel uncomfortable talking to or avoid talking to my Deaf colleague because a lot of it other than ignorance is fear... fear of not being understood themselves.” Hearing

The issue of numbers of Deaf people in the work place is significant as a stimulus to change in the hearing workforce. Typically, there is only one Deaf employee and the pressure for the hearing people to change is much less. However, just as Deaf people may be anxious about being misunderstood, so too, are hearing people.

Training

The primary problems which appeared in our discussions were issues of lack of Deaf awareness (switching the lights off, creating divided visual attention, not giving materials in an appropriate form for the Deaf person). The difficulty of there being only one Deaf person on the course of training was also mentioned (and its impact in isolating that person from the group and from the informal learning – ie coffee and lunch breaks). One person mentioned the problem which arises of being the only Deaf person and having to watch the interpreters continuously (while hearing people can look away – take time out) – this leads to tiredness especially if the training course is an all-day one.

One person mentioned the lack of access to training leading to promotion – feeling that Deaf people experienced discrimination in this respect.

Hearing respondents agreed that there were problems in Deaf people attending training courses and indicated a higher drop out rate. One person mentioned that lack of support with *homework* was a factor.

Promotion

Deaf people report that they believe it is much easier for hearing people to be promoted and even that their hearing loss was used as a reason for not promoting them. One mentioned a subtle difference:

“I never get head-hunted for a higher position. I know if I want to climb the ladder I have to apply.”

The limiting effect of hearing loss was also mentioned by hearing respondents in regard to promotion.

Equal Pay and Equal Opportunities

There was general agreement that pay levels were the same but that opportunities might not be. This extended to training courses and meetings. One mentioned the Union.

“ No opportunity to be included It’s the same at the Union meetings. I’ve made requests regarding pay and they are always sidelined. They subscribe to equal opportunities and should know about rights but they still do not provide interpreters! What was I paying the Union for at that time?”

One point made in this context was that the Deaf person often uses voice in the workplace in order to try to integrate. Depending on the level of intelligibility of speech this may be a helpful strategy (to have a say in what is happening) – the problem is that it gives the mistaken impression that what a Deaf person can articulate is also what they can lip-read, read and hear. This is usually not the case. Deaf people may be able to say something but could not lip-read the same sentence or hear it – except in exceptionally favourable circumstances.

Gender Issues

Although on the surface there have been major changes in the workplace regarding gender, there were still some concerns expressed by Deaf people.

“ She has a pretty face (deaf friend). At work she is always being accosted by hearing men, that are just looking for a good time..... I have seen some of them talking at work .. wondering if Deaf women are any different ...”

In another example, the respondent thought that Deaf men often posed a problem for Deaf women in the workplace as their behaviour (potential harassment) would be undetected by hearing managers.

Socialising

Deaf responses indicated a degree of selection for attending a social event – if there are going to be people ‘with whom we can communicate’ or if it is an event of a close workmate, they would attend. Otherwise there is a dislike of groups of hearing people. One mentioned the issue of hearing people socialising in order to practise their signing, which can be tedious for the Deaf person.

Hearing respondent did not recognise these problems suggesting that the Deaf people that they knew participated well. Interestingly one comment focused on the protectiveness of hearing friends and the occurrence of the “does he take sugar?” problem, where hearing friends were tempted to jump in early in a conversation with a third party when it did not seem to be going well.

Meetings

The topic produced a number of stories of problems: several hearing people talking at the same time, meetings held without interpreters, being told that the meeting participants had already covered that point when the Deaf person asked a question, and being provided with written notes afterwards which could not be read (because of the English level and often the poor quality handwriting). Also,

“ ... meetings on a regular basis ...I have to write things down which is embarrassing because when they are read out, the English is written in BSL grammar and so therefore it is not always understood. Which then leads me to withdraw ...”

In this example, Deaf people who do not speak well (when there is no interpreter available), are forced to try to write their questions or comments – but because their general level of English is poor, the written text is poorly written, When this is read out, it provokes negative or dismissive responses from the hearing participants. Not surprisingly this leads Deaf people to withdraw from this situation and so they seldom make interventions or comments in meetings with hearing people,

Hearing respondents indicated an awareness of the problems of trying to arrange ad hoc meetings and the fact that interpreters might not be available. One explained a bigger problem of trying to explain diagrams and drawings by writing down (presumably in small groups) and the unrealistic goal of training staff to learn sign language just for these occasions.

Use of Interpreters

Not surprisingly a great deal was said about interpreters – generally positive. A recurring theme was the level of performance of the interpreter (which was likely to vary) the dress code of the interpreter and the fact that introducing an interpreter to a small meeting upset the dynamics of the process. One felt that not appointing an interpreter was a way to keep the Deaf person on the defensive.

Interestingly, another Deaf respondent (a supervisor) who brought in an interpreter for the hearing people he was managing, found that the hearing people disliked the interpreter and tried to write down their questions after the meeting because *they* felt the interpreter’s style was not friendly towards them.

Hearing people commented that interpreters were expensive, that they were inflexible (about time and breaks) and even were unfriendly.

Developing Sign Language at Work

Most Deaf respondents want hearing people to be able to sign. There was some support for the idea of providing resource in sign language direct to colleagues eg DVDs, although it was agreed that allowances would have to be made in work time, rather than in the person’s spare time.

Among hearing people there was a recognition that guides to BSL and support at point of need would be helpful. There was no consensus as to which mode of delivery was best – CD or Internet.

Conclusions

The results of our study are influenced by the fact that the hearing participants had more experience (than is usual amongst hearing work colleagues) and probably they had more commitment to Deaf colleagues than is usual. The results above are more positive than would be expected if we chose hearing workers at random.

Deaf awareness and the needs of sign-using work colleagues is a high priority not only for the initial stages of recruitment (which the participants had rarely thought about) and interview but for the ongoing daily interaction. Deaf people pointed out over-use of tactics learned in deaf awareness courses – in this case, too much touching by the hearing employer.

Deaf people tend to be more negative about their experiences than hearing people are – the latter thinking that they are getting by, while the Deaf person is building up a catalogue of frustrations.

Hearing people acknowledged that some hearing colleagues were nervous or embarrassed in trying to communicate with the Deaf person and it is likely that this is seldom properly addressed in the workplace. Hearing people avoid contact – send memos or emails or ask other people to pass messages.

Gender proved to be an issue when there were Deaf young women in the workplace; the possibility for inappropriate behaviour or comments to pass unreported is very high – simply because the Deaf women may be unaware of what has been said.

Training, meetings and interpreters all provoked comments and although hearing people seemed to be aware of the problems on one level, the Deaf views usually tapped a much deeper sense of isolation and lack of communication.

There is much to do to bring Deaf and hearing people into harmony in their perception of work settings.