

## Q&A What Deaf people and hard-of-hearing say about work

### ***What are the experiences of Deaf people at work?***

We set up focus groups during 2004 in order to discover the experiences that Deaf people have had in their work or attempts to work. We contrasted these experiences with people who can be termed *hard of hearing (HOH)* – they usually have lesser hearing losses or have acquired their hearing loss later; they are usually able to speak and to hear in some circumstances through hearing aids. This hard-of-hearing group are quite different from Deaf people – although they have a hearing loss, they are unlikely to use sign language nor to mix with other Deaf people. They are likely to have gone further in education and be more able to carry out one to one conversations. However, they will also have problems in groups, in noisy environments and in socialising with work colleagues. They may say they are deaf when at work – although some may prefer to keep their hearing loss hidden.

The data was collected as part of the ESF SEQUAL project (2004).

There were considerable differences in the discussion of the hard-of-hearing group as compared to the Deaf groups. The most striking was their expression of self assuredness and the priority for them to be more assertive in decision-making at work. In terms of career choice, they were much more likely to be discussing the structural aspects of jobs and not the communication issues. They experienced some discrimination but it was of a different order to that of the Deaf community members. They seldom mentioned the need for personal helpers – interpreters or note-takers – while these were a central concern of Deaf people.

There are also clear differences in age and experience at work with the recent Access to Work initiatives and the very existence of interpreters, being relevant only to the young Deaf people.

### ***Aspirations and Advice***

The HOH groups were much more likely to talk about school issues, planning, University and careers – in the way that hearing people would think about it. Generally speaking HOH people tended to determine their own direction by themselves – to the extent of choosing courses or going to evening classes and so on. This is not so surprising because for them, the communication issue may be less of a factor. Although there were a few HOH who had been told by advisers not to follow a specific career because of hearing loss, it was much more common among the younger Deaf group.

I was also interested in computer programming but my teacher advised against this as it was felt I would not be able to grasp the technical language. (Deaf under 35)

Older Deaf people had had similar and even more negative experiences.

A careers advisor came to our school and advised us about the various career paths we had chosen. But the teacher said we would be only able to work in a factory! (Deaf over 36)

At the point of advice, there should still be some concern that choices are limited by lack of knowledge in the adviser.

### ***Jobs after school and application forms***

Older HOH people said finding a job could be problematic with extensive applications even to get to interview and then a sense of being over-qualified for the job.

For younger Deaf people, the primary discussion was about work experience and placements and the consensus that Deaf young people were not able to obtain the experience and had difficulty in training courses (due to lack of interpreting support). Often there were multiple job experiences before finding something worthwhile.

Well after obtaining my HND in building studies and then going on to do my degree, which I pulled out of because of interpreters problems. I went on to do a course through Bristol Council to become a Housing Surveyor. The two-year course was going well. I had started applying for jobs but at that time there was a recession and many places were making redundancies, which was very frustrating, as I wanted to find a job. So I decided to change direction and became a teacher's assistant at School. Although it was a massive change, I have really enjoyed working in a signing environment ...(Deaf under 35)

One of the problems in getting a job or applying for a new job was the English in the application forms and preparing the CV. This appeared as a theme only for Deaf people.

Because application forms are so heavily English based they are hard for deaf people. I have had to struggle on a few occasions - just struggling with what the question is requiring from me. (Deaf over 35)

I used to think the old application forms were really quite easy as the questions were very repetitive, there was a standard format; age, etc, etc. But now it's quite difficult, as you have to talk about why you want the job etc. That is quite hard to convey, so I tend to do a rough draft show it to a friend and have my English corrected then send it off. (Deaf over 35)

Typically Deaf people are discouraged by open ended questions or where a personal statement has to be made. It is in that area that their difficulties with English might be most obvious.

### ***Independence***

The HOH respondents seemed unaware of the possibility of support at work. In some cases, they claimed "I can cope", as if this was the desirable situation. But other HOH disagreed

...it is incredible how much we are doing a disservice to ourselves by being too proud to ask for help. For instance in my present job - during the first month, I had several tries at getting equipment or help that I needed, but I was probably too proud to ask the company for more help (HOH)

Typically, Deaf people talk about their experiences of going to college without interpreters and being unaware of services which could be offered. There seems to have been little preparation by schools in this respect. One young Deaf person said:

I didn't get any advice from school at all I did everything independently. The course, interpreter provision, everything. I just went off to a college not knowing much, surrounded by hearing people! I think the schools should prepare you for entering into the hearing world and also advising you as to what is on offer. I think if I had this, maybe I would have chosen a better course, had a better career and perhaps had a better way of life maybe?

Hard-of-hearing people often try to hide their hearing loss in order to maintain their independence.

I lost over 50% of hearing at age of 14 - didn't like being treated like a wally - and spent the next x number of years pretending I can hear everything (HOH)

Sometimes this assertion of independence had to be done by acknowledging the hearing loss – an issue for HOH people.

I find as a recently deafened adult, with no hearing, that it was not in my interest to try and hide the deafness; it was too obvious. I needed a speedtext operator in job interviews. I tried to get the upper hand in interviews by saying, don't concentrate on the deafness, look at what I achieved; I can do this and that because I am deaf not an idiot (HOH)

It is not surprising that self esteem is of great importance and both Deaf and HOH.

### ***Interpreters***

Inevitably, the accounts of job problems came around to interpreters.

I remember a time when I needed to go to a meeting about my pension. Human resources promised me that I would have an interpreter provided for this meeting that I had to attend. I remember asking someone about my interpreter and but I was told to go into the meeting as the interpreter would be along shortly. Well I had no interpreter because someone forgot to book them. So I sat in a meeting not knowing anything about the new changes to my pension scheme. Many times they have promised to provide an interpreter but have not delivered, I normally have to make do with writing things down. It's really impossible for me to get an interpreter! (Deaf over 35)

Typically, Deaf people complain about lack of interpreters, the cost, the poor quality of the translated information and even the behaviour. While older Deaf people usually had had to do without interpreters (all through their working lives), the younger Deaf people had used

interpreters in college and expected them in job interviews. Lack of interpreters made everything more difficult – the interviews, the training, the meetings and the job itself.

The lack of interpreters and poor communication led one participant to this simple life plan.

In the future I want to be out of work and tucked up in bed! It's been such hard work. Communication is virtually impossible! I just nod my head even though I don't know what they are talking about. I just want the peace. I know they laugh at me but I don't care. I just want to hurry up and get out of there and spend the rest of my life in bed with my beer. (Deaf over 35)

This apparently humorous image hides what are deep seated feelings about the loss of interaction. One person felt his education was to blame.

My supervisor and myself could not communicate with each other. But if I think about it, I don't think attending a hearing school really helped me to prepare for the hearing world. I should have been allowed to have a chat, like my hearing colleagues, but my way of communicating was mistaken and judged unfairly. I was not treated the same as others. My supervisor and I hated each other! I remember my last day there my supervisor came up to me and said I would not have any success in life... Of course I just ignored her. (Deaf over 35)

I feel my oral education really made a mockery out of me, when I tried to talk to people they didn't understand my voice. So then I was forced into a situation of having to write things down. Often people would say to another person what is she trying to say? It was really embarrassing. (Same person Deaf over 35)

The ideas expressed are very common among Deaf people.

### ***Deaf awareness***

Often people mention situations being deaf-friendly or people being Deaf aware. By this they mean a number of things – the facial expression used when greeting, the consideration in making sure the person understands even if it requires repetitions or writing down, simplifying the interaction and/or the paperwork and so on. One HOH person thought there was a process of educating the employers which could be done personally.

What I'm hoping is that I will manage to educate my employer to ensure that I just don't rot in my job that I'm given support to enable me to grow with it. More training, um, improving my skills, in order to be able to be promoted to bigger more responsible position. So, for instance, during my induction, where we were introduced to various parts of the company, some people were speaking very clearly, and I could understand them, but there were instances when it was just a sheer waste of time because they didn't make any effort to try and speak clearly. So that I could follow ... yeah ... unfortunately, when I returned from induction, there was still a pile of work waiting for me on my desk that I had to get through! (HOH)

There was some discussion among the young Deaf about the need to educate others in the workplace. It was pointed out that Access to Work might pay, although there was a concern about being singled out or it affecting other people's work. One person was unsure about the outcomes.

Now at my new job, Deaf Awareness Training is being given to my firm, it's a big firm, but only members from my department will attend. .... meeting those who have gone on the courses is a nightmare!! The over exaggerated facial expressions and gestures! (Deaf over 35)

However, there were other examples of major problems at work in relations:

I think some of the frustrations I have experienced in the past have been around not passing on information...people always say I'll tell you later and never do... And I hate it when people want to get your attention and as they are frustrated that you can't hear them shouting at you, they resort to throwing things at your head. I had to put up with a lot of discrimination whilst I was in the building industry. (Deaf over 35)

Another said

We were divided up into teams of six and I was the only deaf person out of around 30 hearing people. At times I would stop working and ask others what was being said in the office. (Through pen and paper) I would always get in trouble for this and would be accused of not getting on with my work. (Deaf over 35)

There were other examples of lack of consideration for Deaf employees

I started my current job about a year ago and I can remember we were all outside when I looked up everyone had gone...I checked my clock it wasn't break time of any sort then I looked around and saw all the men were over at the office. Some were staring back at me but because no one had asked me to follow I stayed where I was....when they returned I asked what had been discussed that I was aware I had missed...I got a summary of a twenty minute conversation and was just told our contracts would be extended indefinitely...but that was all. (Deaf over 35)

HOH were more likely to assert themselves.

Well there is no use in staying silent ... if you feel you are being unfairly treated. But the way you put it across is very important; you have to keep on - you have to ... really have to keep on about it ... You need to get it in the public arena so that a lot of people know about this problem - and when they realise it may apply to them as they get older - they will see something is done to improve matters for all. (HOH)

Hard-of-hearing people tended to be more knowledgeable in regard to disability issues and in relation to procedures to deal with problems (because they can read more about it) while Deaf people tend to have to complain generally.

### ***Boring or limited jobs***

Another recurring theme was the quality of work which Deaf people were offered – Deaf people get poorer jobs or jobs which are boring.

I left school and attended college because I thought I wanted to be an accountant so I went to work in an accountancy office. It was so boring I felt it had all been such a waste of time. (Deaf under 35)

... I work in a pharmacy and we are supposed to have a rota - making hand cream and medicines - doing ward boxes - of pills - and another part was using machine that puts the pills in foil ... it was complex machine with different size pills; there was a lot involved. I was a dab hand at that. I didn't like work ...but ... I got lumbered with doing it all the time, because I was deaf, and I concentrated more. I put out more pills and was doing a better job of it than the rest of the people - that was where deafness became a discrimination. (HOH)

It is commonly reported by participants that Deaf people are good workers and are able to concentrate when others are distracted (by sound). However, that may mean that Deaf people are thought to be appropriate for work in noisy environments or in repetitive jobs.

### ***Access to Work***

Access to Work is the government scheme for assessment and provision for disabled people in the workplace. It has great benefits although it identifies the Deaf (or disabled) person as the focus of the problems and provides supports to those needs instead of analysing the aspects of the job or employer's systems which are discriminatory. It is not a particularly complex scheme but there remains a good deal of confusion and lack of understanding of how to use it. One HOH person said that

For me it took a long time to really understand what Access to Work means ... because it was never explained before ... you feel no control ... nothing ... no communication with deaf people about access to work, usually someone has told you about it, but then you can feel more assertive, speak up (HOH)

Another person increasingly felt a need for support without seeing it as an issue for Access to Work.

In my company like now, I feel some difficulty because I'm deaf; my manager wants me to have more responsibility, interacting with more people ... but he doesn't talk to me about it - I am aware that there are some areas where I'm held back professionally

Younger Deaf were also often in the dark on this scheme, saying that they had recently found out or that they had met people who knew nothing about it. One person was reassuring:

ATW provides you with lots of things you have no need to feel embarrassed about it, you can get a pager fire alarm etc. If a fire goes off you don't need to rely on anyone, you just leave the building. It's simple you just say I need blah, blah, blah and they will provide you with it and that is all. (Deaf under 35)

However, there seemed also to be problems for HOH people to deal with the system.

I have ... colleague Dan who is also deaf and has been working for the company for 4 years already. I asked whether he applied for Access to Work and he said, what??? ... he couldn't be bothered. In the same way he didn't do anything about trying to apply for the disability living allowance, so again it seems that complacency and pride seem to be our biggest enemies. (HOH)

Throughout there was a sense that the HOH were more able to influence change than the Deaf people, who typically felt powerless to correct the problems they experienced, even when it was protected by DDA.

### ***Money and Promotion***

Usually Deaf people believe they earn less than hearing people. On average they are right. One can argue that this is because they have less responsible jobs, but it can also be because they have difficulty with the promotion process.

I do think hearing people earn more than deaf people. eg. I see some people who are doing the same job as me, then they get promoted very quickly...I seem to be stuck in the same position...deaf people just get pushed to the back of the queue when it comes to promotional opportunities. Now I just accept it that my path is the long and difficult one, I just try to be pleased for other hearing people when they are excited about moving up the ladder... But I know we deaf people are always passed over for career opportunities. I just let them get on with it, as I know I'm growing too old for it all now anyway. (Deaf over 35)

It is clearly very difficult – on the one hand, Deaf people are just as competent as hearing people, but promotion often means becoming a supervisor and monitoring and interacting with more people. This may be more difficult for a Deaf person unless there are systems in place to support the process. Often this is not the case and this affects the choice of the person who takes on the role. Deaf people are excluded.

### ***Feelings in the workplace***

For many, the workplace creates stress and produces uncertain outcomes. It is necessary for Deaf people to have different work patterns or to take time out.

I think you need to take a break and get away from the pressures regularly. It should not be ... where's she gone? She should be here doing this ... if you come to the end of your energy and can't pay attention anymore, you need to go and rest, take a break, without having people say you are not pulling your weight. (HOH)

One HOH copes by becoming aloof:

.... for instance I cannot hear phone or voice, therefore I take everything at face value ... which means that sometimes I may come across as a cold, calculating, android!!!! - and also because I'm busy, in my work, and cannot hear the gossip! - I really feel sort of excluded. (HOH)

Within the sessions, people talked only fleetingly about their feelings and we did not probe these too deeply. It is quite predictable what the experiences are in the workplace, mostly on the negative side – frustration, anger with often self-defeating outcomes.

I lost my hearing 3 years ago ... when I went back to work, they asked me if I needed anything; I said I want a pager to help with the fire alarm - 3 1/2 years later no pager ....when I say I need help they put obstacles in the way -.... Yesterday I was banned from working on my own; someone complained and so I had an argument with them. If they ban me from the post room, they will have to ban me from the toilet on my own or going to another building. If they did what they promised, none of this would be necessary - the stress would not exist!!!! I also was told if I don't like it, I can take the door. There are others happy to do my job. If I take this to the DDA board I can't prove it unless in writing!!!! (HOH)

For signing Deaf people the frustration is considerable.

.... quite recently staff members have chosen not adhere to the rule of speaking one at a time, although I have reminded my colleagues on many occasions. So I asked my interpreter to walk out of the meeting and I also left out of frustration. (Deaf over 35)

These public displays are relatively rare but even so, in many firms Deaf people are seen as difficult and bad-tempered.

### *In future*

There was some optimism expressed by the older Deaf people.

I used to think I wanted to work as a policeman, doctor or aeroplane pilot...but then I knew it was impossible...I am deaf and there are a lot of barriers you have to fight.... limitations are placed upon your options, to working in a an office, etc etc. However that was how it used to be but with improvements in technology and access improving, perhaps deaf people can do all those jobs? (Deaf over 35)

Positive comments came from the HOH.

I have deaf support at college ... I have hearing support and I have note takers. I would never done the course without these helpers .... last year, I was adult learner of the year for south west; without help from tutors and hearing support I wouldn't have made it... (HOH)

However, the positive statements were few and far between.

On the basis of the experiences of Deaf people, we can see that there remain huge problems and dissatisfaction. Although there is great pressure to find good stories or examples of good practice, the discussions with Deaf people and HOH people do not allow us to point to real examples of enlightened working conditions. There is quite a lot still to be done to make the workplace fair for those who do not hear well.