



Attitudinal and Environmental Barriers for person who are deaf

Workshop: Assumptions and Expectations Concerning People Who Are Deaf

Attitudinal and Environmental Barriers for persons who are deaf.

The following writing summarizes a chapter called “Considerations in the acquisition of employment” James. J. DeCaro, Patricia A. Mudgett-DeCaro, and Douglas D. Noble. I have a copy of the entire chapter. While it focuses upon employment, most of the thoughts can apply equally to educational settings.

Potential Barriers to employment

DeCaro (1980) and DeCaro and Egeleston-Dodd (1982), identified two general classes of barriers that can impede the acquisition of a job by a deaf person: *environmental and attitudinal*.

Environmental barriers are those physical or structural impediments to accessing employment. Included in this category would be such impediments as telephones, instruction manuals, audible fire signals, and the like.

Attitudinal barriers are those perceptions regarding deafness, real or imagined, that mitigate against a deaf person acquiring employment. There may be no impediment to acquisition of a particular job other than the attitude, of an employer, rehabilitation counselor, parent, or a deaf person [teachers too], that deaf people are not suited for the job.

Attitudinal and environmental barriers are confronted by deaf people early in their career development. The attitudes of parents, teachers, counselors, and significant others has a strong influence on how deaf people define themselves and their capabilities.

A measure was developed by DeCaro (DeCaro, Evans, & Dowaliby, 1982) to identify attitudes of teachers and parents in England toward advising deaf people about their careers and this was later modified and applied in Italy and South Africa [it has also been used in India, Israel, and Sweden most recently]. *In all three of the original countries,*

“Safety and communications appeared to play an important role in the guidance that parents and teachers provide to deaf people who are considering preparing for a career.”

“Safety. Despite the concerns there is a documented history of deaf people working very successfully and safely in a variety of occupations. For example, a study in 1948 by the Bureau of Labor Statistics showed that workers with impairments were as safe as other workers. Also for workers in heavy metal fabrication factories and the aerospace industry there was no difference in injuries on the job between deaf and hearing workers.. Several other studies showed superior work by deaf employees for both job performance and attendance. Thus the safety records are important to know.

NTID has a manual recommending various accommodations that can make the workplace safer. Safety tips were 1. set up a buddy system for emergencies 2. determine which sounds need to be translated into visual or tactile signals and acquire the devices, 3. notify security personnel when a deaf employee is working at night or on holidays or the like.

“Communication. First it is important to understand the nature of the workplace [or educational place] and the kind and amount of communication that occurs there. A study of the “communication demographics” varies from occupation to occupation..analysis of the type and amount of communication that occurs 1. what percent are initiated by the employee versus others, 2. what percent with employees in the same department versus another one, 3. own workplace versus another’s, 4. one to one versus small group versus large group, and 5. percent using telecommunication and computers.

New technology such as TDDs, electronic messaging, FAX , and pagers can provide deaf persons with full access to communication through the telephone systems.

Most communication in the workplace has been shown to be one-to-one. This is good to know because it is an easier way to communicate with a deaf person since the communication can be accommodated to fit the needs of the individuals. Several studies have shown that the deaf employees are very flexible in using a wide variety of special strategies for communication (speech reading, voice, writing, sign, finger spelling, and gesturing). Also they used humor, taught some simple signs to co-workers, taught co-workers to speak slowly and clearly and to face them, taught co-workers to repeat messages as needed, and finding a key co-worker to serve as a communication mediator or to be sure the deaf person got the whole message.

Small and large group settings require some planning. Interpreters are a great help if available. Notetaking by a co-worker or boss who writes detailed and clear notes is very helpful and can allow the deaf worker not only to understand and participate during the meeting, but also to have notes afterwards to check. Often the deaf worker sits down after a meeting to clear up any questions.

Language and social issues:

For many deaf people English (or the language of the country) is not easy to master well. This means that sometimes their abilities or intelligence are underrated. Testing that is based upon written language may give the wrong impression.

Sometimes misunderstandings occur because of cultural misunderstandings. For example, sign language requires the use of air space and appropriate facial expressions which are required for the communication of the message. However, in the United States, sometimes such arm movements and facial expression are interpreted by hearing people as “out of control”, or “very emotional”. In contrast, deaf people often refer to hearing people as “cold” or “dull” because they have so little body or facial movement and it is hard to fully understand the subtle messages that are carried in the voice only. It is very important for teachers and employers to discuss their thoughts and assumptions with deaf people or others who can help to catch any misunderstandings that are occurring.

Restructuring versus modification.

Job or task restructuring means changing the job duties itself. That is often very difficult to do. However modification means changing the way work is done, not the actual duties to perform. The focus is upon the task, not how the task is done. This applies to jobs as well as to schoolwork. There needs to be a partnership between teachers/ employers and the deaf persons, as well as rehabilitation counselors.

NTID has a National Center on Employment of the Deaf which establishes partnerships with employers for educational purposes, and to facilitate the entry of deaf individuals into new work places. NTID also works with deaf students in helping them to prepare for work, including mock interviews, going over resumes with them, teaching them how to seek jobs, and how to fill out applications. Thus there are people who help the deaf individuals learn the skills that are expected for getting and keeping jobs.

Teachers and deaf individuals need to present the deaf persons to employers on the basis of their abilities rather than on the basis of pity or employer responsibility or requirements to hire a person who is deaf. Therefore the stress is on what the deaf person can do, not what they cannot do, and upon creative ways to accommodate their work.

Almost any occupation or task can be made accessible to a deaf person who has the intelligence and ability to do the job. For example, one profoundly deaf person became a telephone installer. He carried a business card which said “My name is Z, station installation technician. I am totally deaf. I am here to do the work you requested. Please show me what you would like done”. He then gives the customer a pad and pencil to exchange messages. Secondly, the test kit set was modified to use small lights to show Z what sounds/signals were coming in. Thirdly, he was given a portable TDD to use to communicate from out in the field with departments at the main office. No other special

accommodations were needed. He is expected to meet the same quality and work objectives as all other installers..and he has done better.

Conclusion

Barriers both environmental and attitudinal prevent deaf people from achieving what they can do in many cases.

Work or study sites can be studied to understand better what the actual requirements are, and then to create ways to address or accommodate any concerns or difficulties that a deaf person might encounter there.

Too often people who work with deaf persons underestimate their abilities and do things “for” them instead of working “with” deaf persons to achieve their goals and potential. The deaf person should be provided with the opportunity to assume all the responsibilities he or she can achieve. The deaf person needs to be a partner, not an object of charity.

Teachers and other professionals, who work with deaf students or workers, can be helpful bridges between the deaf person and others through education, training, and example.

Deaf people are people first, and deaf second. They should be approached from an “ability” rather than “disability” perspective.