

# ORC Global Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

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## The Deaf-friendly Workplace: A Primer

*The third in our series on understanding disabilities reviews the terminology of deafness, issues faced by deaf and hard-of-hearing people in the workplace, and possible accommodations.*

### The Definition of Deaf<sup>1</sup>

When written with a lowercase “d,” *deaf* means an inability to hear well enough to use hearing as a means of processing information. *Hard of hearing* (HOH) describes people who have mild to moderate hearing loss but still have enough hearing to use it for communication purposes.

Deaf with a capital D is a cultural term, rather than an audiological one. As defined by Carol Padden and Tom Humphries in *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (1988), *Deaf* refers ‘to a particular group of deaf people who share a language—American Sign Language (ASL)—and a culture.’ According to Padden and Humphries, Deaf culture is more than “a camaraderie with others who have a similar physical condition.” Like other cultures, Deaf culture is a product of history. It may be transmitted through the generations and is expressed through rituals, stories, a rich, nuanced language, and social encounters. Members hold shared beliefs about their identity, values, and connection to the larger society.

The terminology can be confusing since a hard-of-hearing person may identify with Deaf culture and a deaf person may not. For the rest of this memo, we will be using the audiological designations of deaf and hard of hearing, or D/HOH for short.

Several other frequently used terms are found offensive by most D/HOH people, particularly deaf and dumb, deaf-mute, and hearing-impaired. *Deaf and dumb* implies both silence and stupidity. D/HOH people do not consider themselves silent by any means, even though some may communicate without sound. *Deaf-mute* similarly suggests voicelessness. This is technically inaccurate, since most deaf and hard of people have working vocal cords. More to the point, they are capable of communication. *Hearing impaired* sounds to many hearing people like a safe, inoffensive term, and perhaps not as harsh as *deaf*, but many D/HOH folks resent the implication that hearing is the desirable state and not to hear is to be impaired.

### The Deaf-Friendly Workplace

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<sup>1</sup> “What is the Difference Between a Deaf and a Hard of Hearing Person?” and “What is Wrong with the Use of these Terms: ‘Deaf-mute,’ ‘Deaf and dumb,’ or Hearing-impaired?” National Association of the Deaf website, <http://www.nad.org/issues/american-sign-language/community-and-culture-faq>

Sara Geballe, a diversity consultant specializing in creating deaf-friendly workplaces, describes such a company as one that makes an effort to make D/HOH customers and employees comfortable by providing technical accommodations, training to hearing colleagues, and necessary services. Among her suggestions are including deaf awareness in diversity training, teaching receptionists and coworkers rudimentary signs, and having a TTY phone (see below) and relay service.

United Parcel Service is a company Geballe considers a successfully deaf-friendly workplace. UPS has hired a fulltime Deaf Communication Specialist, a hearing graduate of the American Sign Language and Interpreting Institute of Seattle who is responsible for recruiting deaf employees and coordinating job accommodations. She also provides on-site orientations for the new deaf employee's work group. Safeco Insurance Co. offers on-site sign language classes on company time. Washington Mutual Bank turned deaf-friendliness to business advantage by hiring "TTY Bankers" to help deaf customers, many of whom have opened accounts at the bank as a result. "The deaf community is tightly knit," says Geballe. "Word spreads quickly as to which businesses are welcoming and supportive of deaf people, and which are not."<sup>2</sup>

The National Technical Institute for the Deaf's Center on Employment offers detailed advice to employers on how to integrate deaf employees in the workplace.<sup>3</sup> They outline four primary steps:

### 1. *Strengthening your team*

Hiring more than one deaf individual gives the company built in mentors, trainers, and team leaders for new deaf hires and creates a positive image in the deaf community.

### 2. *Pre-employment*

- Make sure senior management will support them.
- Review job descriptions to make sure required skills are really job related
- Establish a TTY phone line in the HR or staffing department and include the number on business cards and employment-related materials.
- Train HR/staffing people to use the TTY effectively.
- Establish a 24-hour TTY job line.
- Expect the same quality of work from all employees.
- Before the interview, give deaf applicants organizational literature to review and a written itinerary. Inform the receptionist or secretary that a deaf applicant is expected. Ask the applicant if he or she would like an interpreter.

### 3. *New Employee Orientation*

- Before the new employee starts, prepare coworkers and meet with managers and supervisors to discuss the best ways to facilitate integration.

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<sup>2</sup> Sara L. Geballe., "Deaf-Friendly Workplace," *Pugent Sound Business Journal*, August 16, 1999,

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ntid.rit.edu/NCE/>

- Determine deaf employees' communication preferences and retain an interpreter, if appropriate, especially for the first day and for orientation sessions. (The Center for Employment's website offers guidelines for choosing interpreters.)
- On the first day, provide name tags for everyone.
- Familiarize the new deaf employees with the work environment, schedules and breaks, the facility, appropriate work behavior and dress code.
- Provide an organization chart and written policies.
- If possible, have an employee who knows sign language help out with orientation for D/HOH hires who use ASL.
- Give D/HOH employees benefits information to read before the benefits meeting.
- Introduce deaf employees to the benefits specialist personally.
- Use captioned films or videos, if available, for explaining benefits.
- Have an interpreter present at the benefits meeting
- Review the benefits booklet with D/HOH employees and make sure terminology is clear.

#### 4. *On the Job*

- To gain the attention of D/HOH employees, approach from the side or front so as not to startle them, consider using flashing lights and installing a light on the telephone to signal incoming calls, tap the desk or floor instead of using your voice.
- When training,
  - use demonstration and clear, concise written instructions
  - provide an outline of the training session
  - if captioned films and videos are not available, get scripts from the manufacturer and provide them for deaf employees in advance
  - allow extra time for communication and offer frequent breaks to mitigate visual fatigue from speechreading and watching the interpreter
  - assign someone who is willing to work one-on-one with deaf employees during the training period
  - provide equal access to regular training required for promotions
  - consider tailoring training to the specialized needs of deaf employees
- To Include D/HOH Employees in Workplace Networks and Grapevine
  - Include D/HOH employees in conversations, break activities, lunch
  - Make sure informal information usually conveyed through the grapevine is shared with D/HOH employees
  - Use memos or email to communicate details about social events
  - Ask deaf employees to organize social events
- To Ensure Safety
  - Use a buddy system to make sure deaf employees are alerted to

- emergencies
- Install flashing lights to work in conjunction with auditory alarms
- Review safety procedures (exits, alarms, buddy system, extinguishers, hazards, etc.) with D/HOH employees
- Use TTY or vibrating beepers to contact deaf employees in emergencies
- Notify security if deaf employees are alone in work areas
- Encourage deaf employees to wear specially colored hard hats in construction areas

### **Courtesies towards D/HOH Colleagues**

Making hearing colleagues aware of a few rules of etiquette will help facilitate the integration of D/HOH employees:

- Make sure deaf employees know the topic of conversation and cue them when the topic changes.
- Encourage deaf employees to let you know if your communication is unclear
- Be patient and prepared to repeat and rephrase information or use paper and pencil if necessary.
- Use facial expressions and body language to communicate the emotion of a message, such as displeasure or approval.
- Remove pencils, gum, and cigarettes from your mouth while speaking to someone who is deaf or hard of hearing
- Give D/HOH employees your full attention and make eye contact with them, watching their eyes to ensure understanding. (Don't depend on affirmative head nodding only.)
- Ask D/HOH employees to review key points of the conversation to ensure understanding.

In meetings or group situations,

- Ask D/HOH employees if they prefer an interpreter
- Let D/HOH employees determine the best seating in order for them to see the speaker and interpreter
- Assign a person to inform D/HOH employees of important public address announcements and/or use email as well.
- Point to the person who is speaking in a meeting
- Watch for signals that a D/HOH employees wishes to contribute to the discussion
- Make sure one person speaks at a time
- Don't pace while giving a presentation or talk with your back to the audience while writing on a blackboard or flip chart
- Speak clearly and slowly
- Use visual aids such as flip charts, written agendas, handouts, etc.

### **Physical Environment and Technological Accommodations**

Physical environments that are well-lit and quiet are most conducive to good communications with D/HOH people. Reduce distractions such as background noise and movement and make sure lighting is good so lips, facial expressions, and/or signs are clearly visible. In meetings, use circular or semi-circular seating to allow the D/HOH employee to have a good view of everyone.

Equipment that can prove useful to D/HOH employees include computers and email, of course, as well as

- Assistive listening devices, which transmit to the D/HOH listener amplified sound from specific sources such as a radio, telephone, or public speaker
- Pagers with vibrating signals and digital displays
- Light signaling devices
- Teletypewriting devices (TTY), also known as telecommunications devices for the deaf (TTD), which permit D/HOH users to type messages that travel over the phone lines and appear on the recipient's TTY display screen.
- Message Relay Centers, which use a middleman to convert TTY messages to voice and vice versa so D/HOH and hearing people can speak to each other via the phone. For example, the D/HOH user types his or her message using a TTY device. An operator at the relay center calls the hearing party and reads the message, then types the response into a TTY for the D/HOH party.<sup>4</sup>
- TTY answering machines and TTY-compatible voicemail services
- Video conferencing
- Video Relay Interpreting, a conferencing computer application for making relay calls with the assistance of a certified sign language interpreter
- Computer-assisted notetaking that allows notes and graphics to be typed almost simultaneously with the meeting discussion and displayed on overhead projectors (This can be valuable to hearing participants as well.)

More information on these and other technologies is available from the NTID Center for Employment and the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). See the Resources section at the end of this memo for contact information.

### **Including Deaf Awareness in Diversity Programs**

The World Federation of the Deaf, an international organization composed of 120 national associations of the deaf, sponsors Deaf Awareness Week in cooperation with the UN every September. This is a natural time to hold deaf awareness events. The National Association of the Deaf sells a *Deaf Awareness Kit* for \$10 that includes a planning guide, information sheets, and proclamations for officials.

Deaf awareness events might include historical or art exhibits, performances, lectures, or film festivals, to name a few ideas. The objectives would be to help members of the organization

- differentiate between misconception and fact about deafness and deaf culture
- learn about types, degrees, and causes of hearing loss

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<sup>4</sup> “What is a TTY?” Captions.com, <http://www.captions.com/%2ftty.html>

- become familiar with terminology related to deafness
- learn about the various forms of sign language and other means of communication
- understand the functions of assistive devices used by D/HOH people
- better understand the interpreter's role
- learn about educational programs and support services available to D/HOH people
- understand the psychosocial aspects of deafness
- learn tips for communications with D/HOH people
- recognize that deaf people can do anything except hear

Dates for Deaf Awareness Week over the next few years are

September 23-29, 2001  
 September 22-28, 2002  
 September 21-27, 2003

### Resources

The following organizations can provide valuable information and assistance to employers:

#### *In the US:*

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)  
 10810 Rockville Pike  
 Rockville, MD 20852  
 1-800-638-9255 (voice or TTY); 1-301-897-8682 (voice or TTY)  
 website: <http://www.asha.org>

National Association of the Deaf  
 814 Thayer Avenue  
 Silver Spring, MD 20910  
 1-301-587-1788 (voice); 1-301-587-1789 (TTY)  
 website: <http://www.nad.org>

National Captioning Institute  
 5203 Leesburg Pike  
 Falls Church, VA 22041  
 1-703-998-2400 (voice/TTY)  
<http://www.ncicap.org>

National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID)  
 Center on Employment  
 Rochester Institute of Technology  
 1 Lomb Memorial Drive  
 Rochester, NY 14623  
 1-716-475-6205 (voice/TTY)  
 website: <http://www.ntid.rit.edu>

***In the UK:***

Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID)  
19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL  
Telephone: 020 7296 8000  
Textphone: 020 7296 8001  
Fax: 020 7296 8199.  
[www.RNID.org.uk](http://www.RNID.org.uk)

RNID Northern Ireland  
Wilton House, 5 College Square North, Belfast BT1 6AR  
Telephone or textphone: 028 9023 9619  
Text answerphone: 028 9031 2033  
Fax: 028 9031 2032  
Email: [information.nireland@rnid.org.uk](mailto:information.nireland@rnid.org.uk)

RNID Cymru Wales  
16 Cathedral Road, Cardiff CF11 9LJ  
Telephone: 029 2033 3034  
Textphone: 029 2033 3036  
Fax: 029 2033 3035  
Email: [rnidcymru@rnid.org.uk](mailto:rnidcymru@rnid.org.uk)

RNID Scotland  
Empire House, 131 West Nile Street, Glasgow, G1 2RX  
Telephone: 0141 341 5330  
Textphone: 0141 341 5347  
Fax: 0141 354 0176  
Email: [rnidscotland@rnid.org.uk](mailto:rnidscotland@rnid.org.uk)

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