

Creating a Deaf-friendly Workplace

Written by Susan Grant



Sign 

*Promoting Deaf Wellness
and Independent Lives*

Published by *Sign*.

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About *Sign* and the Reaching Deaf Minds campaign

Sign currently provide supported living, advocacy, outreach and day care activities for any deaf person in need of emotional support.

We have been very concerned for some time that 40 percent of all deaf people, as opposed to 25 percent of hearing people, currently experience a mental health problem at some point in their lives.

In consequence we now actively campaign to reduce the likelihood of deaf people developing preventable mental health problems in the UK, through working with health and deaf organisations, generic mental health charities, statutory bodies and service providers.

Sign is the only registered charity whose work is dedicated to the field of mental health and deafness in the UK. Our mission is to promote Deaf Wellness and independent lives.

Currently, *Sign* is expanding its work to root out some of the injustice and unfairness that pervades the lives of Deaf people. For many years we have provided residential care and day services to Deaf people who are already ill, but now we want to tackle the downward spiral towards dependency and likely incidence of mental health problems for other Deaf people.

We are therefore now extending our work to promote deaf wellness and independent lives. Deaf wellness means an absence of negative debilitating stress, having opportunities for self-realisation and satisfying life experiences.

Looking into the emotional needs of Deaf people in various employment settings, is our next step to enabling a culture of inclusion and emotional support for Deaf people in work. By doing this we can expect to cut the current high incidence of mental health problems experienced by the deaf community.

The findings of our recent research project, *Reaching Deaf Minds – In the Workplace*, has most certainly highlighted the grave need for supportive measures to be taken in today's workplace environments. These measures should ensure the safeguarding of deaf people's physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. By doing this, organisations, and ultimately our country, can enjoy the benefit of having the full contribution of deaf employees. They in turn will benefit from environments which embrace all the knowledge, skills and talents they have to offer as deaf people.

Reaching Deaf Minds – In the Workplace, led by Sign's Deputy Chief Executive, Matthew James and researcher Susan Grant, is the start of a positive process for employers to go beyond the Disability Discrimination Act and lend their expertise to creating a Deaf-friendly Workplace. Ultimately Sign would wish to see a Deaf Employment Charter created to support its findings. With this in mind we are creating this pamphlet entitled 'Creating a Deaf-friendly Workplace'. This will serve to support employers and employees alike, until such time as new government guidelines are established.

Steve Powell
Chief Executive

The good news about employing deaf people

Sign's positive recruitment of Deaf people has enabled them to build a diverse national workforce employing Deaf people from all over the country. Currently, from a total of approximately 100 people, almost half of our entire workforce is deaf. Most of these are native sign language users and regard themselves as having their own community, culture and language.

Our reason for bringing on board deaf people was not born out of tokenism and sympathy, rather from sound business common sense.

Deaf people can be great workers. With the right support they can offer boundless enthusiasm, stamina, concentration, commitment and loyalty. The difference and richness they bring enhances the abilities of the workforce as a whole.

Employing deaf people is a step forward for your organisation. It shows your ability to assess what qualities and skills people are able to bring. This pamphlet has been created to alleviate any anxiety and confusion organisations may have in relation to how one should treat and support deaf people in the workplace.

What Sign's research *Reaching Deaf Minds – In the Workplace* (2005) has identified, is that making a working environment hospitable to someone who is Deaf is often easy and not nearly as expensive and technically frightening as employers often assume.

The more positive supportive measures you put in place, the more your deaf employee will feel emotionally and physically stable, included and equal to their hearing colleagues. Without this support they are more likely to suffer from negative occupational stress, depression and anxiety.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) commissioned research has indicated that:

- about half a million people in the UK experience work-related stress at a level they believe is making them ill;
- up to 5 million people in the UK feel 'very' or 'extremely' stressed by their work; and
- work-related stress costs society about £3.7 billion every year (at 1995/6 prices).

HSE's key messages on stress are:

- Work-related stress is a serious problem. Tackling it effectively can result in significant benefits for organisations;
- There are practical things organisations can do to prevent and control work-related stress;
- The law requires organisations to take action (www.hse.gov.uk).

Occupational stress is not only caused by excessive workload and therefore detrimental. In Deaf terms it can develop from feelings of isolation, exclusion, lack of appreciation, direction and interaction with one's colleagues. This pamphlet will aid you as employers to ensure you do the right thing by your deaf employees.

What's in it for you?

If you want a welcoming workplace where deaf employees can feel they belong and are able to contribute from day one, this is the guide for you!

Ensuring your workplace is 'Deaf-friendly' starts from the top down. The ethos of your organisation must be one of inclusion and valuing one's workers. It makes good business sense to have a workplace where mutual respect and sincere commitment to embracing diversity is a number one priority.

Traditional methods of recruiting, hiring and promotion will often limit your access to a diverse pool of skilled potential employees. As an employer, you want to be effective and efficient. To achieve optimal results in your organization, you want to reach as wide a pool of qualified and skilled candidates as possible, including deaf people.

This guide is intended to assist you as employers, managers and/or

human resources departments. Its objective is to provide some facts and practical advice on employment and to explain the steps that can be taken in order to facilitate the inclusion of deaf employees into your workforce. We will be specifically looking at the emotional, communication and environmental needs of deaf employees. You will also find some suggestions on how to do the right thing by your potential, or current, deaf employees. Later on we will give you information about what financial help the government gives to employers of deaf people. See the section entitled 'Access to Work Scheme'.

**'Accommodation is not a courtesy – it is the law'
(Barrier Free Employers 1997).**

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) refers to 'reasonable adjustment'. This means employers have an obligation to take appropriate steps to eliminate discrimination against employees, prospective employees or clients resulting from a rule, practice, or barrier that has, or can have, an adverse impact on individuals with disabilities. The DDA now applies to people who are suffering from a mental health problem (Disability Discrimination Act 1995). Therefore employees' mental and emotional wellbeing is now just as important as their physical wellbeing.

Reasonable adjustment equally does not mean that we offer the same adjustments to all disabled people. For example not all deaf people require sign language interpreters; not all blind people read Braille; and not all people with physical disabilities use a wheelchair. Many deaf people can lipread and prefer to use what is termed a 'lipspeaker' during company meetings, or have a notetaker. Without proper communication and assessment of needs, effective accommodation in employment cannot be achieved.

Becoming Deaf-friendly

Becoming Deaf-friendly is more about attitude than about special skills. These are some of the things you can do as employers, to ensure your deaf employees feel fully included in your workforce.

A few simple questions will aid you to decide how Deaf-friendly your workplace is:

- Would a deaf employee feel welcome and have a sense of belonging in your workplace?
- Does your organisation have accessible communication systems, such as textphone, mobile text facility, email?
- Do you consider communication to be a two-way street?
- Would a deaf person be socially integrated into your company?
- Would deaf staff be considered for promotion and training opportunities as readily as hearing staff?
- Do you have policies and procedures to combat discrimination?

Before commencing work and during the recruitment and induction process

- Make your job competitions inclusive and accessible. Use your existing recruitment channels, but post your employment opportunities in alternate formats and circulate employment advertisements with Deaf organisations.
- consider offering job experience placements, or recruitment on a trial basis – this allows the deaf person to show their talents and skills, without obligation for either party.

- job descriptions sent to candidates should be detailed, accurate and up to date, with essential and non-essential duties differentiated.
- use the Disability Symbol (**two ticks**) in your job advertisements, to show that your organisation is positive about the recruitment and retention of disabled people.
- if your organisation has not been awarded the Disability Symbol, then contact the Job Centre for information.
- ensure you ascertain whether your prospective employee considers they have a hearing loss, or whether they see themselves as a Deaf person. This means the former will not necessarily be a sign language user and the latter may see themselves having a Deaf identity, and culture. Those with a Deaf identity see themselves as a language minority, not a member of the disabled community.
- ensure your new deaf employee is offered communication support throughout the interview process and during the induction period.
- ask any other deaf workers you know to advise you on how to improve access to the interview process and the workplace.
- once you make a job offer to your prospective deaf employee, ask them how you can support and include them when they start work. Have a review of how things are going a short while after they start work, as there may be other simple changes which would be of great benefit.
- you could also consider having a professional evaluation made of your workplace to see what, if any, reasonable adjustments might be needed to assist your new deaf employee to be able to perform well in their new job. Having adjustments made beforehand aids confidence and productivity once your deaf employee commences work.
- ensure deaf colleagues are given a list of in-house acronyms and their meanings, if possible before, or at the start of their employment.



- find out where you can book professionally approved sign language interpreters, if required, for situations which are critical to employee orientation, job training, performance evaluation, staff meetings and important social functions.

The contact numbers at the back of this guide will be a good starting point for you.

Successful communication

It is important to be patient and not to make your deaf colleague feel they are inconveniencing you. Having a willingness to communicate effectively with your deaf colleagues is far more important than being a fluent signer. Be flexible, creative and use whatever seems to work. Chatting with your deaf colleague can be easy and fun. It doesn't need lots of major and difficult changes to how you normally talk to people.

If possible, learn the alphabet in sign language and some basic signs related to work; use body language and facial expression; or miming actions. You can obtain free sign language alphabet cards from several organisations listed at the back of this pamphlet.

Consider setting up Deaf Awareness and Communication Tactics training for colleagues working alongside the deaf person, **before** they commence working with you. Conducting introductory sign language classes through break times are also worthy of thought. *Sign* has over 100 registered and accredited trainers and tutors based all over the U.K., so make good use of them.

Within the above training, ensure hearing colleagues are comfortable and knowledgeable about answering textphone calls, or calls via relay services. For information about services such as Typetalk the BT relay service and others, contact the numbers at the back of this pamphlet.

Getting started

- ensure your receptionists are comfortable in knowing how to make deaf people feel welcome – give them appropriate deaf awareness training including some simple signs like “hello”, “good morning”, “please take a seat”
- whoever welcomes your deaf colleague, or clients, should ensure they keep eye contact and speak clearly, but not too slowly, or exaggerate how you pronounce words
- if your deaf colleague is busy, attract their attention by gently tapping their shoulder or upper arm
- if you wish to attract your deaf colleague's attention across a room, then give a wave of your hand, switch the lights on and off, or stomp on the floor if you can make it vibrate
- give your deaf colleague constant eye contact and ensure your face is clearly lit
- stand away from a window and make sure your hair, or hands, aren't covering your mouth when you are speaking
- use some universal signs, for example:
 - ✓ if you don't know something shrug your shoulders and look puzzled
 - ✓ if everything is fine, do a 'thumbs up' sign, or the opposite if things are not so fine
 - ✓ drink; eat; cup of tea; cup of coffee
- wherever possible say the topic first and then point to what you are talking about
- avoid jargon



- ensure all new video, or DVD material has open or closed captioning and sign language translation
- where voice mail is generally used, ensure you send an email to your deaf colleague too, so they are not left out of the communication loop
- if you and your deaf colleague have access to MSN Chattertext facility, make use of it

Wellbeing and inclusion

For newcomers to the workplace, it would be worth finding one or two 'buddies' to help your new deaf colleague to become acclimatized to the workplace and social aspects of work. People who are open to being asked lots of questions and may already have some deaf awareness and/or sign language.



Other ways to enable inclusion and a sense of belonging are:

- use the notice board to post information about forthcoming business and social events
- book a sign language interpreter for both business and social occasions and, where appropriate, invite another deaf colleague along from another department
- take down the action points during meetings for them
- take time to have short regular informal feedback sessions with your deaf colleagues, to ensure they are informed of everything they need to know

- list helpful contact numbers/email addresses and give them a copy
- allow time for them to contribute during any discussions or meetings
- ask their opinions, about how access and inclusion could be improved for them
- ask them would they like an eye break during meetings – concentrating on lipreading, or watching an interpreter constantly, can be very tiring – remember deaf people cannot switch off and glance around the room during meetings as hearing people do
- during formal meals, use napkins to exchange notes
- ensure deaf colleagues are aware of wedding or birth announcements, staff changes, illness or holiday plans
- ensure your deaf colleagues know the in-house rules, e.g. buying cakes for everybody on birthdays
- inform your deaf colleague of other deaf people who work in the organisation, where they are based and also if there are any people who can sign near their work area
- take a look at some Deaf websites to learn a little about the community
- do be patient and approachable
- do review job demands and obtain feedback
- be sensitive to employees signs of stress and distress, and do something about it
- do have in-house policies to combat discrimination and bullying



Some things you should not do are:

- do not refuse permission to attend audiology, ENT (ear, nose and throat), or medical appointments relating to your employee's health
- do not ignore a deaf colleague simply because communication feels awkward or takes longer
- English is not the first language of a Deaf person, so never pretend to understand their written English if you clearly do not
- do not over exaggerate your lip pattern when speaking, or speak too slowly – just talk clearly and naturally
- never shout at a deaf person
- all information is important and deaf people should not be denied access because of inconvenience – therefore do not say “I will tell you later” when a deaf person asks you what has been said – try to give a brief explanation immediately
- don't give a deaf colleague a workspace facing a blank wall, or with their back to the door where they cannot see people approach them
- do not position the deaf person where they will suffer from background noise, which could interfere with their hearing aids, or be distracting, such as lots of people constantly walking to and fro in front of them
- do not turn out all the lights when showing a presentation, so the deaf person cannot lipread, or see the sign language interpreter

Any sign of a job? – Applying for work as a prospective deaf employee

Make use of your Disability Employment Adviser (DEA). They are usually based at the Job Centre and can help you in the following ways:

- find out about your abilities and the sort of job that would suit you
- put you in touch with potential employers
- arrange for communication support for your job interviews
- give you advice on Access to Work
- arrange job experience, or find you a job for a trial period
- offer you supported employment where appropriate

If you do not inform your prospective employer that you are deaf, this may well cause you problems during your interview, so let the organisation you are applying to know that you are deaf before your interview takes place. It is better to include this on your application form, or in an accompanying letter. If the application form has a section on disability, then fill it in. Always tell your prospective employer what you will need during your interview, e.g. a sign language interpreter, lipspeaker, speech-to-text operator, or loop system, etc. Also list on your application form any other needs you may have, e.g. wishing to have any information/job description in large print as you have an additional visual impairment, or if any information is available in sign language.

If it is a panel interview, then you may wish to have the seating arranged so you can see all panel members and interpreter at the same time, e.g. in a semi-circular shape.

If you are not successful in getting the job, you can ask for feedback. If you write to say the feedback will be helpful for future applications, then you are more likely to get a response.

If at any time you feel you have been discriminated against during the interview process, or during your employment, you can seek help



from the Disability Rights Commission. The contact details are listed at the back of this pamphlet, along with other useful contacts.

Support in the workplace – Access to Work scheme

Jobcentre Plus is a business within the Department of Work and Pensions. It can help people in applying for **Access to Work** and help in tackling some of the practical obstacles you may meet at work if you have a disability. The Jobcentre employs Disability Employment Advisers to support people with a disability and helps them find work.

Your Disability Employment Adviser can give you full information on whether you are eligible, and how, and where, to apply.

Access to Work (AtW) can help pay for:

- a communicator for deaf people during job interviews
- a reader at work, if you are blind or have a visual impairment
- special equipment (or adaptations to existing equipment) to suit your particular work needs
- alterations to premises or working environment
- a support worker, if you need practical help getting to work and during work time
- help towards the cost of getting to work if you are unable to use public transport

Forms are available from Access to Work Business Centres.

Applications must be made by the person with the disability. You can find information on the following website:

www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk

Funding available

The funding available depends on the employment status of the disabled individual at the time of application. Funding is for:

- **unemployed people starting a job and all self-employed people**
 - the programme will pay up to 100% of all approved costs
- **people changing jobs**
 - the programme will pay up to 100% of all approved costs
- **employed people who have been with the employer for six weeks or longer**
 - Access to Work will not make any contribution to costs below £300. Between £300 and £10,000, it will pay 80% of the cost over £300. Over £10,000 – it will pay 100% of the cost.
- **travel to work, communication support during your interview and a support worker**
 - the programme will pay up to 100% of all approved costs irrespective of employment status

How long the application takes depends on the type of support needs and how much it costs. The Disability Service Team will try to get the support in place as soon as possible. If there is likely to be a delay, the AtW Adviser will explore temporary solutions until a more permanent solution is found. Once AtW needs have been agreed, the employer is usually responsible for buying equipment and organising support. The employer then claims back the money from AtW.

AtW will approve help for as long as you need it, up to a maximum of three years. After that, help can be renewed under the rules of the scheme at that time. If your situation changes within the three year period (e.g. if your job changes or your needs change), you can ask your Disability Service Team to review your agreement.

Useful contacts

For Deaf Awareness and Communication Tactics Training you can contact *Sign Reaching Deaf Minds*, team directly, who are CACDP accredited and registered national providers of training. Their contact details are:

Sign, Reaching Deaf Minds

5 Baring Road, Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, HP9 2NB

Tel: 01494 687600

Textphone: 01494 687626

Fax: 01494 687622

E-mail: info@reachingdeafminds.org.uk

Website: www.reachingdeafminds.org.uk

British Deaf Association

E-mail: helpline@bda.org.uk

Website: www.bda.org.uk

Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People (CACDP)

Durham University Science Park, Block 4, Stockton Road,
Durham, DH1 3UZ

Tel: 0191 383 1155

Textphone: 0191 383 7915

Fax: 0191 383 7914

E-mail: durham@cacdp.org.uk

Website: www.cacdp.org.uk

The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) Helpline

Freepost MID 02164, Stratford-upon-Avon, CV37 9HY

Tel: 08457 622 633

Textphone: 08457 622 644

Fax: 08457 778 878

E-mail: enquiries@drc.-gb.org

Website: www.drc-gb.org

Jobcentre Plus

Website: www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk

RAD Advice Service

E-mail: advice@royaldeaf.org.uk

RAD Interpreting Service

The Pines, Lynderswood Farm, London Road, Braintree, Essex, CM77 8QN

Tel: 0870 774 3525

Textphone: 0870 774 3526

Fax: 0870 774 3527

Videophone: 0870 774 3528

E-mail: interpreting@royaldeaf.org.uk

RNID Information Line

19-23 Featherstone Street, London, EC1Y 8SL

Tel: 0808 808 0123

Textphone: 0808 808 9000

Fax: 020 7296 8199

E-mail: informationline@rnid.org.uk

Sense, National Deafblind and Rubella Association

11-13 Clifton Terrace, Finsbury Park, London, N4 3SR

Tel: 0207 272 9648

Fax: 0207 272 6012

E-mail: enquiries@sense.org.uk