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## COMMUNICATION NEEDS OF DEAF PEOPLE IN INDUSTRY

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### TRENDS AND ATTITUDES

Until the past decade opportunities for deaf people working within industry were severely restricted. Occupations were usually confined to such jobs as printing, sewing machine operation, and assembly production. Other opportunities were almost non-existent. However, within the past ten years an awareness of the handicapped population has evolved, partly due to national legislation, research, and education. For example, in 1973 the U.S. Congress passed Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act prohibiting discrimination on the basis of physical or mental handicap in every federally assisted program or activity in the country. Consciousness of interpreters as a resource was raised nationally in April 1977 with the passage of a final Section 504 regulation. Employers may not refuse to hire or promote qualified handicapped persons solely because of their disability. "Reasonable accommodation" may also have to be made to the person's handicap, where needed. The general employment provision also states that an employer may not reject an applicant simply because reasonable accommodation is necessary. Reasonable accommodation for deaf employees implies the possible use of interpreters, and the use of sign language by hearing employees.

A research study conducted by DuPont Corporation, the country's largest chemical firm, revealed that, "Those having impairments before they were hired are both a safe and good bet for any employer because they

show a higher degree of motivation toward good safety, attendance, job performance and job stability than those who became handicapped subsequent to hiring" (Wolfe, 1973). The study also revealed, "that the nature of the handicapped has no bearing on the level of safety, attendance or performance. DuPont's experience supports the belief that the utilization of the abilities of the handicapped is good business" (Wolfe, 1973).

Now, during the middle to late 1970s, deaf individuals are rapidly branching into numerous fields. Some are participating in short-term training programs to gain skills presently in demand. Enrollment of deaf students into two- and four-year colleges that provide support services has increased greatly within the past year. State and federal supported technical institutes are experiencing the same growth. The younger generation of deaf people are graduating from paraprofessional and professional technical training programs in careers such as business, computer programming and operations, engineering, allied health science, optical finishing, media production, photography, fine and applied arts, and social services. Some industries are recognizing the potential contribution of trained deaf people and are actively recruiting them for employment.

As result of research information, legislation, and trends toward upgrading the technical and professional skills of deaf people, the attitudes of employers are slowly changing in a positive direction toward hiring deaf indivi-

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duals. Within many large industries there is now the likelihood of seeing one or more deaf employees, and with their presence comes an awareness of deafness and curiosity about deaf people.

### COMMUNICATION MODES

Deaf workers have been requesting communication on the job that is comprehensive and on-going since the 1800's, but have been powerless. Some employers are evaluating their own present communication modes which can be demonstration, written messages, lipreading, sign language, and interpreting. These modes have varying degrees of effectiveness. Demonstrating how to perform a task and writing notes have been common methods of communication between hearing and deaf people. Demonstration is often adequate if the task is simple and specific, but it is limited in the possibilities for clarification and feedback. This method excludes other kinds of verbal information, thus handicapping the deaf individual even when he/she is capable of receiving such information. Writing a message can be an accurate way to exchange ideas because clearer thinking often goes into written words, but because it can be time consuming and cumbersome, a full explanation of ideas within the message is usually omitted. If the English language level of both communicators is similar, then a written message can be appropriate and sufficient. However, the assumption that both parties understand written English may be grossly inaccurate. Many deaf people communicate in their 'native language' of Ameslan (American Sign Language, which differs from English in syntax). Using a similar syntax in written communication may cause the meaning to be easily misconstrued, and the deaf individual's intellect is therefore underestimated by the hearing person.

Another communication mode used is lipreading. Only a small percentage of words can be distinguished on the lips, so in most cases, lipreading is difficult for both hearing and deaf people. Some deaf people can understand an unusually high percentage of the spoken word by lipreading, but these individuals are few in number. Expecting all deaf people to demon-

strate this ability is unrealistic. Communication solely through lipreading is, for many profoundly deaf individuals, virtually impossible.

A new and significant attempt is being made by some organizations to help deaf people adapt to hearing environments. Various companies are encouraging their personnel departments and supervisors, as well as all interested employees, to participate in sign language classes. These classes are conducted by deaf employees or qualified individuals within the company, and by community service organizations. Their purpose is to teach sign language and fingerspelling for everyday communication with co-workers. The returns of this method have by far exceeded the minimal cost and effort involved.

Tektronix, Inc., an electronics manufacturing company employing approximately 50 deaf persons in the Portland, Oregon area, is one of the forerunners in advocating company sign language classes, and has found this effort to have positive results. A spokesman for Tektronix feels that hearing people can share in the responsibility of full communication by using sign language when deaf people are in the immediate environment (Sloan, Note 1). When a deaf person can communicate with other people through sign language, some of the negative psychological effects of deafness (e.g., isolation) are eased, and the communication level is elevated. Within this company, the in-plant counselor has learned sign language, and can communicate directly with deaf employees if personal problems arise. Hearing employees in staff departments, those dealing with company benefits, and people in the personnel office have signing skills as well as access to an internal interpreter. With this support deaf applicants and employees have fewer communication problems. Deaf people are gratified and thrilled when a hearing person takes the effort to learn to use sign language. They usually have patience with beginning signers and are willing to help them develop their skills. Both Kodak and Xerox companies in Rochester, N.Y. are presently offering sign language classes to their employees.

Deaf people need and demand equal access to information. Additionally, deaf individuals

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wanting to contribute ideas and generally converse with management and co-employees need a communication link. Employers recognizing these needs, as well as their own, are looking to interpreters to effectively facilitate this process. Interpreting for deaf people requires proficiency in rendering spoken English into sign language, either verbatim (translating) or adapted to American Sign Language (interpreting), as well as "reversing" oral and manual communications into appropriate spoken English for hearing people. Ten years ago it was difficult in many places to find hearing people who were willing and able to perform interpreting services. Interest in the profession has gradually grown, and various kinds of training programs have developed resulting in increased numbers of interpreters today. The five communication modes discussed above are demonstration, written messages, lip-reading, sign language, and interpreting. The remainder of the paper focuses on the potential uses of interpreters in industry.

### INTERPRETERS IN INDUSTRY

Situations on the job requiring interpreting are usually short-term assignments related to such activities as occupational testing, job interviews, job orientation and training, reviews and appraisals, and meetings. Using an interpreter for periodic meetings is done by Tektronix, Inc. to create an environment where deaf employees can ask questions, air problems, find out about job openings, and have a feedback system to discuss printed information. These meetings make participation in the communication of ideas more effective for deaf employees through the use of internal interpreters. Using an interpreter in these situations can clarify job responsibilities, avoid misunderstandings, prevent future problems, open all communication channels, and allow better opportunities for the advancement of deaf employees.

Those used for interpreting assignments in business and industrial settings vary widely in experience and training. One interpreting strategy is demonstrated by companies and agencies using employees who have only basic

signing skills. An extreme example of using a person with minimal signing skills occurred in an Oakland, California laboratory when a janitor was taught a few survival signs and then asked to interpret. Many businesses ask employees having basic signing skills to perform a service they can't provide. Their job descriptions do not include interpreting, but it is a welcome experience because of the interest and variety it adds to their work. This assistance sometimes is better than none, but a weak background in signing and minimal understanding of the communication needs of deaf employees often does not facilitate an adequate communication and such assistance may even be detrimental.

Another interpreting strategy in industry is to use company employees with a good background in signing and interpreting as interpreters. These employees have a primary job assignment in an area of their expertise and the interpreting function is also included in their job descriptions. One company has eight interpreters, and one coordinator of services. Interpreting is part of their job titles, and salaries are commensurate. Many have deaf parents, which means that sign language may have been their first language, and their awareness of deafness and its problems may be strong. This system is advantageous to the employer because there is convenient access to an interpreter who is familiar with the company's terminology and procedures, and for whom reimbursement has been established. One difficulty is that the interpreter is also a co-worker, which eliminates the confidentiality sometimes necessary between a manager and an employee. Also, workers without professional interpreter training, may be unknowingly violating the role and ethics of an interpreter for the deaf.

Still a third group of interpreters exists in industry which includes men and women within the community who have various stages of training and expertise. These individuals free-lance their services part and full-time. The interpreting opportunities within the industrial community are minor as compared to other options. According to the Deaf

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Counselling and Referral Agency in Oakland, California, approximately 10% of their monthly interpreting requests are work-related (Valley, Note 2). The Center for Deafness in Denver, Colorado, had 17% employment-related requests during the fall quarter 1977 (Westfall, Note 3). Deaf employees who receive paid educational benefits through their companies also create a need for outside interpreters. Interpreters not employed directly by companies are referred through local centers and societies for the deaf, Vocational Rehabilitation offices, interpreting referral agencies, and by word-of-mouth. These referral sources emphasize that their first consideration is to closely match the competency level of the interpreter to both the requirements of the assignment and the needs of the deaf people.

The concerns of industry relate to the cost effectiveness of utilizing interpreters, and many initially view interpreters as a luxury. Interpreters are considered an investment only after the positive effects have been observed. Vocational Rehabilitation and referral agencies usually pay interpreting fees for eligible clients until they are productive on the job. A few of the larger corporations absorb all fees. The Greater Los Angeles Association for the Deaf and the Denver Center for Deafness find that after an initial exposure to the use of interpreters, companies eventually request interpreters themselves and pay for these services. This attitude is not true of all companies as some respond negatively to assuming responsibility for fees. Fees and job possibilities for interpreters are determined by the level of certification. Interpreters with comprehensive skills certification are in demand, while those not certified may find less than part-time employment depending on the geographical area.

In some areas employers often resist the free service of outside interpreting. A counselor in the Vocational Rehabilitation office in Rochester, N.Y. commented that in the past four years of explaining and offering the interpreting service to local companies only

one company has followed up (Royer, Note 4). Often the use of an interpreter denotes a dependency that might continue, so the employer finds another way to communicate and make do. On assembly line jobs there is little interest in using interpreters because not much communication takes place while working. A two-year survey conducted between 1973-75 by the Denver Center for Deafness reported approximately 70% of the employers contacted in the survey said they either did not have deaf employees or had no need for an interpreter for the deaf employee(s) they already had (Weadick, Note 5). Writing messages was considered sufficient.

Educating industry to an awareness of an interpreter's function has been a gradual process over the past five years. On initial contact an employer often has not heard of interpreting, and even after being informed of the potential uses of an interpreter is usually unwilling to try the method. However, employers who have used interpreters frequently find them both advantageous and preferable. Consequently, industry is experiencing an obvious increase in interpreters and the use of sign language among hearing and deaf employees. As awareness of needs grows, so does the demand.

### SUMMARY

Fundamental changes in the attitudes and actions of industry toward deaf people are being effected. The growth of deaf awareness in this decade has been rapid, and occupational opportunities for deaf people have flourished. The communication needs of deaf employees, however, are still not being fully met by industry but initial attempts have been reported in this paper. A major transition in this area will require continuing education and cooperation among all those involved, particularly in convincing companies that facilitating and improving communication with deaf employees is, indeed, advantageous to personnel relations and to company efficiency.

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