

Examining suggested workplace improvements for D/deaf workers

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Employment analysis: How can employers improve their approach regarding D/deaf employees and jobseekers? Rob Wilks, academic manager for law at the University of South Wales, considers the key findings and proposals that stem from a survey into the experiences of deaf jobseekers and employees recently carried out by Totaljobs.com.

What is meant by the term D/deaf?

Readers will note that in this article, the term 'D/deaf' is used. This acknowledges that there are two distinct groups of deaf people that may become workers—deaf people who consider themselves to be culturally 'Deaf' with a capital 'D' and deaf people with a small 'd' who consider themselves to be audiological deaf who have little or no affiliation with the Deaf community. Those who are culturally Deaf are more likely to be British Sign Language (BSL) users and thus rely on BSL/English Interpreters. Those who are deaf are likely to use non-BSL forms of communication support.

What are the key findings of the 'Deaf jobseeker and employee experiences survey 2016' carried out by Totaljobs.com?

The key findings of totaljobs' survey include:

- discrimination plays a large part in the working lives of D/deaf people and many are forced to exit employment because of it
- the attitudes of employers and colleagues can prevent D/deaf people from fulfilling their potential
- there are many perceived barriers to employment and there is a lack of appropriate support to help D/deaf people secure employment

What can employers do to improve D/deaf awareness in the workplace?

The important thing is to remember that it is not always the grand gestures that require a huge amount of effort that matter, but the small ones that allow employers to always bear in mind that an employee is D/deaf—not to treat them any differently to other members of staff, other than to bear in mind that clear communication and, in some cases, patience will always be needed.

Employers can ensure that staff know how to communicate with D/deaf people, such as to:

- speak at a normal pace rather than too slowly or too quickly
- ensure that the room is well-lit
- face the D/deaf worker and speak clearly
- use gestures to assist, and
- be mindful of the role of communication support personnel and to accommodate such use

If basic sign language tuition could be arranged, this can often be immensely helpful for D/deaf workers.

Often, hearing staff members are too afraid to talk to D/deaf workers directly, fearing that there may be a communication breakdown. It is important that persistent efforts are made to minimise the risk that the D/deaf worker becomes unintentionally isolated. Often communication support is not available for the social aspects in a workplace such as lunch, cigarette breaks and social events after work, and it is such aspects that are often crucial in developing working relationships.

What are the key lessons to be learnt and benefits to be derived from D/deaf awareness training?

Employers should incorporate D/deaf awareness training into the training culture of the organisation alongside health and safety, data protection and any continuing professional development, so that staff are regularly trained and thus reminded of what they need to do to ensure that a D/deaf member of staff is included rather than excluded, deliberately or otherwise.

Such D/deaf awareness training should ideally be D/deaf-led, as it is D/deaf people who know more about being D/deaf, not hearing people. The trainer should at least meet with the D/deaf worker to identify any particular issues they may have in the workplace so that these can be addressed during the training.

Avoid D/deaf awareness training that focuses on the medical elements of being D/deaf, as this is not particularly helpful in the workplace, and instead offer practical tips and methods concerning how an employee can ensure that a D/deaf member of staff is treated equally and that communication (or lack of it) does not become an issue.

What are common reasonable adjustments employers may need to make for D/deaf job applicants and workers?

The most common adjustment would be the provision of what the Equality Act 2010 refers to as 'auxiliary aids' such as BSL/English interpreters, speech-to-text reporters, lipspeakers and notetakers. These are more commonly referred to as 'communication support'. These are generally useful for anything that involves group discussion with two or more individuals (apart from the D/deaf worker). In some situations, the D/deaf worker may need support for one to one meetings.

If a D/deaf worker uses such communication support, space may need to be arranged around the worker's desk area and in meeting rooms. Preparation is often key to the communication support's ability to do a good job and therefore, if possible, employers should provide them with copies of agendas, meeting papers, Powerpoint presentations etc in advance. It can also be difficult to book such communication support so provide as much notice as possible of meetings.

Depending on the worker, it may be necessary to make changes to the telephone system to accommodate a headset (for the communication support) if the D/deaf workers use them to make and receive phone calls, or to allow textphone and text direct calls. If the D/deaf worker has enough hearing, an amplifier or telephone set with volume control or specialist headsets may be required. There may be other specialist equipment required depending on the role and the industry.

From a health and safety perspective, employers will need to consider what health and safety measures to put in place to ensure the D/deaf worker's safety. Examples of adjustments would include flashing fire alarms, vibrating alert systems, buddy systems, and any other industry-specific adjustments that may be required.

To what extent may the Access to Work scheme be able to assist employers fund adjustments, such as special equipment, for D/deaf workers?

To get an Access to Work grant the D/deaf worker's D/deafness must affect their ability to work and they must be 16 or over and live in England, Scotland or Wales. At present, the Department for Work and Pensions has imposed an upper limit on grants made to disabled workers, which is currently £41,400 per annum.

These funds are commonly used to pay for adaptations to equipment, special equipment, communication support and awareness training for colleagues, and so can assist employers in funding reasonable adjustments for D/deaf workers. However, it is important to note that Access to Work funding does not absolve employers of their duty to make reasonable adjustments entirely, and it may not fund all the adjustments required, in which case it may be reasonable to expect the employer to fund such adjustments themselves. A good example is equipment required on health and safety grounds, as employers are expected to comply with health and safety legislation in any case.

Do any specialist charities offer guidance or assistance to employers in assessing what adjustments may assist D/deaf job applicants and workers?

The Access to Work scheme will often be happy to provide general advice and guidance to employers. In addition, if employers or the D/deaf worker does not know what adjustments are required, it is possible to ask Access to Work to arrange for an assessment to take place of the worker and their workplace in order to make recommendations.

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