



## **Employment Accommodations for People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing**

People who are deaf or hard of hearing are more likely to be unemployed than people in general, yet there are very few jobs which deaf or hard of hearing people cannot do, given training and workplace accommodations. Accommodations may well be simple, inexpensive and make good business sense. Without accommodations, good candidates might not apply for jobs and good employees could be lost. Precise requirements vary from one individual to another. Always ask the deaf or hard of hearing person what they need and collaborative develop their accommodation plan.

Once someone has been offered a job, begin getting the required accommodations in place as it may take some time. Consult the individual and make sure that the employee's manager or supervisor understands the agreed accommodations. Disability awareness training, that includes deaf awareness, may be especially useful for the candidate's team.

Most deaf people say that what helps them most at work are colleagues who have a basic awareness of deafness and how it affects communication.

Deaf awareness training helps colleagues learn how to make themselves more easily understood, for example where to stand or sit in meetings to ease lip reading, and the importance of passing on key information. In-house sign language classes may be useful for the team in which the employee works.

Build in regular reviews of accommodations, for example at the end of the probationary period, in supervision sessions, and during appraisals to ensure that the accommodations are still effective. Ensure that you take the same approach to accommodations when a deaf or hard of hearing person applies for promotion, again not making assumptions about what the employee can or cannot do.

### **Orientation and Training**

Disability and the need to make adjustments should be embedded in all internal organizational policies, for example, policies on sickness, training, and performance appraisals. New recruits should be made aware of these policies during the employee orientation.

It is important that your standard orientation and training program is accessible, so that a deaf or hard of hearing employee has the same information about, for example, the company profile and office procedures:

- allow more time and greater flexibility for orientation and training
- brief the workgroup on basic 'disability communication' – this will help to ensure the deaf or hard of hearing person can participate fully in any training. It should also generally improve communication between colleagues.
- make sure training videos are subtitled
- voice recognition software used by the speaking members of the group could be connected to a projector to display all conversation onto a screen in the meeting room
- be aware that you may need to provide a captionist, sign language interpreter, lip speaker, a note-taker, a radio aid or a loop system – ask the employee what they need.

Inform course tutors or trainers when they have deaf participants on a programme, and ensure that they know how to make their training accessible. They should:

- provide handouts, a reading list and written notes introducing any new vocabulary
- if possible meet deaf and hard of hearing participants in advance, to determine individual requirements
- establish a collaborative relationship with sign language interpreters or lip speakers and provide them with course materials. Due to the shortage of interpreters, the interpreter needs to be booked between four to six weeks in advance
- arrange for transcripts of any video, or, if the material is in regular use, get it subtitled
- be aware of communication needs
- Ensure that deaf and hard of hearing employees also have equal access to further in-house and external training, meetings and career development opportunities.

### **Working Accommodations to Retain Employees:**

- ensuring the office and/or work environment is well lit
- locating the employee where background noise is minimized
- Arranging the workplace so that the employee can see when someone enters their area and also so that it is easier for the deaf or hard of hearing person to communicate with colleagues and vice-versa.



Such accommodations will also help you to retain employees who become deaf or hard of hearing. By making the accommodations you are more likely to retain an employee and their skills and experiences and save the cost of recruiting and training a replacement, and possibly the cost of early retirement.

## Equipment

Technological advances are increasing the range of accommodations that can be made in the workplace for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

*For example:*

- live or pre-recorded captioning systems that enable deaf people to take part in spoken meetings and conversations at work. They transcribe everything that is said by each speaker into captions that can be instantly read by the deaf or hard of hearing person, usually using a laptop
- cellular phones that have a keypad and a larger screen
- telephones with controllable amplification (most desktop and cellular phones now have this function)
- induction loops which enable people to directly tune in their hearing aids to speakers, and so filter out background noise that could be distracting – portable loops are also available. Other amplification options include FM radio and infra-red systems
- text messaging can be particularly useful
- video telephones and PC-based videotelephony
- laptops with voice recognition software used by the speaking members of the workplace could be used in one-on-one meetings
- digital hearing aids process sounds more accurately than analogue hearing aids and can be adjusted to reflect an individual's needs. They are, therefore, more popular. Digital hearing aids may be particularly necessary where the employee works in an environment which has a lot of background noise.

## Support Workers

Deaf or hard of hearing people may use a variety of support workers to help with communication. These include:

- lip speakers, who soundlessly repeat what is being said, using clear lip patterns
- sign language interpreters using ASL, or other sign language
- captionists, who produce verbatim text for a speech at the speed of ordinary speech through a computer-based system and special keyboard
- a note-taker to make a record of what has been said.



## Health and Safety

With reasonable adjustments there is no reason why deaf and hard of hearing employees should pose a greater health and safety risk than anyone else. While the risks are often overestimated, some straightforward precautions are sensible:

- fire alarms should have accompanying flashing lights and the deaf or hard of hearing person should have a vibrating personal fire alarm
- machinery with safety alarms can be converted to produce accompanying flashing lights
- deaf employees must know about emergency exits and fire drills. Sometimes a 'buddy' is assigned to help in an evacuation
- a pager with a vibrating signal may be issued to a deaf or hard of hearing employee whose job is itinerant
- the emergency button in an elevator should have a light showing when it has been activated.

Following is a brief list of useful resource links for employers wishing to increase their capacity to recruit, employ, and retain employees who are deaf or hard of hearing:

accessWORKS: <http://accessworks.ca>

Canadian Association of the Deaf: <http://www.cad.ca/>

Canadian Hearing Society (offices in Ontario only): <http://www.chs.ca/>

Greater Vancouver Association of the Deaf: <http://www.gvad.com/>

Island Deaf and Hard of Hearing Centre: <http://www.idhhc.ca/>

The Well-Being Program: <http://www.vch.ca/wbp/>

Western Institute for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing: [www.widhh.com](http://www.widhh.com)

## Interpreters:

The Westcoast Association of Visual Language Interpreters:  
<http://www.wavli.com/>

Western Institute for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing:  
[http://www.widhh.com/services\\_interpreting.html](http://www.widhh.com/services_interpreting.html)

Douglas College Sign Language Interpreter Student Volunteers:  
<http://www.douglascollege.ca/programs/sign-language/studentvolunteer.html>

