THE CAREER EXPERIENCES OF DEAF SUPERVISORS IN EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICE PROFESSIONS: CHOICES, MOBILITY AND NETWORKING A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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THE CAREER EXPERIENCES OF DEAF SUPERVISORS IN EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICE PROFESSIONS: CHOICES, MOBILITY AND NETWORKING
A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

In this qualitative study, the researchers interviewed eleven deaf and hard of hearing professionals holding supervisory positions in educational and social service professions regarding factors that have affected their career experiences, specifically regarding choices, mobility, and networking. The respondents shared their experiences navigating the career ladder, including strategies used to move forward in the workplace such as networking and the use of technologies. Common threads such as tokenism and merit, communication access, and self-imposed limitations related to career choices, mobility, and networking were identified and discussed.

Keywords: deaf, supervisors, career mobility, networking issues, communication access, technology

Introduction

The career mobility experiences of deaf professionals, much less supervisors who are deaf, have been sporadically documented (Foster & MacLeod, 2004; Welsh, 1993; Welsh & MacLeod-Gallinger, 1992). Research on career advancement for persons with disabilities is extremely limited and much of the literature that could be found focuses on policy in regard to the hiring and employment of entry-level individuals with disabilities, or guidelines for integration and accommodation of employees with disabilities in the workplace (Braddock & Bachelder, 1994). On the other hand, there was a considerable amount of literature on the career mobility issues of female and/or minority professionals. While women and minorities have enjoyed increased representation in the workforce in recent years, representation of persons with disabilities has not grown as significantly. Minorities or women with disabilities also experience a double barrier (Braddock & Bachelder).
This paper focuses on the experiences of deaf professionals holding supervisory positions in educational and social service professions with regard to career choices, mobility and networking. Deaf people have been historically underrepresented in managerial and professional occupations (Welsh & MacLeod-Gallinger, 1992). MacLeod-Gallinger and Foster (1996) developed a profile of deaf supervisors of hearing employees and called for more in-depth interviews with deaf supervisors to acquire more information.

As a growing number of deaf professionals enter the global economy and workplace in the twenty-first century, the researchers felt the time was ripe to examine the factors influencing the career mobility experiences of deaf supervisors in education and social service professions, as much had changed since the 1980s and 1990s with the advent of new technologies and a growing number of deaf people earning advanced degrees. Interest in this topic was triggered when the primary author of this document led a panel discussion of deaf supervisors at a 2005 American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association national conference (Kavin, 2005). Much of the information shared during the panel session led the researchers to believe the value of documenting those experiences. Thus, a qualitative study of deaf supervisors and their career mobility experiences got underway.

Review of the Literature

Despite growing career mobility opportunities for deaf professionals and a related increase in the number of supervisors who were deaf in education and social service professions, there is still little research addressing these specific areas. In this section, previous research studies of deaf people and their career choices, mobility, and networking issues and challenges are examined.

Deaf Professionals, Career Choices and Mobility

Although there are various definitions for the term “mobility”, Welsh (1993) defines a career as a “pursuit of consecutive and progressive achievement in an area that occupies many years and often a work life” (p. 330), and mobility as “literally some form of movement” (p. 330). These definitions are used for the purpose of this paper.

Just two studies on deaf supervisors could be located. In one study, MacLeod-Gallinger and Foster (1996) developed a profile of deaf supervisors who graduated from the National Technical Institution for the
Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology, and examined the positive and negative experiences of supervising employees. In their later work, Foster and MacLeod (2004) examined the role of mentoring relationships in the career development of successful deaf supervisors. The respondents in both studies graduated from Rochester Institute of Technology in New York State and their work experience was more reflective on business and technical careers.

Only one study that specifically addresses the career choices of deaf and hard of hearing professionals could be found. In a study at Griffith University in Australia, Punch, Hyde, and Power (2007) attempted to identify the extent of a participant’s hearing loss on their reason for choosing their present occupation. While a small number of participants did not indicate that their hearing loss had any effect on their career choice, a majority referred to their deafness as influencing their career choices. Reasons included working in a quiet environment, the desire to draw on their personal experiences to support others who are deaf and hard of hearing—usually in education, the ease of which they could enter their chosen field, and ease of communication. The same study found that even in “deaf-friendly” occupations such as education and the social services, career barriers were still present for deaf and hard of hearing professionals.

There is more research available on the career mobility experiences of deaf and hard of hearing employees overall. Previous research studies have shown that in general, deaf people have less vertical mobility than their hearing peers (Foster, 1987, 1992; Schroedel, Mowry, & Anderson, 1992; Welsh, 1993). Foster (1987) also found that many deaf people were more likely to stay in a secure, well established position rather than change jobs even when opportunities for promotion came knocking on their door. Scherich (1996) discussed how hearing loss can contribute to communication issues and difficult work situations, such as work-related social functions, departmental meetings and in-service training, which adversely impacts job maintenance and career advancement.

The career mobility experiences of deaf and hard of hearing adults appear to be universal. Punch et al. (2007) wrote about the career barriers facing deaf and hard of hearing adults in Australia, resulting from aspects of their working environment that included societal attitudes, stigma and discrimination. He concluded that these deaf adults were more likely to have difficulties in gaining employment and experience slower career advancement.
Deaf Professionals and Networking Challenges

Emerton, Foster, and Gravitz (1996) conducted a study to examine barriers to participation in the workplace for deaf people. Emerton et al. (1996) found that “barriers to participation in the work place by deaf employees usually have to do with access to information” (p. 45). Furthermore, the social aspect of the work environment had a huge impact on deaf employee’s career development. Emerton et al. cautioned that “...an inability to join the social networks of the work environment can have a profound and negative cumulative impact on the employee’s career development” (p. 49). Emerton et al. made the following statement that reflects many of the findings that are discussed therein:

Perhaps, the most difficult barriers lie in facilitative and/or conversational communications. Here the accommodation must address the “Taken-for-granted” social assumptions of how a job is to be done or the work environment is structured. The example of shouting over the top of work carrels about a computer problem or informally resolving a procedural question without taking the time to share with all members of the department are examples where access to facilitative communication is blocked. (p. 53)

In her chapter, “Working with Deaf People: Accessibility and Accommodation in the Workplace,” Foster (1992) discussed in depth the importance of networking and acquiring informal information in the workplace, such as conversations held when passing one-another in the hallways, during coffee or lunch breaks, or in the bathroom. Foster found the following:

While such conversations may seem unnecessary to successful work performance, they were integral to job satisfaction as well as to integration within the department or company. Perhaps most important, informal conversations often developed into communication networks that played central roles in the dissemination of unofficial yet critical information, such as changes in company or department policy, special events, and news about co-workers. Deaf
employees were often completely excluded from these informal communication networks (also referred to as 'grapevines'). (p. 81)

The literature showed clearly that joining and maintaining social networks in the workplace is crucial to successful career development and mobility. This is reinforced by findings in a study done by Punch et al. (2007), on a group of deaf and hard of hearing alumni of Griffith University in Australia where participants discussed their difficulties in work-related social functions and interactions with their colleagues. Participants described their feelings of isolation, missing out on casual information sharing, and the lack of provision of interpreters for informal or social situations. A typical response was, "I did not anticipate the disadvantage of missing out on gossip, networking opportunities, casual information sharing" (Punch et al., p. 513).

In sum, while there is some research available on the career experiences of deaf and hard of hearing individuals, there was very little that addresses specifically deaf supervisors, much less those employed in education and social service professions. Still, nearly all the research pointed out the importance of social networking in the workplace, and the negative impact that one's deafness may have on networking and acquiring informal information in the workplace.

**Methodology**

This qualitative study was designed with an emphasis on ethnographic methodology. The researchers strived to learn more about, describe and analyze the practices and beliefs of deaf and hard of hearing supervisors in education and social service professions, in regard to their career choices, mobility and networking experiences.

**Respondents**

Eleven deaf and hard of hearing supervisors who work in education and social service professions were selected and interviewed regarding the impact of their deafness on their career choices, mobility and networking experiences. They discussed the challenges they faced in the workplace and creative strategies they utilized to stay abreast of informal information exchanged. Of these eleven respondents, three were males and eight were females. Four held doctorate or Juris Doctor degrees, six had master's
degrees, and one had a bachelor’s degree. Six respondents were in the age 30-39 group, two in the age 40-49 group, and three in the age 50-59 group.

When asked about their primary mode of communication: American Sign Language, Manually Conceptual English, Signing Exact English, Oral or Other, three respondents chose more than one mode. Overall, six respondents identified American Sign Language as their primary mode of communication, five chose Manually Conceptual English, two chose Signed Exact English, and one described herself as oral.

At the time of the interviews, four respondents were employed at social service agencies (advocacy, mental health, and employment); three were employed at higher education institutions, two with the federal government, one with vocational rehabilitation, and one in a hospital. All of them had been with their institution or agency ranging from two years to thirty years. All of the respondents were at the time of the interviews, supervisors within their workplace. Six supervised less than 10 employees, and five supervised between 10 and 25 employees.

**Data Collection and Coding Analysis**

The researchers used a purposeful sampling procedure to develop a homogeneous sample of potential subjects, where they identified individuals who shared similar characteristics regarding their career backgrounds and supervisory experiences (Mertens, 1998). The researchers used a list of criteria including: deaf and hard of hearing status, supervisory experiences, and working in education or social service professions. Gender and geographic location were also taken into consideration. They were then contacted and asked to participate via email and upon agreement, asked to sign letters of consent.

Ten respondents were interviewed through videophone using a list of sixteen pre-set, open-ended questions and six multiple-choice questions (see Appendix). Each of the videophone conversations were taped live using a TV with a VCR recorder. The eleventh respondent was interviewed live with a camcorder, using the same set of questions. All the videos were given to a certified sign language interpreter who viewed and translated all of the interviews into voice using an audio recorder. A typist then listened to the recorded interviews and typed the transcripts. Once all of the transcripts
were completed, the investigators sent each respondent their transcript for a member check. The respondents then reviewed their own transcripts, made any corrections necessary, and sent them back to the investigators for a final revision.

Once the transcripts were finalized, the data was analyzed and coded for common threads. During the data coding, the authors did a thorough analysis of all the interview transcripts, systematically sorting, organizing and coding relevant information according to themes. The themes were not established prior to data analysis, but rather, set up as they emerged. A total of eleven themes were identified that include: Technology, Interpreting, Communication, Attitudes, Educating Others, Networking, Supervision, Career Issues, Deaf Community, Impact of Deafness, and Strategies for Success. Much of the data was repeated and categorized in two, three, or even more themes as one theme often held a relationship to another (Mertens, 1998).

Findings and Discussion

For this article, the researchers chose to focus on three main threads: Career choices (self-imposed limitations, contributing to the field of deafness, and drawbacks of choosing a career in the field of deafness); Career mobility (limited opportunities for advancement, communication access, demonstrating one’s full potential, merit and tokenism); and Networking (challenges, strategies and use of technology) which was woven throughout all the eleven key themes identified. The quotes selected and used in this paper typically reflected the majority of responses, unless stated otherwise.

Career Choices

When asked the question fundamental to this research “Do you feel your deafness was an asset or hindrance in your career path?” three respondents felt their deafness was a hindrance in their career path, two felt it served as an asset, five felt it served as both an asset and hindrance, and one stated simply, “I don’t give it much thought.”

All the respondents were also asked “Do you feel you have been limited to deafness-specific professions?” Eight felt they were indeed limited, most with ambivalent feelings. Three felt they were not restricted to deafness-
specific professions, and one commented “Being in the field of deafness just happened. I was there. I never felt that it’s all I can do.”

While their feelings about being limited to the field of deafness were mixed, all the respondents believed that if they were not deaf, their career path would have been different and they might have progressed further professionally. When asked what occupations they might have chosen, responses varied. They include positions such as a foreign services officer, professional firefighter, undercover FBI agent, business owner, geologist, engineering/ construction worker, or a business executive. Analysis of the interview data showed several common themes related to career choices including self-imposed limitations, contributing to the field of deafness, and drawbacks of choosing a career in the field of deafness.

Self-Imposed Limitations

All the eleven professionals interviewed indicated that they chose the field of deafness due to ease of communication access, cultural awareness and sensitivity, staying in a comfort zone, and simply having a strong professional interest in the field. They acknowledged the paradox of limiting oneself by choice, while facing limited choices. One respondent stated that she picked the field of deafness because she knew she could do well there:

I feel limited because I chose to be in a job where the environment is deaf-friendly and communication accessible... I do believe that deaf people are able to work anywhere they want and I made a choice to be in a deaf field because of communication, really.

Another respondent had ambivalent concerns about feeling limited in her profession:

I want to work within deafness-related positions, as that is my interest. But at the same time, if I had an interest in a different focus area or specialty, it would be harder, a lot harder. In the federal government, I’m expected to be an expert on deafness, which I am. That’s ok- I’m fine with that. At the same time, it is limiting.
Contributing to the Field of Deafness

Seven of the eleven respondents stated that they chose to work in the field of deafness because they felt they could contribute more there. They enjoyed serving as role models and showing how barriers could be overcome. Two said that they had received job offers and opportunities to interview for new positions but found their current positions with the focus on deafness so interesting and satisfying that they didn’t wish to leave. One respondent said she enjoyed being in high demand and felt valued:

The Deaf field is more fascinating for me, more interesting, maybe. I feel that I can contribute more. My motivation and hunger to improve life for deaf and hard of hearing people. Now I’m on so many boards… I feel very involved. I think if I weren’t working in the deafness field I would be bored.

Another respondent felt her deafness was a strong asset to her career growth:

It has helped me. Really helped me, because these positions are related to deaf services. They need someone who knows deafness, deaf culture, um, and to be truthful I have to accept viewing myself as a poster child. To make services more accessible to the deaf community.

Drawbacks of Choosing a Career in Deafness

A total of seven respondents expressed some degree of frustration about working in a narrow profession. There were concerns about limited opportunities for skills improvement. Three respondents specifically indicated that because the deaf community was so small, there wasn’t enough of a market demand to make a living out of a true passion full-time such as mental health therapy, law, or lobbying. One respondent puts it as:

Sometimes, to tell the truth, as a therapist, I’m a little jealous of the variety that other therapists have. They talk about mental health treatment, about how they are able to do medical. They’re able to do mental
mindfulness. These kinds of things; different therapy methods. I'm limited because Deaf people see me as more of an administrator. They tend to be more, you know, it's communication. [They] tend to be frustrated with job and referral issues. I feel it's not really therapy- it's more barrier dissolution... In my profession, everything is deaf related, so in some way I feel out of touch with hearing issues ... I feel it's always Deaf, Deaf, Deaf...

One respondent shared a story in which he was invited to join a lobbying firm full time, but the perception that he could only do deafness-related things was problematic:

What I envisioned is that I would come up against the glass ceiling there. I know that. I feel it already... You have to be sure you think about 'how far can I go there'... for the hearing firm, I always feel that they think I can only do deafness related things.

In sum, it appeared that a majority of the deaf and hard of hearing professionals interviewed felt they experienced some degree of limitation regarding their career choices. The limitations appeared to be both self-imposed, and externally-imposed by the perception of others that they could only do 'deafness-related' things.

**Career Mobility**

Common themes related to career mobility were apparent and included limited opportunities for advancement and ability to cross over to other areas of employment, communication access, limited opportunities to demonstrate one's full potential, and merit and tokenism. There was also the general feeling that one had to be 'twice as good' as their hearing colleagues and be 'at the top of their game' to be considered equal.

**Limited Opportunities for Advancement**

There were concerns about limited opportunities for advancement and being able to transfer one's skills to other career areas. Six respondents
said that while they could cross over to other fields, it would very difficult. One respondent said, “I am very aware that if I need to move up to higher positions or similar positions that are “deaf friendly”, these positions are very limited.” As stated earlier in this paper, all the respondents believed that if they were not deaf, their career path would have been different.

One respondent talked about employment experiences as a limitation:

One thing that bothered me was that I felt stuck there… I watched people change jobs often, easily from one department to another. I saw people work at the women’s center for a couple of years and then move on to the employment center and then to the counseling center. I stayed in one place, disability services.

This individual eventually relocated across the country to take a job position that provided for career advancement and felt that if not their deafness, they might have had more options in their hometown.

One respondent acknowledged that career choices limited his career mobility:

I’ve heard people tell me, the reason that you are not considered for that position or are not asked to apply is because they can’t figure out how a deaf person would be able to do that position or how you’d function in that position as a deaf person. But, most of the time, like I say, I’m not interested in these positions…So yes, there is a little bit of resistance, a little bit of barrier in wondering how I could function as a deaf person in that position. And again, because of my focus on deafness, they look at me and say ‘Ok, well you’re very focused with your experiences whereas other people have a broader background’… my profession has limited me in many ways, yes. My focus on deafness means that most jobs that I could apply for have to be related to deafness in some way.
Communication Access

All the respondents discussed communication challenges within their current workplace, and acknowledged potential additional difficulties if they chose to leave the comfort zone of the deafness field. One respondent said

My skills are working with deaf and hard of hearing, so the focus on Deaf issues is there. But I think I could generally apply my skills to a hearing environment. I don’t feel I’m limited, though. I’m just out of practice in communicating with hearing people, you know? I used to feel more comfortable and more patient, now I don’t.

Four respondents felt at times they were a liability rather than an asset due to the lack and cost of interpreting resources. One respondent stated she was unable to participate in a teaching program in Europe due to insufficient funds for interpreting services. She also cited scarce interpreting resources as limiting her professional development opportunities: “I can’t just go to a workshop, some outside event. I have to have interpreters. I don’t get one. Hearing people— it’s easy. They get in the car and they go to the workshop.”

One respondent said that expenses associated with hiring an interpreter posed an obstacle to his accepting a full-time lobbying position: “Lobbying requires a full time interpreter all the time to go with you. So it would be like paying two for one job. This is something I hear all the time.”

Finally, a respondent shared a story about a hard of hearing colleague who had different communication skills and approaches from his, which caused some confusion among colleagues:

For example, there’s a woman here... she herself speaks pretty well and can use the telephone pretty well. So she decided the best way for her to move up was not to use the interpreter and not to depend upon that. So she focuses herself on her own skills and has moved up three times so far, different positions. So
that, the negative of that is people look at it like, ‘Oh, if she can do that, then why can’t I?’ Yes, it’s a little sticky.

**Demonstrating One’s Full Potential**

Ten out of eleven respondents felt overall that they weren’t working to their full potential and felt underestimated by their colleagues. One said, “I couldn’t prove that I was smart and capable... personally I could never make contact with the higher ups, so I accepted that.” One respondent felt while there had been great progress, the move upwards was still slow, “So, I think that if I were not deaf, I would have been allowed to contribute a lot more throughout my career”. Interestingly enough, a respondent who created her own agency with a deaf clientele base didn’t feel she was experiencing ‘glass ceiling’ issues. She stated, “This was designed by me and the board, and the Deaf. Deaf designed for Deaf. The barriers are out of the way.”

**Merit and Tokenism**

Three respondents expressed some degree of concern about being in their leadership positions for the purpose of tokenism and maintaining appearances. One said, “Well, the world looks up at me as a deaf person. I’m a role model with this position... [People think] ‘Wow, you’re director of the center. Oh, and you’re deaf, wow’...On the outside, it’s fine but behind the scenes, it’s not.” Another respondent stressed the importance of earning promotions based on merit, “...you need to be deaf and qualified and skilled. The marriage of both is a win-win situation. I think that most professional deaf people want to feel that they’ve earned their position based on merit, their own merit, not based on disability.”

It seemed clear that the deaf and hard of hearing supervisors interviewed in this study felt they had limited opportunities for career advancement. Communication issues, inability to demonstrate ones own full potential, and concern regarding the possible perception of merit and tokenism were all factors in their career mobility experiences.

**Networking Issues**

As in any career, the ability to network has a great impact on one’s career mobility experiences. All the respondents talked about their networking
challenges and the strategies they used to stay abreast of current information, including working with staff interpreters and using technologies.

Challenges

Ten out of eleven respondents expressed frustrations about missing out on networking opportunities, wishing they could join ‘water cooler’ conversations and engage in every day conversation and jokes with their hearing non-signing colleagues. One respondent said that it took her a while to figure out why she wasn’t acquiring the same information as her peers. “It took me a couple of years to understand how most information is exchanged within an agency or an office... I am slowly developing the necessary connections and network to access information” She continued “Since I’m constantly filling in the blanks, this is an increased level of effort. I’m often worn out in the evenings. I think that deaf and hard of hearing individuals must devote more efforts to gather information in the workplace.” Another respondent said

I do not have good speech skills and I really need an interpreter to communicate with hearing people. Oftentimes, when I see a hearing person in the hall, I needed to talk with them right away but I could not do that, so that is a real barrier. I have to wait until I get back to my office and send e-mail or call that person. I often miss a lot of opportunities with the hearing staff for any emerging issues or discussions.

Having an interpreter did not always fill the networking gaps. One respondent talked about her experience attending departmental meetings. Even though she had an interpreter present for each meeting, networking was a challenge. “I saw a lot of networking happening before and after the meetings. It was hard for me to get to know people.”

Four respondents felt that oftentimes, staff interpreters had more access to informal information than they did. There were stories of awkward workplace dynamics where the respondents supervised staff interpreters who they believed had more access to information than they did, and they often felt undermined. A respondent who was director of a business said that hearing visitors would gravitate towards her assistant/interpreter who could speak well- rather than herself, the director, which was a detriment
to her career mobility. Another respondent shared a story in which her staff interpreter struck up an impromptu but important conversation regarding program development with a college vice president in the office bathroom, one that the deaf supervisor felt she herself should have had. One respondent summarized her experiences:

In the career world, who you are isn’t only the work production, but your ability to develop networks. Deaf people miss out on that part, the networking. I have good networking with people who are hearing, but only with the ones who sign.

Strategies

Respondents utilized various strategies to compensate for missing informal information exchanged in the office. One respondent shared a story about a group of managers gathered monthly at a local bar. He was never invited to go and speculated it was because the group was afraid he would request an interpreter. One evening, he showed up at a gathering and offered to pay for a round of drinks. While he found group communication a challenge, it was a beneficial networking event. From that point on, he received invitations to attend their gatherings.

Four respondents scheduled regular debriefing sessions or lunch/dinner dates with colleagues for the sole purpose of acquiring information and making workplace allies. One respondent said

I can not hear the gossip that goes around such as who got laid off or fired, etc. This is the area where I am missing a lot of information. Fortunately, one of the signing [colleagues] is a very good friend. He is also a very good ally so he always makes sure that I know what is going on especially with the upper administration gossips. Sometimes, we go out to dinner so he can catch me up with the most updates.

Another participant made a conscientious effort to befriend a chatty co-worker: “A female colleague loved to talk...I’d stop by her office to chat with her, and she would chat or gossip about others in the office and I’d listen.”
All the respondents discussed using various strategies to gain more footing in networking and accessing the information loop in the workplace. Some used their videophones at times to bypass their staff interpreters. One respondent had a staff interpreter who stopped by her office on a regular basis to update her on office gossip, and another asked his supervisor point-blank to make an increased effort to communicate informal information directly to him, so that he wouldn’t need to learn things through his staff interpreter.

Use of Technology

All the respondents depended on technologies including the use of e-mail, instant messaging, videophones, and pagers to compensate for limited face-to-face networking.

One respondent talked about the benefit of using e-mail communications: “Email has helped a lot. Everyone uses and loves email. They would never know I was deaf until I tell them or meet them. With email, there is no way to tell. That has really broadened things.” Another respondent elaborated on how the advent of the videophone has made a difference in her job, allowing for more independence and autonomy: “Ever since then, it [the videophone] has been really great. I feel more independent and can do my work without depending on the staff interpreters. This technology is truly a blessing.” Another respondent summed up by saying

Not having the same information that others have is just part of my work experience. I work diligently on filling the blanks the best I can. I’m much more attentive to information that’s exchanged in meetings, in e-mails, and in some informal conversations that I have with others, one-on-one.

Conclusion

Career Choices and Mobility

Nearly all the respondents demonstrated high levels of satisfaction with their current employment, and indicated that they greatly enjoyed working in the field of deafness. One respondent stated that he enjoyed the communication access so much, that he could not imagine working in another setting. It appeared that the professionals interviewed gravitated
towards the field of deafness in education and social service occupations, due to the ease of communication and high level of sensitivity and awareness regarding deafness and deaf culture.

It was apparent that there was a paradox: high job satisfaction among respondents, paralleled with actual or self-imposed limitations in a field with a small number of employment opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing professionals. This was reinforced by the frequent reference of respondents to limited opportunities for career mobility and promotion. Overall, the respondents viewed the ease of communication access in a deaf-friendly environment as an acceptable trade off for limited job opportunities and mobility.

There was concern that career mobility for deaf and hard of hearing professionals was generally slow. One respondent said

The low point for me...is that some people who are not deaf and not female, have moved along faster even if they had similar or even slightly less qualifications, but they’ve gone ahead... for deaf people and gender related issues, the move up is very slow.

Networking Issues

Networking challenges had a tremendous impact on the career experiences of deaf and hard of hearing professionals. Even with interpreting support and the advent of technologies, most of the respondents felt they often missed out on networking opportunities and informal information exchanges in the workplace and would utilize creative strategies such as scheduling lunch or dinner dates with colleagues for the purpose of acquiring information and forming workplace allies. One person felt that the use of current technologies didn’t always fully compensate for limited career mobility and said, “I always thought that with technology, that would open more doors but still I don’t get that feeling yet.” It appeared that networking and access to informal, unwritten information has been, and continues to be, a great challenge for deaf professionals, as found in past research (Foster & MacLeod, 2003).
Implications of Findings

Despite the advent of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1991 to advance employment opportunities and workplace access for individuals with disabilities which include interpreting and other communication supports and access technologies, the deaf professionals interviewed for this study still felt they experienced limited career choices and mobility opportunities in the workplace. A review of the literature reinforces this perception. “Although in the U.S. labor market, women have increasingly come under the protection of antidiscriminatory legislation, research findings show that legislation has had little effect on informal discrimination. Subtle forms of discrimination remain widespread, including supervisors’ biases in selection, evaluation, and attribution of success” (Chi-Ching, 1992, p. 661).

It appears that legally mandated or ‘formal’ access services, such as sign language interpreting, do not fully compensate for the power of informal networking and communications in the workplace. As Emerton et al. (1996) found, the social and networking aspects in the work environment have a great impact on the deaf professional’s career advancement, a finding also apparent in this study.

Conclusions drawn from this study also lend further validation to Foster’s 1987 research which found that many deaf people were likely to stay in a secure well-established position, even when opportunities for promotion presented themselves. Whether the glass ceiling and other barriers to career mobility and promotion were actual or self-created, many of the barriers seemed to stem from attitudinal and communication issues and the reluctance of the deaf professional to step out of their own ‘comfort zone’. Furthermore, Foster (1992) found that deaf and hard of hearing employees often experienced difficulty joining in social interactions, informal networking and acquiring of information in the workplace, which was often detrimental to achievement of their long term career goals.

While there has been an increase in the number of highly educated deaf professionals with advanced degrees, it is unclear whether or not commensurate employment opportunities have kept up. The researchers have also questioned whether or not there is an abundance of deaf professionals “underemployed” in educational and social service positions, for which they may be overqualified. Furthermore, for the purpose of this paper the
researchers assume that there is greater awareness and sensitivity to diversity in education and social service oriented professions, and wonder if glass ceiling issues for deaf professionals in business, technology and industry oriented professionals are even more challenging. These are possible areas for future research studies.

Limitations of Study

The sample group was very small, consisting of eleven hand-picked deaf professionals who worked with the deaf and hard of hearing population in the fields of education and the social services. Perspectives came only from the respondents themselves as their colleagues and supervisors were not interviewed. In addition, there was no follow-up contact after the initial interviews except for member checks and approval of the interview transcripts. At least two respondents have since made job changes.

Additional limitations of this study include gaps in information regarding the input of the respondents' co-workers or supervisors, and sorting of the data by specific occupation area (e.g., mental health, job placement, or higher education).

Recommendations and Summary

While there has been painstaking progress, the use of emerging technologies such as e-mail, instant messaging, pagers, remote video services and video relay interpreting services are helping to break down workplace communication barriers. Innovative use of these technologies should continue to be utilized by deaf and hard of hearing professionals and their colleagues. This is crucial in face of the growth of the information age and service industry of this economy, where communication and literacy skills are essential (Foster, 1992).

Deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing professionals alike need to continue open dialogue regarding “glass ceiling” issues and concerns, and utilize creative communication and interaction strategies to ensure that they keep up to par on informal information exchanges and networking in the workplace. Other strategies such as training on empowerment and self-advocacy, assertiveness and communication skills development, mentoring, and awareness of relevant legislation, will also be helpful in ensuring that deaf and hard of hearing professionals remain competitive in the workplace.
While it may be difficult to generalize the findings to other career areas, it appears that despite new legislation and technologies, and increased awareness of deafness in general, deaf professionals still continue to experience problematic career mobility and networking issues. In sum, many of the findings discussed here—career choices, mobility and networking issues—are similar to those found in previous research studies on the employment experiences of deaf and hard of hearing professionals. The question remains as to why there has not been great improvement in the career mobility experiences of deaf and hard of hearing professionals holding supervisory positions in education and social service fields where generally, there is supposedly greater sensitivity and awareness of deafness and deaf culture.

The authors’ utmost appreciation goes to these individuals:

- **Dr. James DeCaro**, Director of PEN-International for his financial support of this project.
- **Ms. Patricia DeCaro**, for her consultation and sign-to-voice translation services.
- **Dr. Christopher Kurz**, for his consultation and support.
- **Dr. Susan Foster**, for her consultation and support.
- **Ms. Jennifer Palumbo**, for her transcription services.
- **Mr. Christopher Samp**, PEN-International Student Assistant for his research services.
- **All of the research subjects** for their time and willingness to participate in this project.

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Appendix
Interview Questions

1. Please provide us with your educational background (secondary, colleges attended & degrees earned).
2. Please describe your work background and experiences.
3. What is your current job title? How long have you been in this position?
4. Describe what your current job involves and the types of responsibilities/duties that go with it.
5. How many staff do you supervise now? How many are Deaf, and how many are hearing?
6. What were the highs and lows in your climb up the career ladder? Please provide us with specific examples.
7. What ‘glass ceiling’ experiences did you have, if any? Please provide us with specific examples.
8. Do you feel your deafness was an asset or a hindrance in your career path? Please provide us with specific examples on how your deafness might have impacted you.
9. In your supervisory experiences, what access or communication issues have you experienced, if any? Please provide us with specific examples.
10. In your supervisory experiences, what cultural issues have you experienced, if any? Please provide us with specific examples. Do you feel you have been limited to ‘deafness-specific’ professions?
11. If you were not deaf, do you feel your career path would have been different? What do you think you might have been doing instead?
12. Were there any particular situation(s) that you had to “overcome” because of communication or cultural issues? What strategies have you utilized in removing barriers in your working environment? Please provide us with specific examples.
13. Do you feel that as a deaf supervisor, you have to work harder compared with your hearing colleagues? If so, please provide us with specific examples.
14. If you could give advice to future deaf supervisors, what would you say?
15. Any last thoughts or comments?
Questionnaire

1. What age group are you in?
   a. 25 – 29
   b. 30 – 39
   c. 40 – 49
   d. 50 – 59
   e. 60 – 69
   f. 70 +

2. What is your highest level of education?
   a. Associates Degree
   b. Bachelor’s Degree
   c. Master’s Degree
   d. Ed.D.
   e. J.D.
   f. Ph.D.

3. I _____________ use a sign language interpreter at work.
   a. always
   b. sometimes
   c. occasionally
   d. rarely
   e. never

4. My primary mode of communication is:
   a. American Sign Language
   b. Manually Conceptual English
   c. Signing Exact English
   d. Oral
   e. Others

5. The type of profession I am in is:
   a. Education
   b. Rehabilitation
   c. Mental Health
   d. Social Service
   e. Hospital
   f. Business
   g. Other

6. The number of staff I supervise is:
   a. Less than 10
   b. 10 – 25
   c. 26 – 50
   d. 50 and more
References


