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Alan T. Hurwitz
Rochester Institute of Technology

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QUALITY OF COMMUNICATION SERVICES FOR DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING CLIENTS: CURRENT ISSUES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

T. ALAN HURWITZ, Ed.D.

Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, New York

Abstract

This paper describes the success which New York State has had with an Advisory Committee to the State Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. It describes the success the committee has had in sensitizing the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation to the unique communication needs of their deaf clients, and in getting communication standards established for counselors and interpreters who work with deaf clients. In addition, the paper describes some future priorities which must be addressed to further enhance services to deaf rehabilitation clients.

There have been a number of formal and informal attempts to define and describe some of the communication problems of deaf adults in the community. Three deaf authors, Jacobs (1974), Woods (no date), and Wiggins (1970), presented a viewpoint of the trials and tribulations of several deaf people who experienced a wide variety of communication difficulties in their lives. Generally, the difficulties discussed in this literature centered around the realities and frustrations of deaf people and how they managed to overcome their problems in society. These authors talk about the attitudes and misconceptions of their hearing counterparts about the aspects of deafness. These

problems often caused a great deal of misunderstanding, mistrust and apprehension of deaf persons toward hearing people in the workplace. Some deaf people were either "fired" from their employment or demoted in their workplace without understanding the reasons. Jacobs explained that because of these problems, many deaf people chose to form themselves into a closely knitted deaf community with clubs and other social and religious functions. Also, the Deaf American in a series of articles reports on the results of interviews with deaf adults on the question of communication problems in their workplaces and in society (Bowe and Sternberg, 1973). The results of these communication barriers are similar to the experiences of other deaf people as described by Jacobs, Woods, and Wiggins.

Joanne Greenberg (1970) in In This Sign uses a fictional story to describe communication obstacles of a hearing daughter and her deaf family who had very little education and experiential opportunities for successful survival in the hearing community. The daughter often acted as interpreter, negotiator, mediator, and decision maker for her parents as was shown in a television program, Love is Never Silent in 1986.

Ernest Tidyman (1974) revealed a true story of a young deaf black man who was without any means of communication and was on trial for

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murder. The story covered the trials and tribulations of a deaf lawyer who defended him, but the defendant was declared incompetent to stand trial because of his lack of ability to understand the court procedures and communicate his actions.

Dr. Larry Stewart (1978) described typical severely handicapped deaf people as having severe limitations in their communication skills in speech, speechreading, writing, reading, hearing, and sign language. These clients required comprehensive diagnostic evaluation and training centers that offer services designed to meet their specific communication needs and prepare them for independent, semi-independent, or sheltered employment and living. Dr. Stewart has suggested that these clients may fit the concept of a Developmentally Disabled client.

Certainly, the magnitude of the handicapping conditions have been documented in both popular and research literature. But only through a direct experience can a real understanding of the magnitude of these problems be comprehended as indicated in many different case studies. I'd like to share with you one case study which illustrates a serious communication problem of a deaf worker who nearly lost his right to a retirement pension:

"A deaf man worked for a unionized bakery shop for four and one-half years before he left the shop to take another job in a different trade. After nineteen years when the company folded, the deaf man was re-employed by the same bakery shop. He was assured that his first four and one-half years with the shop before he left would be retained towards his pension. Shortly afterwards, the bakery shop was bought out by a larger bakery firm. Rules were changed, and the deaf man was not made aware of the changes. His credit toward pension was nullified without his knowledge. He had the union regulation book but did not read it since it was complex and full of jargon he did not

understand. As it turned out, the merger had profound effects on his seniority rights. He was reassigned to a dock area where he would be required to lift heavy boxes. He happened to have a long history of shoulder dislocations, so he told his foreman that he had to refuse to report and requested another assignment. The request was denied and he was stripped of his seniority and placed on the jobber list, which meant that he would work as a substitute only when he was needed. This man did not understand what was going on, so he went along with it for about six months until his son intervened on his behalf. After contact with the union officer and the secretary of the company, and a considerable amount of time, all the difficulties were resolved and the man was reinstated as an employee and received full back pay for the entire period he was a jobber. His credit toward pension was fully restored just before he retired from the company."

The above story exemplifies some of the difficulties that many deaf people encounter in living in a world of work where much information is transferred through speech and reading. This man happens to be my very own beloved father. How many other deaf employees are facing similar situations which are never resolved, and are thus victimized (unknowingly) by the communicative whirlwind of the hearing world? What kind of communication support is needed in business and industry to insure that the rights of deaf employees are not violated? What role does rehabilitation play in preparing the deaf or hard of hearing person for employment and what communication services are needed by rehabilitation services to facilitate employment? With the advent of growing and expanding interpreter referral services and telecommunication relay services, it is possible for rehabilitation personnel to provide orientation about these and other services to potential employers in business and industry.

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Current Communication Issues

In 1982, the New York State Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) established an Advisory Committee on Deafness to identify and address the unique needs of deaf and hard of hearing clients. A document on a model plan concerning services to deaf and hard of hearing persons in New York State was produced by the advisory committee (OVR, 1983). Its development and publication signified a renewed commitment on the part of the New York State OVR to improve and ensure quality services for clients with hearing impairments. While these documented needs were related to providing coordinated and quality rehabilitation services, including vocational diagnosis, evaluation, and adjustment/training, the advisory committee spent a large portion of time addressing the issue related to communication with deaf and hard of hearing clients in the VR system (Hurwitz, 1986).

A study conducted by Joyce and Mathay (1984) revealed that a significant number of cases which were unsuccessful case closures were largely attributed to the lack of counselors' skills to effectively communicate in sign language with their deaf clients, particularly those who are low achieving and do not possess adequate communication and language skills to be able to use an interpreter in the rehabilitation process. The advisory committee reviewed the report and the supporting data, and strongly recommended that the OVR develop guidelines and procedures for evaluating the sign language skills of all rehabilitation counselors for the deaf (RCD's). As a result, a Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (Caccamise and Newell, 1987), was used to assess counselors' sign communication skills. Each counselor received a report on specific recommendations on how they can improve their sign communication skills. Some of the RCD's

received additional sign language training from various sources, including a summer program at Gallaudet University. Now OVR requires that all new candidates for RCD positions in New York State must attain specified proficiency levels in sign communication prior to securing a position as a RCD.

Another major accomplishment of the advisory committee was the establishment of minimum qualifications for sign language interpreters who have not been certified by the national certifying body for interpreters, Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. A set of criteria, procedures, and materials were developed jointly by members of the advisory committee and coordinators of interpreter referral centers.

The advisory committee also played a crucial role in impacting the OVR and the New York State Office of Budget to analyze the fee schedule utilized for payment of interpreters for client service, and recommended adjustments designed to be more competitive with other interpreter agencies in the state. This was necessary in order to recruit, hire and retain qualified interpreters for deaf clients in the rehabilitation process.

Still another significant accomplishment of the advisory committee was the provision of sign language and deafness related training for non-counseling staff in OVR offices. Many deaf clients reported that they were often frustrated by the lack of appropriate sign language skills of secretaries and other staff in the OVR offices, and were often discouraged from going back to the OVR offices for further services. Use of TDD's was also included in the training program to enable office staff to be able to handle TDD calls with deaf clients.

Unfinished Business and Future Directions

The advisory committee has identified other unmet needs related to a supply of qualified

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interpreters, communication needs of deaf and hard of hearing clients in the rehabilitation process, staff training needs and public information about deafness and hearing impairments. These are elaborated in the following paragraphs.

There continues to be a prevailing concern about the scarcity of qualified interpreters to work with deaf and hard of hearing clients in vocational rehabilitation related programs and services. Many places outside of large metropolitan areas lack support and funding to provide interpreter training programs to interested individuals in their geographical areas. The fee structure for interpreters working with deaf and hard of hearing clients is often noncompetitive with the existing market for free-lance interpreters. There is a need to develop policies, procedures, strategies and materials for the evaluation and employment of non-certified interpreters, which should help them to identify their specific needs for interpreter skill development, and eventual certification.

There is a need to provide comprehensive communication evaluation and training to deaf and hard of hearing clients who have either "aged-out" of the school system or are without high school diplomas, including those with minimal language skills. Without these appropriate communication skills for successful job placement and retention, these clients are bound to face serious repercussions on the job. Many anecdotal stories have alluded to the fact that deaf or hard of hearing persons who lack sufficient communication or social skills tend to have difficulties relating with coworkers and handling their job responsibilities. As indicated in the case study in this paper, these workers have often faced the possibility of being "let go" from their jobs.

There is a growing concern about how individuals who are hard of hearing, or who are losing their hearing in later years, may require special assistance with their unique needs. Many

regular VR counselors and RCD's are unfamiliar with the communication needs of hard of hearing clients. These clients can be expected not to know any sign language and may not want to be categorized with other clients who are deaf. Special care must be taken to address their unique needs. To name a few, comprehensive audiological examinations must be provided for all hard of hearing clients experiencing difficulty due to progressive hearing loss. Retraining programs with emphasis on communication skill development must be provided for these hard of hearing clients whose vocational skills are inadequate due to progressive hearing loss.

For deaf people and some hard of hearing clients, interpreter services may not be sufficient for those who wish to upgrade their education for enhanced job maintenance and mobility. It is difficult for many deaf clients to be able to watch an interpreter, or for hard of hearing clients to lipread and hear professors at the same time as they take their own notes. Notetaking and/or tutoring service may need to be supplemented to their overall support service needs.

Assistive devices, including TDD's, assistive listening systems (e.g. FM system, loop system, ultra red system) and visual warning systems (e.g., smoke alarms, telephone lights) must be provided for deaf and hard of hearing clients to assure successful employment. These clients need to be able to communicate directly with their supervisors from home as needed, as well as to communicate with coworkers at their workplace or with customers outside of the company, through use of TDD relay system. They need to be able to communicate with their families from their workplace on an emergency/urgent basis through use of TDD's. Visual warning systems at workplaces should enable deaf/hard of hearing workers to be responsive to emergency or immediate notices (e.g., paging a deaf worker to

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his supervisor's office as needed).

Information materials provided through VR offices must be modified and simplified to appropriately meet the needs of deaf and hard of hearing clients with manual language skills. Support staff, possibly deaf individuals, may be needed to act as a third party between a deaf client and a counselor or an interpreter. It may be necessary for a support staff person to use very basic signs, or at least use mime, to get messages across to these clients.

Staff development funds must be available to improve manual sign communication skills of VR personnel working with deaf and hard of hearing clients. Quality training which is related to a rehabilitation work environment must be provided at recognized training programs.

Furthermore, staff development funds must be available to train at least one counselor in each office to work specifically with hard of hearing clients. Training should include an understanding of the physiological nature of hearing loss, its psycho-sound implications and the nature of the technology developed to alleviate some of the physical and communicative consequences of hearing loss.

Summary

Due to the unique nature of their disability, deaf and hard of hearing clients require a wide array of services designed to facilitate and improve communication skills and their independence and successful employment. Because of the existing language and communication barriers for deaf clients, and increasingly difficult communication modes for hard of hearing clients experiencing degenerative hearing loss, these clients become increasingly isolated within their communities and thus more reliant on the services provided by VR for integration into the society in which they live.

Deaf and hard of hearing people communicate in many different modes with deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing people. Writing on a pad of paper when communicating with hearing people, is a necessity for most deaf people, even though it is slow and cumbersome, especially for a hearing counterpart. However, there are many deaf people who are unable to write down, or even read and understand concise messages. Lipreading is, at best, educated guesswork. If one has ample and usable residual hearing, it may be easier to read lips but, for most deaf people who are able to speechread, it requires uncanny talent, patience, and a good English language base. It also requires vigorous and continuous training from early age, or at the onset of their hearing impairment.

Sign language is used widely in the deaf community, but unfortunately, it still has a long way to go before it gains general acceptance and usage in a larger population. However, it is gaining its momentum as more and more sign language programs are being established throughout the country.

Another approach to bridging communication with other parties is through the use of telecommunication devices (TDD) and other assistive devices for use by and with deaf and hard of hearing people. The TDD relay system allows deaf people and hearing people to communicate with each other over regular telephone lines through an exchange center.

The deaf or hard of hearing person is part of the community. In order to take advantage of communication within the community, the general population should continue to be made aware of the unique needs of deaf and hard of hearing people, and be part of the solution to those needs. It is important for you to talk to as many deaf and hard of hearing adults as possible to learn more about their individual and unique experiences. A good way to become more aware of deaf and hard

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of hearing adults and interact with them appears to be through active membership in local, state, or national organizations that will represent the concerns of the deaf or hard of hearing citizen.

Based on the positive and productive experiences of the Advisory Committee of the New York State Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, in addressing critical issues and needs of deaf and hard of hearing clients in the rehabilitation process, it is imperative for each state agency to consider establishing an advisory committee to identify rehabilitation needs of deaf and hard of hearing persons, and develop/implement various strategies to address these needs. The success and effectiveness of the advisory committee cannot be accomplished without directly involving deaf and hard of hearing persons in the decision-making process. Because of the dynamics in facilitating

communication in advisory committee meetings, it is absolutely necessary to provide a full range of interpreting services and assistive listening devices (e.g., sign language interpreters, oral interpreters and FM/loop systems). All members of the advisory committee, including VR staff and interpreters, must work together to establish principles, guidelines and procedures for an effectively run meeting with individuals of varying hearing losses and communication requirements. The chairperson of an advisory committee must always be aware and sensitive to the communication needs of all people on the committee, and control/facilitate the communication flow to the best of his/her ability with the aid of these support services (e.g., interpreters and assistive listening devices).

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