

Embracing the Elephant in the Room: Interviewing Ideas for Applicants who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

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Abstract

Unemployment is at an all time high and many people are looking for work. Competition for the right job is a challenge and there are specific hurdles faced by job seekers who are deaf or hard of hearing. Unfortunately, many employers know little about hearing loss. This article provides important interviewing ideas for those who are deaf or hard of hearing, with a focus on how the rehabilitation profession can help the job seeker discuss their regarding hearing loss during the job interview thus empowering the deaf or hard of hearing applicant to embrace the elephant in the room.

Keywords: disability, employment, job search, disability disclosure, disability fatigue

Recent research shows that stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities continues in the workplace (Courtwright, 2009; Larson, 2008; Link & Phelan, 2001; McMahon & Hurley, 2008). Whereas employers tend to generally have a positive attitude toward people with disabilities, it has been found that when pressed about hiring behavior, employers often express reluctance to hire applicants with disabilities (Bruyère, Ericson, & Ferrentino, 2003; Hernandez, 2000;). In a 2008 study (Domzal, Houtenville, & Sharma) it was found that only 19.1% of companies reported employing people with disabilities and 72% cited that the nature of their work was *too challenging* for people with disabilities. This is further demonstrated by the October, 2010 report by the Office of Disability Employment Policy which stated that the percentage of people with disabilities who are employed is 21.4% whereas the percentage of persons without a disability is 69.8% (<http://www.dol.gov/odep/>). It is important to note that research in this area focuses on persons with general disabilities with no specific consideration to the population that is deaf or hard of hearing, so statistically significant conclusions about labor market conditions for the deaf and hard of hearing is difficult (Houtenville, 2002).

Rehabilitation professionals have shared that their clients who are deaf or hard of hearing struggle to find gainful employment during this challenging economic time (S. Hoover, personal communication, August 24, 2010). Even with the support of federal laws and mandates, job searchers who are deaf and hard of hearing face an uphill battle in securing employment

in hearing dominated work sites. The 20th anniversary of the ADA was recently celebrated, and whereas there have been noticeable improvements in the understanding and acceptance of disability on a societal level, based on the research cited above there continues to be discrimination in the workplace. In addition, the question remains whether the ADA has been truly helpful in supporting workers who are deaf or hard of hearing. The late Dr. Lawrence Fleischer, chair of the Department of Deaf Studies at California State University, Northridge stated in 2005 that “Workers who are deaf used to be *underemployed*, now they are *unemployed*.” And Christopher Wagner, President of the Florida Association of the Deaf retorted, “employers are afraid of the ADA” (Houston, Lammers, & Svorny, 2010, p. 9). Indeed researchers have found that many employers are concerned with the cost of meeting ADA expectations (Acemoglu & Angrist, 2001; DeLeire, 2003; Peck & Kirkbride, 2001). Employees who are deaf or hard of hearing often need accommodations in the workplace related to communication with their hearing supervisors and colleagues. Possible accommodations for this population include written communication (via emailing, texting, or memos) or the use of a sign language interpreter. A Gallaudet Research Institute, 2003 report stated “written communication is often not an option for workers who are deaf, as weak English reading and writing skills characterize the population that is deaf” (Houston, Lammers, & Svorny, 2010, p. 10). This then leaves the use of interpreters which can be an expensive, reoccurring accommodation for a company.

With this in mind, how can job applicants who are deaf or hard of hearing overcome these obstacles and compete in this tough job market? Many rehabilitation professionals work closely with clients who are deaf or hard of hearing in preparation for employment. A major focus is to help clients find the right employment sites and develop a well thought-out resume which focuses on employment outcomes and has customized the objectives of the specific job. Whereas these are very important steps, there are additional issues to consider.

Searching for a Job is a Job

Even in the best times, job development can be challenging and now we are experiencing one of the toughest job markets in many years. However, this does not mean employers have stopped hiring; they are just using more selective methods. Experts in the field say that job applicants must approach job search as a *job*, and a minimum of four hours a day is

recommended (Bolles, 2010, 2009; O'Neil, 2009). Providing this realistic time commitment can help structure deaf and hard of hearing job searchers' days. What needs to happen in those four hours per day?

There is a lot of information on the internet as well as in books and journals (please see reference list) that can provide creative ideas of how to network and keep abreast of the most up to date job search ideas. Two suggests include resume upgrading and on-line *rebranding*. As stated above, most job applicants know that a well written and concise resume is critical. However, many don't know that it is important to review and individually update the resume for each job application. Rehabilitation professionals can encourage deaf and hard of hearing job seekers to carefully read the description of the desired job and identify the skills and experience they have that match the requirements. Rehabilitation professionals can help the job seeker customize the objectives in the resume to match the description, as well as use the same language or wording found in the job description so there is no question when the employer reviews the resume that this job seeker is a good fit.

Many employers take the time to look up job applicants on-line profiles before offering a job. The concept of *rebranding* refers to the process of giving a product or an organization a new image, in order to make it more attractive or successful (Reverso Dictionary, <http://dictionary.reverso.net/english-cobuild/rebranding>). For the job searcher, this refers to updating all social media sites that are open to the public. It is important to look with a critical eye at pictures and information that may be unappealing to potential employers. Rehabilitation professionals can encourage deaf and hard of hearing job seekers to do a review of their online persona and to ask a family member or trusted friend to provide suggestions. The goal is to have the online virtual presence free of rude comments, embarrassing photos, or any hint of legal troubles. Online accounts should be cleaned up and all personal information secured with passwords or friends only filters. On the other hand, blogs using social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, may actually be helpful because they can highlight unique features that are not included on a resume. This can show potential employers that the applicant is web savvy, aware of current topics in the field, and on the cutting edge.

Preparation for an interview. Whereas finding an announcement for a *good fit* job and preparing a strong resume is important to securing employment, the actual interview is what can make or break an employer's

mind regarding the actual hire of an applicant who is deaf or hard of hearing. Preparing for the interview is crucial. A good way to do this is to encourage deaf or hard of hearing job searchers to schedule an informal informational interview at a site where they would like to work. The job applicant can gather information about the job site and then prepare a list of questions about the job and company that can be discussed with the employer or an employer representative. It is important to encourage the job seeker to take notes during this informal interview and to pay attention to specific words or terms the employer uses when discussing the company and job that is open. These words and concepts can be used in the body of the resume and repeated during the actual interview.

Often overlooked by job seekers is the importance of practicing interview skills with others to help prepare for the actual interview. Rehabilitation professionals know what kinds of questions are often asked in interviews and are invaluable to this process. Mock interviews that are taped can provide immediate feedback to the interested applicant who is deaf or hard of hearing. A visual of how one looks during an interview allows for important changes and improvements for a more successful interview. Rehabilitation professionals can encourage job seekers to practice as often as possible and to try different strategies.

Professional etiquette. First impressions are critical and it is important for the job searchers to present themselves as professional at all times. Employers want people with strong professional etiquette skills. Professional etiquette is based on the expectation of respectful, cultured behavior, including courteous manners, appropriate image, and appropriate communications. Job candidates who make an effort to be courteous always gain a decided edge over competitors who overlook this employer-valued behavior.

The Internet is a common method of communication for job seekers and employers, and is an area where etiquette blunders can occur. Deaf or hard of hearing job applicants can project a more professional image by following the guidelines outlined by Levitt and Harwood (2010):

1. Don't send e-mail messages that contain grammatical, punctuation, or spelling errors; these demonstrate that you aren't competent in these areas, eroding your professional image. Proofread your e-mail messages just as carefully as your cover letter and resume. Use the grammar and

- spelling checker.
2. Use a respectful, business-like tone, not an overly informal one, and avoid slang. Use the standard mix of upper and lower case text—don't use all caps; it projects that you are SHOUTING and is difficult to read. Don't use all lower case text; it is also difficult to read and creates serious errors in capitalization, such as the pronoun, "I," which should always be capitalized. Don't use emoticons (symbols that indicate emotions such as smiling or winking); these are considered unprofessional. Also remember that e-mail communications can be retained permanently and can be forwarded endlessly. Send only appropriate content to relevant recipients.
 3. Always complete the subject line in the e-mail message carefully—think of it as the "headline" of your message. Make the subject relevant to the contents of the message. Misleading subjects are often used to get the message opened, but they usually backfire because people don't like to be manipulated.
 4. Use a professional e-mail address—many applicants make a bad first impression (or disqualify themselves immediately) by using an e-mail address such as "poopsidoodle@provider.com" or "redhotwinner@email.com." These addresses may amuse your friends, but they don't project a professional image to employers.
 5. Leave the "TO" field of the address blank until the body of your message is completed, proofread, and spell checked. You will avoid accidentally sending the message before it's ready to go. When the message is completely ready, add the employer's e-mail address and send.
 6. Be complete. Read and respond completely to all incoming e-mail. Incomplete responses project a lack of professionalism and reliability. Also be complete (provide all necessary information) in messages you initiate.

An important objective for conducting a successful job search is to project a polished and professional image. Rehabilitation professionals can provide valuable feedback and suggestions to help toward this goal. By demonstrating good business etiquette skills in the job search, deaf and hard of hearing applicants can gain a decided edge over other candidates.

Understanding the ADA

Preparing for the interview and practicing professional etiquette are key components to searching for a job for the deaf and hard of hearing applicant. In addition, it is important for job searchers to know their rights. The ADA

provides important legal support for the deaf or hard of hearing job seeker. Whereas Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) makes it unlawful for an employer to discriminate against a *qualified* applicant or employee with a disability, it is critical to remember that the applicant must meet the employer's requirements for the job, such as education, training, employment experience, or skills. In addition, the applicant must be able to perform the *essential functions* or the fundamental duties of the job either on her own or with the help of *reasonable accommodations*. An employer does not have to hire an applicant who is unable to perform all of the essential functions of the job, even with reasonable accommodation. However, an employer cannot reject an applicant only because the disability prevents performance of minor duties that are not essential to the job.

The concept of reasonable accommodations and how it relates to the job interview is important to be understood by the job seeker. The U.S. Department of Justice provides the following definition:

A reasonable accommodation is any modification or adjustment to a job or the work environment that will enable a qualified applicant or employee with a disability to participate in the application process or to perform essential job functions. Reasonable accommodation also includes adjustments to assure that a qualified individual with a disability has rights and privileges in employment equal to those of employees without disabilities. USDOJ (Department of Justice)

It is required by the employer to provide reasonable accommodations to enable deaf and hard of hearing job seekers to be considered for a job opening. An employer cannot refuse to consider the *qualified* deaf or hard of hearing applicant because of the need for a reasonable accommodation to compete for a job. It is important for qualified job applicants who are deaf or hard of to know that they have the right to a modification or adjustment to the interviewing process to accommodate their disability. These accommodations may include different types of visual communication which may include useable technology or a sign language interpreter.

Rehabilitation professionals can advise their consumers as to when to request an accommodation. It is best to let an employer know as soon as possible if a reasonable accommodation is needed for some aspect of the hiring

process. An employer needs advanced notice to provide accommodations such as a sign language interpreter or to adjust the time allowed for taking a written test. The deaf or hard of hearing applicant can make this request orally or in writing, or through the help of a rehabilitation professional.

Disability disclosure. The ADA protects job seekers if they chose not to disclose their disability during the application and interview process. However, Nancy Starnes Director of External Affairs, National Office of Disability (2009), states “Certainly, if you know that your condition is one that you know is going to come up it’s probably a good idea to take the bull by the horns and maintain control of the information flow and disclose it as soon as possible” (Diversity Inc., 2009, para 3). In regards to hearing loss, disability disclosure is often taken for granted because the use of visual communication makes the disability become visible. However, many deaf and hard of hearing applicants are not prepared to talk about their hearing loss and how it may impact their job performance. Likewise, many hearing employers who are not accustomed to working with deaf or hard of hearing employees may be aware of the ADA and wish to be compliant, yet are not sure what they can ask and what they cannot.

The ADA rules change during different stages of employment. During an interview, employers are limited in regards the questions they can ask. The focus of their questions must be on the ability of the interviewee to do the job. The ADA prohibits employers from asking questions that are likely to reveal the existence of a disability before making a job offer. For example, an employer may *not* ask “Do you have a disability which would interfere with your ability to perform the job?” However, the rules change once an employer makes a job offer. Questions about disabilities and medical examinations are permitted after extending a job offer but before the individual begins work. At this stage, the ADA just requires that employer ask the same question to all and to demonstrate consistency. If there is clear evidence that points to a person’s ability to meet the job requirements, then the job offer can be withdrawn. The ADA states that once the deaf or hard of hearing person begins a job, employers can ask questions related to the disability if an employee is struggling to get the job done.

For most job seekers, the interview is the *make or break* point. Disclosure of a disability is critical at this point. As stated above, research finds that employers tend to have positive attitudes toward people with disabilities but are hesitant to hire them. This is the time to *embrace the elephant in the*

room. Employers are required to interview deaf or hard of hearing applicants if their application packet shows them to be qualified. Because the ADA does not allow the employer to ask about how a person's hearing loss may affect them on the job, this is an opportunity for the deaf or hard of hearing applicant to talk about their abilities. The applicant might say "I know you are wondering how a person who is deaf (or hard of hearing) like me might be able to do this job. Well, let me tell you." From here the applicant can talk about what accommodations are available and how the applicant has overcome communication or hearing barriers in the past. In addition, the applicant can acknowledge that the employer may not have experience working deaf or hard of hearing employees and present a prepared list of references of other employers who have successfully hired deaf and hard of hearing persons in the past. The employer can be encouraged to contact these references to talk with them confidentially about the supervisors' experiences having employees with hearing loss.

Of course the focus of the interview is on abilities. Employers need qualified, capable individuals to fill positions. Deaf and hard of hearing applicants need to find a way to show that they are that person. Selling the employer on what they *can do* versus what they cannot, will powerfully change the direction of the interview. A working knowledge of the ADA and the rights it promotes provides deaf and hard of hearing applicants with important resources during job searches.

Employer concerns. As stated earlier, research has found that employers tend to have positive attitudes toward people with disabilities but hesitate to hire them (Bruyère et al., 2003; Hernandez, 2000). With this in mind, it is beneficial for deaf or hard of hearing applicants to go into a job search understanding the employer's concerns. Rehabilitation professionals can help job seekers to understand that most employers lack real knowledge of disability. The employer may go into the interview thinking "it is impossible for a deaf or hard of hearing person to do this job!" Or maybe the employer has no idea how to work with an interpreter or use technology for smoother communication. This is when deaf or hard of hearing applicants have the chance to *embrace the elephant in the room* and teach the employer how to effectively communicate with them, as well as provide information to the employer regarding what they *can do* and where it has been successful in other agencies. Unless employers have a family member or close friend who is deaf or hard of hearing, it is likely they will only know what they have heard from others or through the media. Therefore the employer may have

preconceived ideas of what a deaf or hard of hearing person can or cannot do and what accommodations may be necessary. This is an opportunity for the deaf or hard of hearing applicant to broaden the view of what members in this population are capable of.

Another consideration for the deaf or hard of hearing applicant is to remember that the employer may have limited and biased information regarding the ADA. Perhaps employers think that their hands will be legally tied if they hire a person who is deaf. Or perhaps the thought of accommodations seems overwhelming or cost prohibitive. Some employers may believe that an accommodation will fundamentally alter the nature of the job or that it may be a direct threat or safety issue to other employees. In addition, the employer may have concerns about how an employee who is deaf or hard of hearing can work with established co-workers. An important responsibility of an employer is how to keep the work environment running smoothly. The lack of understanding of disability can bias the employer's beliefs of how employees will interact and communicate with an employee who has a hearing loss.

A common concern for the employer is money; all employers must consider budget. Employers who don't fully understand the ADA may have limited or faulty information regarding employer incentives. This is something deaf and hearing applicants should keep in mind. Rehabilitation professionals can work with job seekers to review with them employer incentives and the ADA. Most employer incentives are aimed at non-state agencies with more than one million dollars revenue. The reported average return is \$28.60 in benefits for every dollar that is invested in an accommodation. In addition there is Work Opportunity Tax Credit as well as Small Business Tax Credit (IRS Code Section 44, Disabled Access Credit) (Fast Facts on Business Tax Credits and Deductions for Employment of People with Disabilities, 2005). Deaf and hard of hearing job seekers can provide contact information for employers if these types of concerns are presented.

Another aspect for the job applicant to consider is that employers probably have questions regarding hiring a person who is deaf or hard of hearing. These questions may include: What will I need to do differently to supervise this deaf or hard of hearing individual? What can I expect from this individual in terms of production? Will I need to compromise what I ask her to do? Can I use my normal approach to correct/discipline the worker? What else might I need to know?

Applicants who bear in mind the questions an employer may have are better ready to address these concerns. Most employers lack exposure to success stories of deaf and hard of hearing employees. As stated earlier, providing an additional reference sheet which includes contact information of other agencies that have successfully hired and maintained employees with hearing loss may be the key to expanding an employer's understanding. Rehabilitation professionals who work with deaf and hard of hearing job seekers to comprehend the ADA and their legal rights provide a strong platform for the job applicant.

Disability Fatigue

It is important for deaf and hard of hearing job seekers as well as the professionals who work with them to recognize *disability fatigue*. This phrase refers to the emotional stress that comes from being individuals being the only one in a particular setting and having to repeatedly explain themselves and their needs. This concept has been considered within racial minority groups (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007) and relates to the fatigue that comes from being a minority member within a majority group. This applies to those who have a disability because they often have to fight the common misconceptions and ignorance of the larger society. People who are deaf or hard of hearing frequently experience isolation in general settings due to communication barriers. Trying to fit in and keep up with communication can be draining. Also, most often the preponderance of responsibility for clear communication falls on the shoulders of the person with hearing loss. Deaf and hard of hearing people talk about both physical and emotional exhaustion after spending time with hearing others (Fellinger, Holzinger, Gerich, & Goldberg, 2007).

Job search by itself can be frustrating, disappointing, and exhausting. When deaf or hard of hearing persons look for employment within organizations that know little about their disability, these emotions can intensify. Rehabilitation professionals can help job seekers examine issues or attitudes that may be triggered during this process. A professional who acknowledges the possibility of disability fatigue can empower the job seeker. Also, talking with others with hearing loss who have confronted disability fatigue can provide invaluable support for the deaf or hard of hearing job searcher.

Rehabilitation professionals need to keep in mind that an important goal is to encourage the job searcher to stay fresh and excited about employment possibilities. It can be very discouraging to deaf and hard of hearing applicants when they face ignorance and bias from the hearing world. This is the time when rehabilitation professionals can help job seekers recognize and overcome the symptoms of disability fatigue.

Embrace the Elephant in the Room

It is a tough time to be looking for employment and research shows that persons with disabilities face even greater challenges than the general public (Bruyère, Ericson, & Ferrentino, 2003; Courtwright, 2009; Hernandez, 2000; Larson, 2008; Link & Phelan, 2001; McMahon & Hurley, 2008). However, the suggestions discussed in this article can make a difference. Rehabilitation professionals play an important role in grooming an effective job applicant. To start with, helping the job seeker to prepare a strong resume and cover letter is essential. Rehabilitation professionals can remind deaf and hard of hearing job searchers to coordinate their abilities with the company objectives as well as focus on questions of essential function or ability to do the job. Another advantage for job applicants is to show how they can be a part of the employment team and to build trust and reassurance during the interview. Setting up role plays with job seekers to help instill a sense of power in what they say and how they can directly address issues during the interview is very beneficial. Practicing with job applicants to show how they can be a part of the employment team is constructive, as is exploring ways to build trust and reassurance during the interview. Rehabilitation professionals can work with applicants who are deaf or hard of hearing to provide examples that show that they can perform at the same high quality as hearing employees, although they may get the job done differently. One way to address employers' concerns about budget, safety, and inclusion, is to prepare a reference sheet of employers who have successfully hired deaf or hard of hearing employees to be presented at the interview.

Rehabilitation professionals are key to supporting deaf and hard of hearing job seekers during this challenging time. To aid in success, it is critical that job applicants consider the tools discussed in this article. Helping applicants *embrace the elephant in the room* by comfortably discussing their hearing loss and its possible impact on the job during the actual interview allows unasked questions of the employer and the interview panel be put on the table. By considering these suggestions, the outcome can create

greater empowerment and sense of agency for the job seeker who is deaf or hard of hearing as well as more accurate and useable information for the employer.

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