

October 2019

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### Recommended Citation

Arnold, M. V. (2019). Affirmative Action and Employment of Deaf Persons: How Rehabilitation Personnel Can Help. *JADARA*, 10(4). Retrieved from <https://repository.wcsu.edu/jadara/vol10/iss4/6>

## **AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND EMPLOYMENT OF DEAF PERSONS: HOW REHABILITATION PERSONNEL CAN HELP**

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**Margaret V. Arnold, CRC**

A survey of recently published literature about employment for the deaf indicates there continue to be numerous unresolved difficulties for the deaf person seeking employment and for supportive agency personnel attempting to locate the appropriate job for the deaf person. Indications in the literature are that there is no easy solution to a problem that evolves out of the deaf person's home environment and is compounded by the generally inadequate available educational programs, insufficiently qualified personnel in helping services such as Vocational Rehabilitation and employment agencies, inadequate community resources, and skeptical employers.

In a recent article Phillips (1975) explored employer attitudes toward hiring the deaf in New York State. In addition, he explored attitudes toward social interaction of deaf workers with their co-workers and limitations on advancement and/or supervisory opportunities for deaf workers. He found stereotypic attitudes toward the deaf worker and the problems he represents. Although Phillips made several general recommendations for improving the employment situation for the deaf, he did not include any references to the new Federal requirements for affirmative action hiring policies, which could have a definite effect on the situation, if utilized well.

### **Purpose:**

This article is primarily concerned with the employer aspect of the problem of the deaf worker. Hanson (1973) states the situation succinctly: "Every new job placement represents a challenge in educating the employer about deafness" (p.97). It was felt there are some positive actions which Vocational Rehabilitation counselors could take to improve the current picture.

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A survey of several businesses of varying sizes was conducted in a representative metropolitan area to determine the extent of contact with the deaf and what, if any, coping mechanisms were utilized for communication. The intent was to use information, ideas, and suggestions which developed from these employer contacts to develop specific recommendations for improving the employment picture for deaf persons. The Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 503, requires an affirmative action policy be instituted by any company who does business with the Federal Government under a contract to provide either personal or non-personal services, including construction, in any amount in excess of \$2,500 (U.S. Department of Labor, 1975). The major thrust of this paper will be to formulate methods for assisting employers to implement affirmative action programs for hiring the deaf, handicapped individual through cooperative efforts with Vocational Rehabilitation personnel.

### The Survey:

The nine companies surveyed were selected with an attempt to include a variety of types of employment. They included government agencies (Federal and State), large companies (a major chain department store, a bank, a utilities company and a major clothing manufacturer), and small businesses (a furniture manufacturer and a dental laboratory).

The number of employees per business ranged from 20 at the furniture manufacturers to 10,800 at the utility company. There were several basic questions asked: (1) How many employees do you have? (2) Have you ever had deaf applicants for employment? (3) How many deaf employees do you currently have and what positions do they hold? (4) How many deaf employees are you aware of in your company during the past two to three years and what were their jobs? (5) What problems were encountered and how did you cope with them during the initial interview and after the deaf person was hired? (6) Would you be interested in attending a workshop designed to orient you (and pertinent supervisory personnel) to working with the deaf? For purposes of this survey "deaf" was defined as a person who is unable to understand speech in most situations with or without a hearing aid.

Contacts with employers were made either by phone or personal contact. The results of the survey are summarized and several general observations follow.

Among the six private businesses surveyed two had never had contact with a deaf applicant. Among these six businesses only two have entry examinations: one is fortunate in having a clerical worker fluent in sign language in the testing department. They have also cooperated with Vocational Rehabilitation counselors in the past in arranging for interpreters for testing situations. The other company has no special way of handling testing with a deaf applicant, but would cooperate with Vocational Rehabilitation

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personnel during testing if requested. The onus is clearly on the applicant or his Vocational Rehabilitation counselor to provide an interpreter for entry tests.

Communication methods utilized during initial interviews varied. One company has an interviewer who knows some sign language. All companies had tried speaking slowly and clearly so the applicant could lipread as well as writing. At one small business, several employees and the owner had taken courses in sign language. In companies requiring medical examination prior to acceptance for employment, the deaf applicant's family or Vocational Rehabilitation counselor is relied upon for assistance. Also in three companies the Vocational Rehabilitation counselor is contacted for assistance once the deaf person is employed and problems of communication develop. Two of the companies found they could utilize other deaf employees for improving communication with new deaf employees.

For those five employers who had experience with deaf employees, all but one were interested in attending a workshop to familiarize them with deafness and how to more efficiently deal with communication problems. They provided interesting suggestions for content of such a workshop. None had developed an affirmative action plan at the time they were interviewed.

Among the five companies who felt they could employ the deaf, two had only three positions they felt were feasible. The other companies saw many different positions which a deaf worker could fill. The fact that this had not yet occurred provides a definite take-off point for discussion in an employer workshop.

Also of value in stimulating discussion would be sharing the attitudes and ideas some of the employers interviewed expressed. For example, whether a deaf person understands he must come to work every day on time and remembering that you don't need to talk louder to a deaf person to help communication—one employer found he was talking louder to all his employees—were mentioned.

Among the three government agencies there were two Federal (Internal Revenue Service and Social Security) and a State Personnel Department (clerical positions only). The Federal agencies each have a Coordinator for Hiring the Handicapped. They have both had deaf applicants and hired some of them, although the number hired is very small. There have only been a few deaf applicants for clerical positions with the State, and only one had been hired, according to the person interviewed. There appeared to be several reasons for the low number hired; low test scores, unsuitability of deaf persons for specific positions available (perhaps due to the need for phone use in job), and lack of aggressive work on the part of Vocational Rehabilitation counselors in searching out available positions and "selling" the deaf applicant. However, with the State clerical jobs it appeared that one major problem is in the complexity of application forms and entry testing procedures. When asked if an interpreter could be allowed in the testing area

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with a deaf person, the personnel officer in charge of testing was unable to give a definite answer and unable to understand why current test procedures may be unfair. It appears there is a definite need here for education and possibly request for adaptation from a higher level than field counselors. Social Security has entry exams but they may be waived under certain conditions at the request of the Vocational Rehabilitation counselor. The same is technically true with the State, but is not as easily accomplished. IRS has entry exams for some positions and would be open to special testing arrangements for the deaf applicant. There was no difference in methods used for communication with deaf applicants and employees by government agencies as compared with those used by private companies.

At IRS, training for the new deaf employees was done in smaller segments than is done with hearing employees. At Social Security they have sign language courses given for any employees who wish to take them.

All persons interviewed felt the inability to use the phone was the most serious handicap and felt that there were numerous positions that could be filled by deaf persons. Representatives of both Federal agencies endorsed the idea of a workshop for employers. The attitude of the two State personnel people interviewed seemed to be that they were uncertain they needed to learn more about the deaf. They did not appear to feel there was a problem within their agency for deaf applicants.

### Observations:

There were a variety of reactions exhibited by employers, ranging from resistance to complete cooperation. In the case of the resistant employer, there is a possibility he may have been disturbed by questions about an affirmative action program for hiring the handicapped. Some very cooperative employers exhibited stereotyped views of how to cope with the communication problem and could improve their means of communication with a better understanding of the deaf. It is interesting that there have been relatively few deaf job applicants at any of these companies. It was surprising to find that no one mentioned problems with the deaf persons' educational level, ability to complete an application, or problems in understanding written notes. Based on readings in the literature concerning vocational maturity among the deaf, this surveyor expected more complaints in this area (Bolton, 1975; McHugh, 1975).

The jobs employers felt deaf applicants could perform generally fell into unskilled or semi-skilled areas. There appeared to be acceptance of deaf clerical workers where phone use was not required. There were no instances among the businesses surveyed of deaf professional and/or supervisory employees either now or in the past; there were indications from a few of the businesses that supervisory positions might be feasible.

There appears to be a need to upgrade current deaf employees and to open up jobs above the semi-skilled level. This cannot be accomplished just

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through education of employers. It is essential to improve the prevocational experiences of deaf youth, both at home and in school. They must be given the opportunity to develop their vocational potential to the maximum as has recently been indicated by several writers (Bolton, 1975; Lorman, 1970; McHugh, 1975).

In several cases employers indicated that having one good deaf employee made hiring the next deaf person easier because the two could probably assist each other in training, retraining, etc.

### Recommendations:

Out of these observations and from reading recent literature come several recommendations to improve the vocational scene for the deaf. Recommendations are grouped into five areas.

#### 1). Education Programs

Jochem (1970) suggests rigorous schooling in work habits and attitudes and in the ability to relate well to others in addition to improved vocational and academic training in schools for the deaf. He suggests combining efforts among schools for the deaf to provide several quality curriculum options for deaf students.

Silver (1970) suggests more contact between schools for the deaf and local businesses to keep school programs updated. Based on his findings, Lorman (1970) states that "apparently, both the type and level of the deaf adolescent's vocational preference become stabilized at a relatively young age." If this is true, the need to improve programs in schools for the deaf cannot be overemphasized.

#### 2). Vocational Rehabilitation Programs

More aggressive rehabilitation counselors with creativity and flexibility are needed to assist the deaf person who is job ready. One problem appears to be the necessity for convincing supervisors of the need for such innovations as interpreter services for on the job training and for training in vocational schools not equipped to instruct the deaf. The idea of a workshop to educate Vocational Rehabilitation supervisory and administrative personnel to deafness is suggested. There is also a need for work adjustment training personnel to assist a deaf person in job adjustment either prior to employment or once he has obtained employment. The concept of WAT after employment is a new one in my experience and is worth a try—especially for low verbal deaf young persons.

Careful placement and follow-up services are stressed as necessities by Lauritsen (1970). Jackson (1974) suggests the creation of a placement specialist for the deaf to work cooperatively with the rehabilitation counselor. Jochem (1970) states the situation succinctly: "A proper placement of a good deaf worker has never failed to open up future jobs."

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### 3). Workshop for Employers

The response from most employers contacted was positive. Some even made suggestions. It is clear there are numerous misunderstandings, stereotypical ideas, and unintentional discriminations, which may be correctable through a workshop organized to orient employers to deafness. This could assist them in implementing affirmative action programs to hire the deaf by working out more appropriate testing procedures where entry tests are required, by suggesting appropriate methods of communication with a deaf employee, and by dispelling some of the fears about safety hazards and training problems.

Positive aspects of deaf employees, such as ability to work in noisy areas, thus resolving the problem created for some industries by recent industrial noise legislation, could be pointed out (Vernon, 1975). Information should be shared regarding how other companies have worked out such problems as "architectural barriers" to hiring the deaf (U.S. Civil Service Commission, 1974).

A useful audio visual presentation would include illustrations of deaf persons already employed in a variety of jobs. One essential thrust of the workshop should be to help employers see Vocational Rehabilitation personnel as resource persons who can assist them in developing affirmative action programs which meet the requirements of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 503.

### 4). Orientation Package

Although a workshop can provide general information for the future or to improve present situations on the job, it seems that there is a need for something more immediate. For example, what could an employer who hires a deaf applicant today do to provide answers to questions asked by the supervisors and co-workers? A multi-media orientation package is an idea worth exploring. This could include: (1) slides and/or a film of interaction between a deaf worker and his co-workers; (2) lists of resource persons (such as Vocational Rehabilitation counselors for the deaf and interpreters); (3) lists of pertinent reading material; (4) recordings of how speech sounds to a deaf person at varying dB levels; (5) alphabet cards and some illustrations of basic signs. This idea needs development in all aspects including how it could be distributed most effectively.

### 5). Employer Advisory Council

At present, efforts by Vocational Rehabilitation staff are underway in the metropolitan area involved in this study to set up a board of employers who are willing to work with Vocational Rehabilitation counselors in assessing job readiness of clients, in sharing problems about hiring the handicapped, and in eventually suggesting specific job possibilities within local companies which might fit a client under discussion. This is visualized

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as a cooperative effort which could be of benefit to employers, clients, and counselors. Efforts will be made to familiarize employers with the special problems and advantages of deaf employees present.

### Summary

These are recommendations for improving the current scene in employment of deaf persons. Admittedly, they are based on a limited survey, but it is felt the responses obtained in this survey are representative.

There are definitely steps employers need to make to eliminate current discrimination against the qualified deaf job applicant. There is also a great deal that must be done by professionals working with the deaf to enhance their vocational maturity and skill qualifications and to educate employers. If the deaf job applicant has really acquired optimum vocational and language skills from his home, educational, and prevocational experiences, he will be a highly marketable person with need for very little supportive assistance. This should be rehabilitation's goal.

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