



Submission to the discussion paper:

**Improving the employment participation of people
with disability in Australia**

15 February 2013

Deaf Australia appreciates the opportunity to comment on the discussion paper and share ideas on how to improve the employment participation of people with disability in Australia.

Deaf Australia is the national peak body that represents the interests of Deaf people who use Auslan. Deaf people who use Auslan are generally bilingual in Auslan and English, to varying degrees of fluency in one or the other or both. Most can and want to work.

Many of the issues that deaf people face in the workplace have little to do with their deafness per se, and much to do with the lack of appropriate early intervention, family support and education. For Deaf people, disability is relative: in a room full of Deaf people, it's the hearing person who can't sign who is disabled.

In response to the discussion paper, we make the following comments.

Main barriers faced by deaf people in employment

a) Communication

Communication is a major issue for deaf people. There is a great deal of diversity among deaf people themselves. Some have good speech, lipreading and listening skills, some use mainly Auslan, some use a mixture of Auslan and speech.

The phone is a constant issue. There are alternatives to a standard voice phone that deaf people can use, but often employers are not open to these alternatives and insist that if the person cannot use a standard phone then they cannot do the job.

Because of these communication issues, deaf employees are often relegated to backroom jobs and are not considered for other jobs that they could do very well with some adjustments.

Not being able to use the phone as more people are computer literate and phones often go with the job. Very hard to get office work no matter how experienced I am. I have been made redundant unfairly three times and I was a far better worker than my hearing peers!
– Deaf Australia member

Employers often don't want to provide interpreters and the Deaf person needs to be confident enough to advocate for it; many do not have such confidence.

For many deaf people, English is their second language and it can be difficult for them to read guidelines and work instructions in English.

Inflexibility about communication also is an ongoing problem. As an example, Skype is an excellent communication tool for deaf people but it is prohibited in government departments and many businesses.

Many government departments have video conferencing facilities but it is restricted to the top public servants, and there are not many 'top' deaf public servants. Most deaf people are in the 'grassroots' part of the public service and therefore cannot access video conferencing facilities or have Skype on their computer.
– Deaf Australia member

b) Employer attitudes; mistaken beliefs about occupational health and safety

Ignorance, prejudice and stereotypical beliefs are rife among employers. Many also have mistaken beliefs about occupational health and safety being an issue.

Many deaf people have good qualifications and experience and are bilingual in Auslan and English, but find it hard to get jobs and promotions simply because of employer's ignorance about deaf people.

Employers/interviewers judge us on our deafness, the Anti-discrimination law makes NO difference! Employers use stealth with excuses of all sorts even though I KNOW I am perfectly suited for a job! They just don't want the effort of having a deaf person there to communicate with! I am sick of that attitude of theirs! Other issue is too many jobs require customer service and phones, we need more jobs that don't require this. Plus, employers go on and on about safety issues, and I do not care at all! I know how to be safe, I find it offensive when an employer assumes that I don't know how to keep MYSELF safe, I have eyes! They should know this!
– Deaf Australia member

c) Lack of deaf-specific employment training and assistance programs

Although there are some deaf-specific employment services, there is still a lack of deaf-specific employment assistance and training programs that assist people who are deaf with the skills they need to secure employment.

Deaf specific employment services are not available for people who are already in work for more than 15 hours per week but need help to find new or better jobs or promotions.

d) Resources for deaf people are seen by employers as too costly / lack of awareness of available supports and how to get them

Many resources that help level the playing field for deaf people, e.g. interpreting and real time captioning, are expensive and many employers do not want to have to pay these costs.

Interpreting and captioning costs, up to a limit of \$6000 pa, are covered by the Employment Assistance Fund (EAF), but many employers are not aware of the EAF, and for many deaf people the \$6000 cap is too low for the needs of particular jobs.

Practical and workable approaches to make a real improvement to employment outcomes and workplace equality for deaf people

a) Provision of communication access tools

The Employment Assistance Fund (EAF) is an excellent resource and funds a variety of communication tools that help level the playing field, but there are some issues with it that need to be addressed:

- Employers need to be better informed about the EAF
- EAF rules need to be more flexible and person/job centred. For some types of jobs, \$6000pa is more than is needed, for other types of jobs it is nowhere near enough.

There are many communication tools that deaf people can use in lieu of a voice phone but employers are inflexible in their thinking. As an example, Skype (with higher speed ADSL2+ Internet access) is an excellent communication tool but governments and many businesses do not permit its use in the workplace. Employers need to be educated about the benefits of flexibility in the use of these communication tools.

When hearing co-workers have even limited skills in Auslan, workplace culture and inclusion improve for deaf people. Auslan classes are included in the EAF but again, employers are not widely aware of this. Government needs to promote the EAF much more widely to employers.

Deaf people of working age are not eligible for free hearing aids, and they are no longer included in the EAF. This is a major issue for those who rely on hearing aids because they

are expensive and many deaf people are on low or middle incomes. Government needs to fund the provision of hearing aids for deaf people of working age.

Even when Auslan interpreting is made available, it can be difficult to book interpreters at short notice and this can be a problem in the workplace, e.g. when meetings are called at short notice. Having Auslan interpreters on call when needed, e.g. via video relay technology would help this situation. Some workplaces that employ a number of deaf people have found an effective solution by employing qualified interpreters on staff to interpret for both staff and customers. Westpac is a good example of this.

b) Improved early intervention, family support, education, and services to develop the individual's independence and skills including self-advocacy

The current systems for early intervention, family support and education for deaf people need to be improved.

When deaf people are well educated, skilled and self-confident, they are more able to hold their own in workplaces that may not initially be deaf-friendly and they need less ongoing support.

c) More flexible workplaces and job design

Many jobs have the potential for flexible design and employers could be encouraged to rethink how jobs are designed. As an example, two people doing essentially the same type of work could exchange parts of their jobs.

Governments and large organisation could be encouraged to relax their restrictions on the use of certain types of technology such as Skype.

d) Develop positive attitudes, open mindedness to difference

Working with deaf people does not have to be difficult; it is mainly an issue of awareness and understanding. Training employers and co-workers to understand how to work with deaf people also has the benefit of improving their ability to provide good service to deaf customers.

Awareness training should be compulsory and properly funded by government and delivered by deaf people themselves so that employers and co-workers have direct experience of interacting with a deaf person and misconceptions can be more readily dispelled.

e) Incentives to give people a chance

Many misconceptions about deaf people can be dispelled simply by experiences of positive interactions with deaf people.

The jury is out on the issue of quotas. Some people believe they are helpful, others do not. On the whole, Deaf Australia believes that quotas are only effective when they are voluntary and enforced quotas are counterproductive.

Other incentives could be considered, e.g., tax concessions, funding bonuses for long term (full time permanent) employment of deaf/disabled people, naming and publicly praising employers who do the right thing.

Incentives need to be widely promoted to employers, they are of little use if employers do not know about them.

Government needs to promote the positive attitude that employing people with disabilities will promote greater independence and self-esteem for people with disabilities and less dependence on government funds for welfare.

e) Raise awareness about available assistance – EAF etc

Awareness of the EAF is low among employers. Many deaf people also are not aware of what supports are available through the EAF or how to access these supports. Government needs to make this information more widely known.

f) Ongoing support/education/mentoring for employers

It is not sufficient for employers to have one-off awareness training. Unless they have well established and successful employment programs for people with disabilities, they need to have ongoing education, support and mentoring.

It is important to constantly remind even successful employers and management how important and valuable it is to employ deaf people and to make them feel their contributions to the economy and society are valued.

g) Quotas

As previously noted, the jury is out on the issue of quotas. On the whole, Deaf Australia believes that quotas are only effective when they are voluntary and enforced quotas are counterproductive.

However, our members have made the point that there is a need for an over-haul of deafness-related organisations in Australia. Many organisations providing services for deaf people and advocating employment of deaf people do not themselves practice what they preach. Those that do employ deaf people tend not to promote them to decision-making levels. Quotas for these organisations for employment of deaf people at all levels, not just at entry level, could be considered to be appropriate.

h) Raising public awareness / culture change

Media attitudes towards deaf/disabled people need to be vastly improved. The media has a huge influence on cultural attitudes. Can government develop a program to improve the media's understanding of the importance of and willingness to promote positive attitudes towards people with disability?

Publicity campaigns to make knowledge more widespread on how to include deaf people in the workplace and make deaf/disabled people more publicly visible, including in leadership roles.

There is enormous scope to tell success stories on television, have an EAF advertisement campaign, positive stories in the newspapers, 'Australian Story' equivalent TV show about people with disabilities, and examples of successful people doing their jobs to show that deaf/disabled people are not essentially different to their hearing/non disabled colleagues.

Publicity about disability is generally not done well. Such campaigns need to include people with disabilities in their design and production.

The inclusion of information in Auslan on government web sites and job access websites will also help to make deaf people and their sign language more visible and commonplace.

i) Public service to lead the way and develop best practice

Like disability service providers, governments need to practice what they preach. The Public Service needs to become a best practice model for employing people with disabilities and set the benchmark.

j) Dedicated internships

Government could provide public service internships and fund mainstream business internships specifically for deaf/disabled university and TAFE graduates.

k) Employers motivating other employers

There are some employers who are already doing good things, e.g., IBM and Westpac employ deaf people and provide supports and adjustments to level the playing field, and both have great stories to tell about how this benefits their business. Can these employers and their experience be harnessed as motivators for other businesses?

Disclosure

Generally our members expressed the view that employers should be required to report on employment of people with disabilities, but for people with disabilities themselves, disclosure should be voluntary.

When deaf people disclose their deafness, disclosure can be helpful, but this is usually only the case if the employer is already predisposed to be open minded about deaf people.

If the employer is not already open minded, disclosure, particularly early in the recruitment process, tends to result in a negative outcome for deaf people. There are many stories of deaf people who are qualified for jobs being offered an interview when they have not disclosed their deafness, and not being offered an interview when they have disclosed.

Generally Deaf Australia believes that for disclosure to be effective, employer awareness needs to have significantly improved first.

Information sought from employers

In addition to the information listed in the discussion paper, the following information could also be sought from employers:

- What type of support, technology, aids are provided to employees;
- Salary comparisons with hearing/non-disabled people employed at the same level;
- Additional costs incurred;
- What other supports the employer feels they need.

For further information please contact:

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