

POSITION STATEMENT

TITLE: EMPLOYER & EMPLOYEE DEAFNESS EDUCATION

ISSUE:

Awareness in many workplaces is still at the level of “deaf equals stupid”. Generally this would point to a lack of knowledge about hearing loss and the perception of noise and sound wave vibrations over a given frequency range.

It is essential when considering the issue of employer education regarding hearing loss to make a distinction between levels of hearing loss. A major concern of employers faced with a profoundly deafened employee is one of safety. Typically, an employer is worried that a shouted warning will not alert the worker to impending danger. For a worker who has a degree of hearing, the concern for employers tends to be about communication. This would seem to suggest that employers would employ a profoundly deaf person for menial or physical work, whereas their expectations for someone who is “merely” hearing impaired are much higher. For a worker who is Deaf, the concern for employers again tends to be about communication. In that case, employers frequently (and incorrectly) would think that the Deaf person could not function effectively in the workplace because of their “inability” to communicate with other employees or clients of the business.

Special considerations need to be given for those without a sufficient level of hearing to enable two way vocal communications in the workplace. It is often difficult to reach the person responsible for creating the employment criteria and who, as a result, holds the key to the workplace door for many from the Deaf and hearing impaired communities.

It is within small businesses particularly that changes need to be effected. One of the major hurdles is that small business sees workplace modifications as a cost with little prospect of profitable return. Only specific education, and legislation, will erode and alter such a belief.

An equal consideration to the need for attitudinal change amongst employers is the need for a similar change in prospective employees. Many people who are Deaf or hearing impaired are among the Long Term Unemployed (LTU). They are at risk of becoming unemployable for the same reason that many hearing LTU would. It is, therefore, necessary to parallel employer education programs with a similar program for employees with a view to establishing good long-term work relationships.

It is important to provide a high degree of support for a worker/employer relationship, particularly when that relationship is new. Effective education of employers should start with the various Federal, State, and Territory agencies with responsibility for workplace relations and health. It should be formally institutionalised so as not to widen the gulf between “what is” and “what should be”.

POSITION:



That the various Federal, State and Territory government departments and agencies with responsibility for workplace relations and health matters should implement programs designed to educate both employers and employees as to how to establish appropriate workplace environments for people who are Deaf or have a hearing impairment.

That tertiary institutions with Deaf and hearing impaired students should implement programs to educate prospective employers.

COSTS OF POSITION:

No specific costing undertaken by Deafness Forum.

RESEARCH BASIS:

No specific research undertaken by Deafness Forum.

APPROVED: Board - 29 October 2000.

REVIEWED: Board - October 2001, 25 October 2004.

DATE OF NEXT SCHEDULED REVIEW: No review currently scheduled.