

UNDERSTANDING WORKPLACE EXPECTATIONS:
A STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF PRELINGUALLY DEAF
WORKERS AND EMPLOYERS

By

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the understanding of workplace expectations of a group of deaf workers. Nine males and fifteen females, ranging in ages 18 to 48, all prelingually deaf, and whose preferred mode of communication was Auslan (Australian Sign Language), participated in the study. All had a history of extended periods of unemployment, interspersed with short-term vocational training courses that had not resulted in long-term employment. Ten of the participants were individuals identified as low-functioning deaf (LFD) characterised by their limited communication skills in sign language, English and presence of secondary disabilities.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the extent the deaf participants understood employer expectations and how this knowledge may have impacted their employment success. Each deaf participant completed a 25-item written questionnaire exploring their views about workplace behaviours. A group of 100 employers from the Western Sydney area completed the same survey. The 24 deaf participants were interviewed regarding how they prioritised the items in the questionnaire and were asked to describe their workplace experiences. Subsequently, both data sets were analysed and compared.

The participants were divided into four subgroups based on their employment status: employed/unemployed and functional levels: medium/LFD. Analysis of questionnaire rankings indicated the employed participants' responses showed good understanding of employer expectations. Results for the unemployed participants were divided; the rankings for the medium-functioning unemployed participants were very similar to

the employed participants except in four areas. Predictably, the unemployed participants with LFD demonstrated a much lower understanding of employer expectations.

The qualitative interviews provided further insight into the deaf participants' attitudes towards employment and the importance of meeting employer expectations. Additionally the interview transcripts identified many workplace problems experienced by the deaf participants which contribute to a lack of correspondence. The findings suggest deaf workers' dissatisfaction with their workplace conditions may play a role in their ability to sustain employment. Therefore, meeting employer expectations can be seen as only one of many components of successful employment.

The findings suggest that both deaf workers and employers would benefit from greater understanding of each others' perspectives about the workplace. Seven topics are recommended for inclusion in future curricula. Better understanding of each others' views can support improved workplace relationships, employment retention and satisfaction levels.

CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP OF THESIS

Except where clearly acknowledged in footnotes, quotations and the bibliography, I certify that I am the sole author of the thesis submitted today entitled –

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A STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF
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I further certify that to the best of my knowledge the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis. The material in the thesis has not been the basis of an award of any other degree or diploma except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

The thesis complies with University requirements for a thesis as set out in <http://www.canberra.edu.au/secretariat/goldbook/forms/thesisrqmt.pdf>



Signature of Candidate



Signature of Chair of the Supervisory Panel

10th August, 2007

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We learn the rope of life by untying its knots. (Jean Toomer)

This study began during my studies for a degree in Adult Education at the University of Western Sydney from 1995 to 1996. It took shape during the conception, government funding, implementation, and closure of the Australian College for the Deaf (ACD), a federally funded program that provided employment preparation training for deaf and hard of hearing jobseekers under my directorship. The desire to learn from the praxis of action research began a journey from Australia to Washington, DC in 1996 because I was keen to learn what international benchmarks existed in the education and preparation of people who are deaf for employment. Over 10 years this work has gestated, formed, and matured into this dissertation. This work is based on an understanding of the relevance of vocational rehabilitation and training to the wider community. It is informed by theory and moulded by research approaches into an empirically experienced and theoretically informed account of the relevance and value of contemporary employment preparation programs for deaf jobseekers.

The thesis has local, theoretical, and international background material and adopts complementary research methods in order to make a meaningful contribution to future training programs. The importance of sharing information about successful vocational rehabilitation programs was recognised by Long (1992b) especially in light of the limited amount of empirical research about the workplace experiences of people who are deaf and low-functioning (LFD). The study combines quantitative and qualitative research (historical narrative, action research, and critique) to illuminate the challenges and barriers that prevent

many skilled and willing deaf people from becoming employed. As a researcher I have learned through this study to find my own voice, to see issues in vocational rehabilitation more clearly and to understand the skills of defining, identifying, and looking for evidence before rushing into hasty conclusions. The journey has been long and has covered geographies from Australia to North America, but it was an illuminating and empowering journey.

Importantly, none of these programs would have been possible without the support and funding of the Australian Federal Government. I am extremely grateful to Mr. Finn Pratt of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and Mr. David Cosgrove for their confidence and support for the training initiatives I proposed to the Department. The journey towards the completion of this thesis was facilitated by the encouragement and support of my colleagues, friends and family. I would like to particularly thank Dr. Alison Elliott for her support throughout my candidature, Pamela Taylor for her expert interpreting support, and Cath Raby of the University of Canberra for her on-going assistance. Many vocational rehabilitation professionals in the deaf community were willing to share their knowledge and experiences with me. I am very grateful in particular to Dr. Shawn Saladin from the University of Texas-Pan American for his insight and encouragement. I am profoundly thankful to my armchair reviewers for their contributions to this project. Thanks also to my son William for his patience and to my parents for their continued encouragement over the years. I would like to thank Dr. Suzanne Manness and Steven Lane for their editorial assistance and Frank Hall for his statistics support.

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