

# Workplace Communication for Deaf & Hard-of-Hearing Employees



Employers can have concerns related to hiring students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing (HH), often because they're not sure how to best communicate with them. Explain to your industry partner how you effectively communicate with your deaf/HH student. The best advice to give your industry partner is to not make assumptions about communication needs, but instead just ask. Below are strategies for communicating with deaf/HH people.

## One-on-One Conversations

- Ask the person how they identify – deaf or hard-of-hearing. The term “hearing impaired” is not used. The terms “mute” or “deaf and dumb” are offensive.
- Look at and speak to the deaf person, not the interpreter.
- Clearly explain the topic of the conversation, and again when the topic changes.
- Point to or hold up any items that you're talking about. Hold up fingers to indicate numbers. Mimic actions, e.g., holding a phone to your ear, typing, or texting.
- Speak in a normal voice, at a normal pace, and keep your face and mouth visible to the deaf/HH person. Shouting or over-enunciating distorts your lips, making it difficult to speechread (lipread) for deaf/HH people who do so.
- Ask the deaf/HH person open-ended questions or to review key points of the conversation, to ensure understanding.
- If you are not understood, first repeat what you said, then try to rephrase the statement. Encourage the deaf/HH person to let you know if you're unclear.
- Ensure appropriate lighting so you and the interpreter can be seen clearly.
- Choose a quiet environment. Be aware of distractions or noises in the environment that can disrupt effective communication.

## Group Communication

- Establish communication protocols. When people are talking at the same time or having side conversations, it can be confusing and difficult for a deaf/HH person to follow the conversation. Setting rules at the beginning of a meeting for taking turns speaking is very helpful.
- Provide an interpreter for group meetings if needed. Due to the complexity of a group meeting, the deaf/HH person may need additional resources; ask if they prefer sign language interpreting or captioning.
- Be aware of the lag time in translation. Typically, there is a few seconds' lag time between what is spoken and what is being captioned/interpreted, so responses from a deaf/HH person may be slightly delayed. Slow the pace of the meeting and include pauses or breaks to allow the deaf/HH person time to catch up. Watch for signals that deaf/HH person wants to contribute.

- Face the room when speaking. Walking around or turning away can interfere with communication. If you need to turn away, pause and then resume speaking when you are facing the group.
- Providing an agenda or meeting materials in advance provides the deaf/HH person and any interpreters an understanding of what will be discussed.
- It can be difficult for a deaf/HH person to pay attention to a speaker and the interpreter/captioning while taking notes at the same time. Consider having someone take notes during meetings and share them with everyone after.
- Make sure the room supports good communication. Let the deaf/HH person determine the best seating arrangement to see the speaker and interpreter. Consider rearranging tables and chairs so everyone can see each other.
- It can be difficult for a deaf/HH person to look at a handout or peruse a slide presentation while they are paying attention to the interpreter or presenter. When using slides or a handout, pause to let the deaf person review before you proceed.

## Telephone or Video Conference Meetings

To ensure meetings are accessible for all participants, consider the following:

- Consider taking a roll call at the beginning of the meeting so that everyone is made aware of who is involved in the meeting.
- Set communication protocols.
- Have one person speak at a time. For videoconferencing, have people raise their hand and wait to be called on before speaking.
- Ask meeting participants to identify themselves by name before speaking, and address people by name.
- Consider the lag time in interpreting.

## Additional Resources

- DeafTEC Working Together - <http://workingtogether.deaftec.org>
- NTID Center on Employment - <https://www.rit.edu/ntid/nce/employers>
- Job Accommodation Network - <https://askjan.org/disabilities/Deafness.cfm>
- Safety Pro - <https://www.safetyproresources.com/blog/loud-clear-ensuring-safety-for-deaf-workers> (<https://tinyurl.com/aaSafetyPro>)
- National Deaf Center - <https://www.nationaldeafcenter.org>



Developed in conjunction with DeafTEC, part of the Rochester Institute of Technology: <https://deaftec.org/>



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