

Tips for Working with Deaf Consumers and Sign Language Interpreters

Tips for Using Interpreters Effectively:

- ✚ While it may be a new experience for you, the first thing you need to do is relax. Speak at a natural speed and tone of voice. While it may seem odd at first to be communicating through a third person, the process works best if you try to communicate directly to the Deaf person speaking to them as you would anyone else.
- ✚ Interpreters have the responsibility to do their best to interpret all communication. Anything you say will be interpreted. The same is true of the Deaf or Hard of Hearing person. If you need to have private communication with a colleague, move to a separate location.
- ✚ Speak at your natural pace but be aware that the interpreter may wait to hear and understand a complete thought before beginning to interpret. The interpreter will let you know if you need to repeat or slow down.
- ✚ Look at and speak directly to the deaf person. Do not say “tell him” or “tell her.” The deaf person will be watching the interpreter and glancing back and forth at you. Remember that when the interpreter speaks, he/she is voicing the words of the deaf individual. The interpreter is not a participant in the interaction. Respond directly to the deaf person.
- ✚ Interpreters pledge to abide by a code of professional conduct that requires adherence to strict standards of confidentiality, neutrality, professionalism, and respect for consumers. Follow the link to view the RID Code of Professional Conduct - <http://rid.org/ethics/code-of-professional-conduct/>
- ✚ Interpreters will keep all information confidential. This includes information they may know about the client from other interpreting settings. It is best not to ask the interpreter about the Deaf consumer. Ask the Deaf person directly and the interpreter will be happy to facilitate the communication.
- ✚ Interpreters often work in teams. If assignments are more than an hour in length or content is complex, there will be two interpreters. They will switch every 15-20 minutes per industry standard.

Useful Tidbits:

- ✚ Lip-reading: many deaf people do not lip read at all, as only about 35% of what is spoken is visible on the lips.
- ✚ American Sign Language (ASL): Linguistically, ASL is a separate language from English with its own syntax and grammar. Not all Deaf are bilingual and therefore written English communication may not be an effective way to communicate.
- ✚ Sign Language is not universal. While American Sign Language is used in the United States and Canada, most countries have their own distinct sign languages.
- ✚ Information sharing in a collectivist culture: It's not unusual for Deaf people to be completely comfortable talking about personal topics like health, salary, and how much their mortgage is, even with people they don't know well. In Deaf culture, information sharing is valued, so it isn't considered rude to ask questions that may seem overly personal to hearing people.
- ✚ Deaf People Can Be Very Direct: Similar to the value placed on information sharing, Deaf people can be direct with comments and questions about topics that hearing people often consider rude. For example, Deaf people don't consider it rude to make comments such as, "You've really gained weight—what happened?" In fact, not commenting on an obvious change like weight gain can come across as aloof or uncaring.
- ✚ High context vs. low context cultures: Deaf culture is considered a "high context" culture. When you ask a question that would typically get you a short one or two word answer in English, a Deaf person could potentially give you a lot more context than you are accustomed to. If you are looking for a yes or no answer, specify that before asking your question.
- ✚ Getting someone's Attention: To get someone's attention, Deaf people might tap someone on the shoulder. Or, they might bang or tap on a table so that the vibrations cause everyone at the table to look toward the source of the vibrations.