Access to employment for deaf graduates, employees and jobseeking signers: findings from the DESIGNS project

Haaris Sheikh, Trinity College Dublin
Jemina Napier, Heriot-Watt University
Audrey Cameron, Heriot-Watt University
Lorraine Leeson, Trinity College Dublin
Christian Rathmann, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
Chris Peters, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
John Bosco Conama, Trinity College Dublin
Rachel Moiselle, Trinity College Dublin

Employment represents a central component in most adults' lives, providing economic security and social stability, and satisfying psychological needs (Blustein, 2008). Deaf people face structural challenges when accessing and maintaining employment when compared to their hearing counterparts, as well as large gaps in earnings (e.g. Walter et al, 2013). There has been limited research on the experiences of deaf job-seekers, employees, and sign language interpreters, and there have been few if any evidence-based resources that can address or mitigate these challenges. The Erasmus+ funded DESIGNS project (2016-2019) used an action research approach to explore the situation of deaf graduates[183] who are employees or jobseekers as well as employers and sign language interpreters, to inform and produce training materials for these stakeholder groups in Ireland, Germany and the UK. The overall aims of DESIGNS were to create evidence-based resources for Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and to share exemplar practices from across Europe to facilitate greater participation of deaf signers in employment; encourage employers to understand and to accomodate the needs of deaf employees; and provide employment-context training to sign language interpreters. The project team included seven organisations and institutions from four European countries who contributed their expertise in the fields of education and training, employment, sign language interpreting and deaf community advocacy. This chapter presents a summary of the study including its background, methodology, and findings (see Figure 1).[184]

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[183] 'Graduates' refers to people that have completed further or higher education to obtain profession-relevant qualifications.

[184] This chapter draws on Napier et al. (2020). Some content has been used, adapted and reproduced with the kind permission of the project coordinator, Interesource Group (Ireland) Limited and the SLSCS/CDS Monograph series editor Lorraine Leeson.

Figure 1: Employment for deaf signers in Europe. Research findings from the DESIGNS project.

Background: Deaf signers and employment

Studies on the sociology of work have moved away from analysing what constitutes a profession, and toward examining the relationship between societal forces and occupational strategies and a person's ability to obtain a professional status and identity (Klegon, 1978). Studies of employees with disabilities, however, have found that regardless of the occupational strategies utilised, they still experience various social and environmental barriers in the workplace (Barnes & Mercer, 2005). Various legal instruments identify people with disabilities as a protected group, which should prevent discrimination in the workplace, but employees with disabilities still experience stigmatisation due to the stereotypical assumptions of others (Mik-Meyer, 2016). In order to do their job, many people with disabilities require adjustments/accommodations that have to be negotiated on an ad hoc basis with managers who may have little understanding of what is needed (Foster, 2007). Legislatively, in occupational contexts, deaf people are also situated as 'disabled', and for them the adjustment/accommodation is typically a sign language interpreter.

There has been a contentious debate between the societal perceptions of deaf people as being disabled, and their status as 'sign language peoples' (De Meulder, 2015; Napier & Leeson, 2016). This is because legislative instruments often frame sign language rights within the context of disability rights (De Meulder, 2015; World Federation of the Deaf, 2018) and regard deaf signers' linguistic status as a disability access issue. The World Federation of the Deaf (2018, pp. 10–11) argues that an intersectional stance should be taken that situates deaf signers as part of both language and disability minority groups:

> *...deaf people differ from other linguistic minorities in one important way – while many users of minority languages are able to learn and function in majority languages, deaf people are usually unable to fully access the spoken languages of their surrounding environment because of their auditory-vocal transmission. Therefore, sign languages are not only linguistically and culturally important, they can be the sole means of language development and accessible communication for deaf people.*

For deaf signers in the workplace, a typical adjustment / accommodation is the provision of a sign language interpreter. Research on deaf people's lived experiences in employment indicates that in addition to this, it is valuable for employers to take positive steps to become *au fait* with deaf awareness and culture; understand preferred communication norms, and foster inclusion in social settings (Sheikh, forthcoming).

In Ireland there is funding available to cover the costs of interpreters for job interviews and initial training, but not for on-going accommodation in the workplace. However, the Irish Sign Language Act 2017 included a plan to introduce a voucher-based system for deaf people to pay for interpreters, and this is being piloted at the time of writing (2021). In Germany, there is government support, for example through *Agentur für Arbeit* (the federal agency of employment, under the Ministry of Labour), where an employer hiring a job applicant with disabilities receives a higher allocation of funding in their first year of work, which is gradually reduced so that after four years, the employer is expected to pay a full salary. Moreover, funding for German Sign Language interpreters for work-related matters comes from the government's Integrationsamt / Inklusionsamt's scheme. In the UK, funding for British Sign Language interpreters mostly comes from the government's Access to Work scheme[185] (with employers also expected to make a contribution towards interpreting costs).

There is an increasing demand for interpreters to facilitate interactions in the workplace between deaf professionals and their non-signing counterparts. An emerging body of work in deaf and sign language interpreting studies has examined the role of the interpreter in this context (Dickinson, 2014; Feyne, 2015, 2018; Miner, 2017; Napier, Carmichael & Wiltshire, 2008), including from a deaf perspective (Burke, 2017; Haug et al., 2017; Napier, 2011). This has led to the development of the 'deaf-professional-designated interpreter' model (Hauser, Finch & Hauser, 2008), which details the practices of deaf professionals and interpreters who work together on a regular basis.

There is a direct link between educational qualifications, social inclusion,

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185   See www.gov.uk/access-to-work

and advancement in the labour market. Apart from financial autonomy, work and paid employment serves to develop a sense of belonging with benefits in terms of mental health and identification with the wider community. Previous research has identified that deaf signers tend to have lower status jobs than hearing people (Capella, 2003); experience communication difficulties at work (Foster & MacLeod, 2003, 2004); tend to work in different sectors than hearing people (Rydberg, Gellerstedt & Danermark, 2011); experience a lack of support in finding, maintaining and progressing in employment (Total Jobs, 2016). However, to date there has been little consideration of deaf signers' lived experiences of work from a sociological perspective. Explorations of deaf employment tend to focus on barriers, inequalities, and accommodations or adjustments, and any reference to interpreters is primarily in relation to cost or availability (Hogan et al., 2009; Punch, Hyde & Power, 2007; Willoughby, 2011).
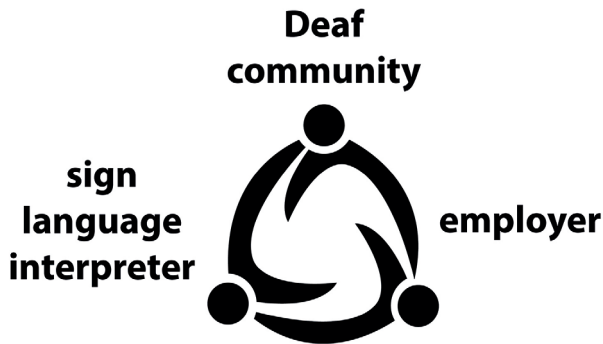

Figure 2: Triangulation of perspectives on deaf employment

In order to address this gap and collect an evidence base for the development of training resources, it was necessary to conduct action research, including a landscape review of the current situation for deaf workers in Europe, and examine their experiences in employment settings. Action research involves a six-step cyclical process of (1) identifying a problem to study; (2) gathering and reviewing related information; (3) developing a plan of action; (4) implementing the plan; (5) evaluating the results; and (6) repeating the cycle with a revised problem or strategy derived from what was learned in the first cycle, until the question is answered (McKay, 1992). One of the innovative aspects of DESIGNS is the triangulation of the perspectives of the stakeholder groups (employers, sign language interpreters, and deaf sign-language-using graduates who are employees or jobseekers) and consideration of how this triadic partnership plays out in work contexts (see Figure 2).

The project team explored three key research questions:

1. What are the experiences of deaf graduates in securing, retaining and/ or progressing in employment?

2. What are the experiences of sign language interpreters when working with deaf signers in employment settings?

3. What are the experiences of employers in recruiting, employing and supporting deaf signers in the workplace?

Methodology

A mixed-methods research design (Cresswell, 2003) was adopted to enable an in-depth, triangulated exploration of the experiences of the three groups of key stakeholders and look at the same phenomena from different perspectives (cf. Napier & Hale, 2015). The research was also aligned with principles of community participatory research (Cornwall & Jewkes, 2010), which has become an established methodology for studies with deaf signers (Leeson et al., 2017) and a way to rebalance power by including community users in the scholarly scrutiny of interpreting practices (Wurm & Napier, 2017). The study was designed to adhere to principles for conducting research ethically with deaf signers (Harris et al., 2009), and therefore the research team was comprised of a multilingual, mixed deaf-hearing team of signers, interpreters, and employment-related practitioners. More importantly, in keeping with transparency and accountability when conducting action research with signing deaf communities (Leeson et al., 2017), the team ensured that their communication and dissemination were available in several signed languages.[186]

The specific methods of data collection involved a Europe-wide online survey to review the landscape of deaf employment from the perspective of national deaf associations; and three sets of focus groups and one-to-one interviews in Ireland, Germany and the UK with 1) deaf employees, 2) employers and organisations that have deaf employees; and 3) interpreters who work regularly in employment settings.[187] The team used a thematic analysis on the resulting cross-national data set to identify patterns in the data. Each interview and focus group transcript was examined, and key themes emerged in five principal domains: (1) barriers to employment related to interpreting provision; (2) strategies employed by key stakeholders; (3) familiarity with one's job and other stakeholders in the context; (4) the role of the interpreter; and (5) the perceived training needs of deaf people, employers and interpreters.

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186 Irish Sign Language, British Sign Language, and German Sign Language, and International Sign.

187 For an overview of each method, the process of recruitment, and the procedure of data collection, see Napier et al. (2020).

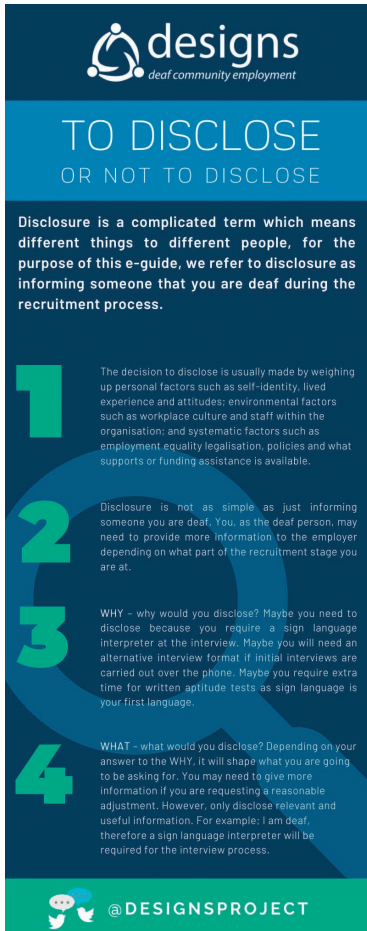**Findings and discussion: the 5 gaps**

Figure 3: DESIGNS flyer that informs deaf jobseekers on disclosure

Figure 4: Working with sign language interpreters – a DESIGNS resource for employers

The findings point to a trend of increased participation of deaf people in higher education, most likely attributable to greater provision of interpreters in this sphere (typically facilitated through disability legislation). Consequently, more deaf signers are achieving higher-level qualifications and seeking to enter the workforce in a range of professional roles. In turn, there is a commensurate increased demand for interpreters to facilitate interactions in the workplace. But in general, the findings suggest that this demand is not being adequately met, and that deaf graduates are significantly more likely to be underemployed or unemployed than their hearing counterparts, despite similar levels of qualification; deaf job candidates are concerned about disclosing their hearing status for fear of

experiencing discrimination; interpreters are inadequately prepared for working in employment-related settings, particularly in fields with large amounts of specialist concepts and terminology; deaf people felt that interpreting provision is as an administrative and economic burden; and the lack of statutory provision of interpreting in employment settings in some countries (e.g. Ireland) inhibits deaf people's career progression.

More specifically, the data analysis revealed that all three stakeholder groups face a series of gaps, which were prevalent in all three countries.[188] These gaps pertain to five areas: (i) knowledge, (ii) organisational culture, (iii) experience, (iv) feedback, and (iv) systems. The remainder of this chapter discusses each of these gaps in turn and considers what might be done to address them.

Bridging the Knowledge Gap

1. Deaf signers require support while still in education around the process of transitioning to the workplace. This should entail discussion around working in hearing dominant settings, expectations, cultural norms, custom and practice (see Figure 3).

2. Deaf graduates, employees and jobseekers, need to know about the kinds of work-related supports that are available to them and what they have to do to avail of same. They also need input around working with interpreters in workplace settings, unpicking what this means for how they are represented and perceived and what this may mean for their career progression. Opportunities to practice working in interactive settings via interpretation would also be helpful. These sessions could be recorded to facilitate close review. Such practice sessions would also offer highly beneficial opportunities to interpreters to secure feedback and inform their practice too.

3. Deaf graduates, employees and jobseekers require access to internship programmes and mentoring as they transition into the workplace.

4. Employers need to be actively encouraged to recruit deaf graduates.

5. Employers need information around what supports are available to deaf employees and how they can apply for same/support their employee's application for same. Employers need to view such support as part of the routine administration of their business to avoid stigmatising deaf employees as 'burdensome'.

6. Employers must be challenged about 'myths' they have about deaf people as employees such as deaf employees are no more a health and

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188   For a full overview of the research findings, see Napier et al. (2020).

safety risk than any other employee; that there is no insurance weighted premium for employing a deaf person, and that deaf employee can perform the same functional tasks, given the proper supports, as their hearing counterparts.

7. Employers need input around the scope of practice of interpreters, how they work and what they need to facilitate best outcomes for all stakeholders in an interpreted event (see Figure 4).

8. Employers require guidance regarding how best to plan for accessible training, meetings, conferences and other work-related events where sign language interpreters or other professionals providing supports are engaged. Guidance should include information about the work-space requirement of interpreters (lighting, seating arrangements, microphone usage, recording of events, etc.), any considerations for the agenda (working conditions, breaks, etc.), and preparation materials required to ensure that interpreters (or other professionals providing supports) are best equipped to perform maximally.

9. Expectations need to be managed around what an interpreter can do in a workplace setting. If an interpreter is not a specialist in the field that they are hired into, they will not sound/sign like a specialist in that field (see Figure 4 and 5). Stakeholders will have to bear in mind that the gaps in knowledge are the interpreter's, not the gap of the deaf/hearing party's. To mitigate gaps in experience and knowledge, stakeholders need to support the interpreter by providing adequate preparation materials, by briefing the interpreter/s, and by providing feedback. The interpreter will treat all information received as confidential. A framework for discussing these issues needs to be introduced and normalised for every new booking that an interpreter takes on/is assigned by an agency.

10. Employers should consider how they can best deliver training and to deaf employees and make sure that deaf employees have access to the same range of supports as their hearing counterparts. For example, in-house training video materials could be signed and/or subtitled and company employee assistance programmes should be accessible (e.g. interpretation should be made available as needed). We recommend engaging in dialogue with deaf staff members and seeking their advice regarding what works best for them.

11. Employers should induct deaf staff into their organisation, but also provide induction to hearing staff regarding issues to consider when working with deaf sign language users.

12. Employers should commit to embedding sign language classes and information about deaf communities in their annual programme of activities to facilitate hearing colleagues to engage directly with their deaf colleague/s. Deaf Awareness Training is recommended as a starting point in this regard.

13. Deaf employees should be provided with mentoring to support and plan for career progression; this should also help bridge the confidence gap that employers report for some deaf employees.

14. Interpreters can help bridge their knowledge gap by engaging regularly with the Deaf community they serve to ensure that they are maintaining their fluency in their working sign language/s and staying abreast of current issues of importance to the Deaf community.

15. Interpreters require adequate preparation to be able to perform optimally. This requires ensuring that interpreters are granted access to materials ahead of interviews, training events and meetings. One approach that many DESIGNS informants found helpful was working collaboratively to develop bilingual glossaries of terms that are central to the business at hand.

16. State bodies need to ensure that staff members engaging with deaf people seeking supports are trained to work with interpreters and understand how to engage effectively with deaf sign language users. Deaf Awareness Training is recommended as a starting point in this regard.

Figure 5: Glossary for sign language interpreters

Bridging the Organisational Culture Gap

1. Deaf signers need induction into the workplace, and may require additional guidance regarding custom and practice, cultural norms of the organisation, and expectations. This may go hand in hand

with mentoring, a requirement that should help to also bridge the knowledge gap, and ease the challenge of negotiating an institutional culture with a hearing dominant workforce.

2. Employers must recognise that deaf employees can feel isolated and should try to foster a workplace where hearing employees are actively encouraged to include deaf sign language users in office 'chit chat'.

3. Deaf and hearing employees must be encouraged to actively engage each other.

4. Stakeholders – deaf people and employers – need to recognise that interpreters do not share the 'insider' knowledge that they do. To facilitate effective interpreting, interpreters need to be prepared so that they can best represent all parties for whom they are interpreting.

Bridging the Experience Gap

1. Deaf signers would benefit from opportunities to engage in mock interviews with interpretation so that they can work through how they negotiate their self-presentation via interpretation, how they handle disclosure of deafness and discussion of same.

2. Employers would also benefit from opportunities to engage in such mock interviews, with opportunity for feedback on their response from deaf interviewees and interpreters.

3. Mock interviews would also offer up an opportunity for interpreters to receive feedback on their work into both languages, and on their presentation, which can impact on how a deaf candidate is perceived. Further, as interpreters may have limited personal experience with interviews themselves, mock interviews also offers an opportunity for them to bridge their personal experience gap, as well as to consider how they will interpret effectively in interviews for specific fields of practice (e.g. engineering, education, accounting/finance, etc.).

4. Internships for sign language users at early stages in their career, with opportunities to secure mentoring and guidance from more senior level employees, will help to bridge the experience gap reported by deaf people and employers alike.

5. Employers can support deaf employees by offering job-related leadership training.

6. Interpreters may be called on to interpret for deaf people from another country, who use languages that the local sign language interpreter is not competent in. To bridge this gap, hiring an interpreting team that includes a deaf interpreter who can negotiate this linguistic distance can enhance the quality of the interpreting.

7. Interpreters typically rarely have experience of working in situations where disciplinary proceedings are instigated, or where cases are referred to tribunals for settlement. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) opportunities that allow for 'mock' cases will help to future-proof competence development for such domains and also help to alleviate the stress associated with such high-stakes assignments.

Bridging the Feedback Gap

Employers realise that there are situations where "them and us" can occur if there are major misunderstandings from either sides, and they need to minimise the risks and prevent these scenarios from happening by tackling misunderstandings as quickly as they can. Providing feedback that is timely, focused and actionable – and accessible can help minimise misunderstandings.

Interpreters should request feedback from all key stakeholders. Opportunities to plan, review, and appraise interpreting practices and their impact on the interactions that occur should be built into workplace schedules to maximise quality of outcomes for all involved.

Bridging the Systems Gap

1. There is a need for disaggregated data from State bodies that allows for better understanding of the situation of deaf sign language users in order to better respond with evidence-based policy and practice.

2. There is a need for statutory funding to underpin linguistic access to and at work for deaf sign language users across Europe. The British 'Access to Work' (AtW) programme and German`s Integrationsamt/ Inklusionsamt are considered a model in this respect.

3. A clearly outlined process must be provided that allows deaf people to know how long an application for funding will take to be processed. Processing times must be aligned to labour market demands or they risk further disadvantaging deaf signers in their careers.

4. State bodies responsible for tendering processes must ensure that quality leads provision when putting service level agreements in place around sign language interpreting. ISO standards for community interpreting (2014) provide guidance in this respect, and the DESIGNS project resources and guidelines are useful tools.

5. The process of administration of payment of interpreters working via State bodies requires attention. Documentation and processes

must be streamlined and easy to follow to ensure that there are no undue delays in processing payment to interpreters/agencies. Those responsible with the process of administering interpreting should not shift this responsibility to the deaf service user.

6. More generally, there is an issue around the provision of interpreters to facilitate access and participation for deaf employees around take-up of options available to hearing peers such as accessing services such as private health insurance, participating in external training funded by their company, and indeed, engaging in part-time further education (e.g. masters or other professional qualification pathways).

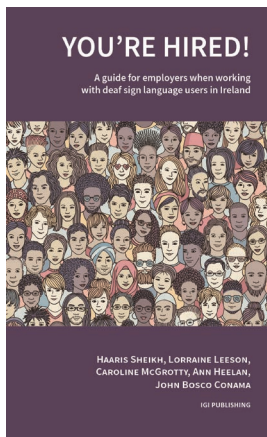**Training modules and other resources**
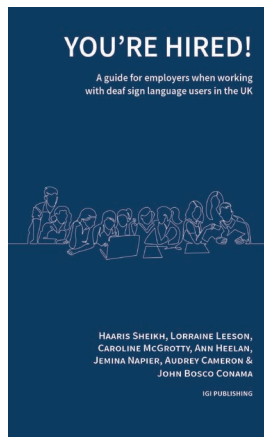

Figure 6: *'You're hired!'* - Irish version

Figure 7: *''You're hired!'* - British version

Figure 8: *You're hired!'* - German version

A significant part of the findings pointed to the general lack of awareness amongst the three stakeholder groups about employment contexts. For employers, the research revealed there is a fundamental lack of deaf awareness; for interpreters there is a lack of specialist knowledge about the multitude of employment-specific contexts; and for the deaf community, particularly for new entrants to the labour market, there was a general lack of awareness about access to funding for interpreters, soft skills and information about employment rights.

To respond to these knowledge gaps, during the lifecycle of the DESIGNS project, training resources were created for each of the target groups. These resources included: a training module for deaf job seeking graduates from higher education who are reported to be underemployed and who have a lower propensity to get a job; training resources for employers to increase their awareness of deaf job applicants and job candidates to so that deaf

job applicants have a better chance in succeeding in employment; and training resources for sign language interpreters as part of their continuous professional development to understand the nature of interpreting in education and employment (preemployment/during employment) settings.

Other resources include '*You're hired!' A guide for employers when working with sign language users'*, which is available in English (Irish version (see Figure 6) and British version (see Figure 7)), Dutch and German (see Figure 8), *What do you mean? Workplace terminology for sign language interpreters* (see Figure 5), and Toolkits for employers on how to work with sign language interpreters (see Figure 4).[189] Video insights from professionals, deaf employees and interpreters are available, and a signed guide for deaf job seekers are available on the DESIGNS Project Vimeo Channel.

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189   These resources can be consulted at www.designsproject.eu

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