

Deaf Professionals in Education and Social Services: Their Career Mobility Experiences

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Background

- Researchers- Denise Kavin & Kim Brown Kurz
- Interest generated during panel discussion, “The Trials and Tribulations of Deaf Administrators” at 2005 ADARA Conference in Orlando, FL
- Literature review

Purpose of Study

- Anecdotal - focus on 'experiences'
- IRB-approved at NTID/RIT
- To look at the experiences of deaf administrators in educational & social service settings
- To identify challenges that deaf professionals face regarding career mobility

Methodology

- ❑ 16 open-ended interview questions
- ❑ Brief questionnaire
- ❑ 1-hour videotaped, videophone interviews conducted in ASL. Tapes were translated into voice by a certified interpreter, then transcribed into script
- ❑ Member check
- ❑ Data coded and sorted by themes

Participants

- ❑ 11 deaf/ hard of hearing
- ❑ 3 males, 8 females
- ❑ Degrees held
 - 4 - doctorate or JD degrees
 - 6 – Masters
 - 1 - Bachelors
- ❑ Age groups
 - 6 - age 30-39
 - 2 - age 40-49
 - 3 - age 50-59
- ❑ Primary Communication Mode (several mixed)
 - 6 - ASL
 - 5 - Manually Conceptual English
 - 2 - Signed Exact English
 - 1 - Oral

Participants (cont'd)

- Supervisors of 1-25 staff
- Work Settings
 - 4- Social Services (advocacy, mental health, employment)
 - 3- Higher Education
 - 2- Federal Government
 - 1- VR
 - 1- Medical

Interview Questions

1. What is your educational background?
2. Describe your work background and experiences.
3. What is your current job title? How long have you been in this position?
4. Describe what your job involves and the responsibilities/duties.
5. How many staff do you supervise now? How many are Deaf or hearing?
6. What were the highs and lows in your climb up the career ladder?
7. What 'glass ceiling' experiences did you have?
8. Do you feel your deafness was an asset or a hindrance in your career path?
9. In your supervisory experiences, what access/communication issues have you experienced?

Interview Questions (cont'd)

10. In your supervisory experiences, what cultural issues have you experienced?
11. Do you feel you've been limited to 'deafness-specific' professions?
12. If you weren't deaf, do you feel your career path would've been different?
13. Were there any situations to "overcome" due to communication/ cultural issues? What strategies have you used?
14. Do you feel that as a deaf supervisor, you have to work harder compared with your hearing colleagues?
15. Do you have any advice to future deaf supervisors?
16. Last thoughts or comments?

Identified Themes

- Technology
- Interpreting
- Communication
- Attitudes
- Educating Others
- Networking
- Supervision
- Career
- Deaf Community
- Impact of Deafness
- Strategies for Success
- Other

Three Strands for Discussion

- Career Choices
- Career Mobility
- Networking Issues

Career Choices

Most felt...

- their deafness was both an asset and hindrance in their career paths
- limited to deafness-specific professions

All believed if they weren't deaf, their career paths would've been different, and they would've progressed further professionally

Career Choices: Self-Imposed Limitations

- ❑ Most chose deafness field due to communication access, cultural awareness & sensitivity
- ❑ Paradox of limiting oneself by choice while facing limited choices

“I want to work within deafness-related positions, as that is my interest. But at the same time, if I had an interest in a different focus area or specialty, it would be harder- a lot harder. (Here), I’m expected to be an expert on deafness, which I am. That’s OK- I’m find with that. At the same time, it is limiting”

Career Choices:

Contributing to the Deafness field

- Being role models and in high demand
- Some find their current positions so satisfying, they've turned down opportunities for mobility

“(My deafness) has really helped me, because these positions are related to deaf services. They need someone who knows deafness, and to be truthful I have to accept viewing myself as a poster child. To make services more accessible to the deaf community”

Career Choices:

Drawbacks of choosing the Deafness field

- ❑ Limited opportunities for skills improvement
- ❑ Insufficient market demand to make a living out of a true passion

"...as a therapist, I'm a little jealous of the variety that other therapists have. They talk about mental health treatment... they're able to do different therapy methods. I'm limited because Deaf people see me as more of an administrator. They tend to be more, you know, it's communication. (They) tend to be frustrated with job and referral issues. I feel it's not really therapy- it's more barrier dissolution. In my profession, everything is deaf related, so in some way I feel out of touch with hearing issues... I feel it's always Deaf, Deaf, Deaf..."

Career Mobility

- Feeling that one has to be 'twice as good' or be 'at the top of their game' to be considered equal

Career Mobility:

Limited Opportunities for Advancement

- ❑ Difficulties 'crossing over' or transferring skills to other fields
- ❑ Actual – vs – self imposed limitations

“One thing that bothered me was that I felt stuck there... I watched people change jobs often, easily from one department to another... I stayed in one place, Disability Services”

“My profession has limited me in many ways, yes. My focus on deafness means that most jobs that I could apply for have to be related to deafness in some way”

Career Mobility: Communication Access

- ❑ 'Comfort Zone'
- ❑ Feeling like a liability
- ❑ Downplaying one's deafness

"I can't just go to a workshop, some outside event. I have to have interpreters. (Sometimes) I don't get one. Hearing people- it's easy. They get in the car and they go to the workshop"

Career Mobility:

Demonstrating One's Full Potential

- ❑ Several felt they weren't working to their full potential
- ❑ Great progress, but still slow upward mobility

"I couldn't prove that I was smart and capable... personally I could never make contact with the higher ups. So I accepted that"

Career Mobility: Merit and Tokenism

- Concern about being in leadership positions for purpose of maintaining appearances

“...you need to be deaf and qualified and skilled. The marriage of both is a win-win situation. I think that most professional deaf people want to feel that they’ve earned their position based on merit, their own merit, not based on disability”

Findings:

Networking Issues

- ▣ Ability to network has a great impact on one's career mobility experiences

Networking Issues: Challenges

- ❑ Missing 'water cooler' conversations
- ❑ Having an interpreter doesn't always fill networking gaps

"Since I'm constantly filling in the 'blanks', this is an increased level of effort. I'm also worn out in the evenings. I think that deaf and hard of hearing individuals must devote more efforts to gather information in the workplace"

"In the career world, who you are is not only the work production, but your ability to develop networks. Deaf people miss out on that part, the networking. I have good networking with people who are hearing, but only with the ones who sign"

Networking Issues: Strategies

- Creativity is a must!
- Examples
 - Happy Hour
 - Scheduling regular lunch dates with colleagues
 - Befriending a chatty colleague
- Role of the interpreter

Networking Issues: Use of Technology

- ▣ Using e-mail, instant messaging, videophone, and pagers to compensate for limited face-to-face networking

“Email has helped a lot. Everyone uses and loves email. They would never know I was deaf until I tell them or meet them”

“...ever since then, it (videophone) has been really great. I feel more independent and can do my work without depending on the staff interpreters. This technology is truly a blessing”

Conclusion

- ❑ Career Choices and Mobility
- ❑ Networking Issues
- ❑ Implications of Findings
- ❑ Limitations of Study

Thank You!

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