

Research Report

Employer Survey: Supervising Employees

Who are Deafblind

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# PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Securing and retaining meaningful employment is a critical issue for people who are DeafBlind. In recent years, Helen Keller National Center for DeafBlind Youths and Adults (HKNC) has expanded its commitment to providing employment-focused rehabilitation and placement services for DeafBlind people as well as training and information for employers about how to best support their DeafBlind employees. As part of this commitment, HKNC developed an anonymous online survey for supervisors of DeafBlind employees. Respondents were asked to consider their experiences with a single DeafBlind employee. Respondents were also asked to provide demographic information, information about their positions and the position of their DeafBlind employee and information about the company they work for. In addition, they were asked to specify and rate the types of supports and accommodations used by their DeafBlind employees as well as information and training that they, as supervisors, have received. The survey was disseminated in the Spring of 2021 and therefore there may be limitations to the results based on the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the results reveal important implications for employment support and training as well as further research that is needed in the field.

The need for this survey emerged as the result of a 2018 survey distributed by the Information, Research & Professional Development Department at HKNC that was intended to gauge the training needs of professionals in the area of DeafBlindness and employment. The survey asked participants to identify training that they have received, as well as professional competencies and training needs. It also asked them several questions about their perceptions of successful employment strategies and employment barriers for DeafBlind people.

The survey revealed important factors related to the placement and retention of DeafBlind employees including:

* Accommodations and on-the-job supports including natural supports and job coaches.
* Access to communication.
* Access to technology and ability to use technology effectively.
* Sensitivity and awareness training for employers and co-workers.

The survey also revealed further research needs including, "A survey that targets the perceptions of a different population, such as employers of DeafBlind people.” The recent survey of supervisors of DeafBlind employees, upon which we report in this document, further develops our understanding of the support and training needs of both employers and employees.

# METHODOLOGY

Targeted respondents for the survey were supervisors of DeafBlind employees who had supervised at least one DeafBlind employee within the past two years. The survey was disseminated from February to March 2021, via snowball sampling starting with HKNC’s network of regional representatives, DeafBlind specialists and community partners. There were 50 responses but 25 were disqualified because they were either incomplete or the respondent indicated that they have not supervised someone who is DeafBlind within the past 2 years. One respondent only partially completed the survey, completing all of the information about themselves and the company they worked for but not about their DeafBlind employee. Their information is included in respondent demographic reporting, but most of the reporting concerns a respondent number of N=24.

The survey asked respondents a series of multiple choice and short answer questions about themselves, their companies and their DeafBlind employee, with a focus on employee supports and accommodations, communication and supervisor support and training. Respondents also had the opportunity to write in additional comments.

The survey was analyzed both quantitatively (demographics, frequency of responses) and qualitatively (write in and comments).

# RESULTS - PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Most of the respondents were age 41-60 (60%). A majority of respondents have a bachelor’s degree (20%) or above (56%). A majority of respondents have worked for their company for more than 5 years (52%). 40% of respondents are upper management or the CEO/business owner and 36% are mid-management. Most respondents have worked for their current company for more than 5 years (52%) with zero participants having worked for their company less than a year.

The size of the companies that respondents work for varies from 1 to more than 10,000, but a majority (52%) work for small to mid-size companies (20-500 employees). Companies were located across several regions in the United States with 10 in the South, 8 in the West, 4 in the Midwest and 2 in the East. Companies were representative of a variety of industries but non-profits (24%), education (20%) and government (9%) were the most highly represented.

Respondents were asked to estimate the number of employees with a disability at their company and estimates varied widely with the majority estimating either 1-5 (33%) or more than 20 (42%) employees with a disability. However, 88% indicated that 5 or fewer of these employees are DeafBlind.

Most respondents have only supervised 1-2 DeafBlind employees in the last two years (80%). With the remaining 20% having supervised 3-5 employees who are DeafBlind.

# DEAFBLIND EMPLOYEE CHARACTERISTICS

Supervisors were asked to characterize their DeafBlind employee’s functional hearing and vision loss. Supervisors characterize their employee’s vision loss as ranging from mild to profound with most falling in the moderate range (42%) and the majority of the remaining split between severe and profound (29% and 25% respectively). A majority of supervisors characterized their employees hearing loss as profound (54%) with the remaining split between moderate and severe (29% and 17% respectively). 65% of supervisors did not know whether or not their DeafBlind employees had additional disabilities, but the remainder indicated that their employees had intellectual/cognitive disability (17%), psychiatric disability (13%), physical disability (9%) and/or health disability (17%).

Respondents speculated that their DeafBlind employees use a variety of communication methods at home, ranging from use of a mobile device (63%) or computer (58%) to visual and tactile sign language (42% and 33%) and speech with and without an assistive listening device (38% and 29%). Other methods of communication include print (8%) and gestures (4%). It is interesting to note that the percentage of DeafBlind employees who used speech alone at work and at home was the same (29%), but that employees used visual and tactile American Sign Language (ASL) less frequently with supervisors (33% and 29%) than at home.

Supervisors also used a variety of communication methods with their DeafBlind employees including speech or ASL plus a computer or mobile device being the predominant modes of communication at work. However, mobile devices were used less (42%) at work than at home and assistive listening devices with speech (29%) were used less at work than at home. Supervisors also mentioned that the need for remote work during the COVID pandemic necessitated the use of interpreters and captioning via Zoom and telephone.

59% of DeafBlind employees hold positions at the professional level, while the remainder are in skilled labor (21%) or entry level (21%). The majority of the employees are employed full-time (54%), however 21% worked 10 hours or less a week.

The vast majority of DeafBlind employees were professionals in rehabilitation, DeafBlindness or other disability fields. Job titles included rehabilitation counselor, program coordinator and case manager. Also listed as job titles were vendor, substance abuse counselor and web developer. Entry level positions were either in the food industry or unspecified internships. Skilled labor professions included massage therapy, machine operator, materials handler and home health aide. Job duties for professional positions were as expected for such positions, including project coordination, case management, job placement, advocacy, web development and training. For entry level positions, duties include basic food preparation, cleaning, and customer service. For skilled labor positions, duties include operating and distributing equipment, sales, assembly, accessibility feedback and personal shopping for a client.

# EMPLOYEE HIRING AND RETENTION

Most DeafBlind employees are still working for their company (83%) and, for those who left, none were fired. A majority of DeafBlind employees have worked at their company for 3 or more years (63%).

69% of supervisors were involved in hiring their DeafBlind employee and 64% were aware that the employee was DeafBlind before they applied. Only 14% of supervisors became aware that the employee was DeafBlind after the employee was hired. Supervisors indicated that 67% of DeafBlind employees received accommodations during the application and interview process while 17% did not and for 17% it was not known. The most common accommodation provided during the application and hiring process was sign language interpreter (50%) followed by use of a personal mobile device (37.5%), alternative formats (37.5%) and support from a job coach (37.5%).

A majority of respondents did have concerns before their DeafBlind employee started working for them, with only 21% indicating that they had no concerns. The most frequent concern was the employee being able to complete required job duties (46%) followed by communication (42%), safety (33%), getting work done on time and the cost of accommodations and supports (25% each).

One respondent wrote: “Bill has been a great employee. The inconveniences I was afraid of having when I hired him have been far outweighed by his skill and work ethic. I would hire him again. He has been with us for 7-8 years and I am still so happy to have him with us.”

# EMPLOYEE SUPPORTS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

The vast majority of supervisors said that they spend less than 5 hours a week directly supervising their DeafBlind employees (75%), with only 4% (1 respondent) spending more than 20 hours a week supervising their DeafBlind employee. 61% of supervisors said they spend the same amount of time supervising DeafBlind employees as they do other employees, while 36% indicated that they do spend more time supervising their DeafBlind employee. Supervisors primarily provided support with understanding job duties (65%) and communication (61%), but also provided support for performing job duties (57%) and mobility and transportation (13% each). One respondent wrote, “Our biggest challenge has been our Metro Mobility provider. They continue to drop off our DeafBlind employees at the wrong entrance or do not show up to bring them home. They are not reliable. We have to arrange for staff to transport our DeafBlind employees to meet with their consumers which is time-consuming and costly. Otherwise, all of our DeafBlind employees are independent with transportation.” Another respondent wrote, “I make sure I assist her with some computer work that is limited so I devote more time to be sure she feels included in the process."

DeafBlind employees used a wide variety of accommodations and supports on the job. The most frequently provided accommodation was use of assistive technology (79%), followed by environmental modifications (79%), interpreters (75%) and support service providers (SSPs) (67%). Also provided were large print, braille or other modifications for printed material (58%), individualized training (54%), job coach (50%), modified work duties (50%), orientation and mobility (50%), modified work schedule (46%), real time captioning (33%) and use of guide dog or service animal (29%). Supervisors were also asked to rate the effectiveness of the accommodations their DeafBlind employees received from "not effective" (1) to "very effective” (5). A majority of respondents rated interpreters as the most effective accommodation (72%). (75%) rated interpreters as highly effective. The use of adaptive or specialized technology, was the most frequently used accommodation, was ranked highly effective by 58% of respondents, with an average rating of 4 out of 5. Environmental modifications were rated highly effective by 48% of respondents (average rating of 3.9 out of 5) and SSPs was rated highly effective by 50% of respondents (average rating of 3.5 out of 5). Interestingly, although only half of respondents indicated that their DeafBlind employees used a job coach or support with orientation and mobility, after interpreters, these two accommodations received the next highest rating of “very effective” (67%).

Supervisors were asked whether or not their DeafBlind employee uses a job coach and the specific tasks supported by a job coach. 37.5% of respondents indicated that their employee uses a job coach which differs from the number who indicated a job coach was being utilized under supports and accommodations (50%). This could be because employees previously used a job coach and are no longer doing so or because supervisors were speculating on the potential effectiveness of job coaches. Most respondents indicated the job coaches supported employees with learning new tasks (75%) and accessing information about the environment (75%) followed by communication (63%) and completing tasks (63%). Only 38% of job coaches supported employees with helping to understand workplace norms which has previously been mentioned as an important need for DeafBlind employees in the workplace (for example, in the 2018 employment survey conducted by HKNC). Supervisors indicated that the majority of job coaches worked with their DeafBlind employees less than 10 hours a week (67%), while 22% worked with their employees 11-20 hours a week and 11% worked with their employees more than 20 hours a week.

Comments from survey respondents about supports and accommodations for their DeafBlind employees include:

“More time is needed when meeting with DeafBlind employees for their 1:1 check-ins and reviews. We are a privately owned company that provides employment and independent living skills services for individuals who are Deaf, DeafBlind, hard of hearing, blind and low vision. I believe that we need to lead by example as a company for other employers. All of our DeafBlind employees bring a valuable perspective and service to our company and for the people they serve.”

“The most helpful thing to prepare our employee for her role would be cultural understanding of working in an organization. She is interested in activism in her job as well as her own activism but in her job, she's limited by her knowledge of how government works and how to scope projects, so they are actionable. I wish she was given a more comprehensive education in non-DeafBlind work culture as part of her work training as well as better computer skill training. There is a lot that she does well but for some basics, it would help her to learn from a culturally competent trainer. She is helping us meet our goals of connecting with disabled city residents, but she would be more effective at more skills with better training. I really care about her meeting her own activism goals in her job and more training would help.”

“I think it's important that DeafBlind employees communicate their needs to be effective at work such as receiving copies of materials and PowerPoint slides in advance to allow them to review prior to meetings/trainings."

# SUPERVISOR SUPPORTS AND TRAINING

Supervisors were asked to indicate what kinds of information, support and training they have received in order to better supervise their DeafBlind employee. They were also asked to rate the effectiveness (on a scale of 1 to 5) of this information, support and training. The vast majority of supervisors said that their DeafBlind employee provided the most information and support about their disability and related accommodation needs (75%). The highest number of supervisors also rated information from their DeafBlind employee as “very effective.” 71% indicated that they received information about how to communicate with the DeafBlind employee (from an unspecified source) and 68% indicated that they received information about the specific support needs of the DeafBlind employee. Supervisors also received information and support from their supervisor or human resources (63%), an employment specialist (58%) or from an outside organization (54%). Only 17% stated that they received monetary or other compensation.

A majority of supervisors said that they have received workplace training on working with people with disabilities (61%), with 79% of those respondents saying that the training included information about working with people who are DeafBlind. Half of supervisors indicated that they received training that included insight into issues such as culture, stigma and prejudice and half indicated that they received training that included information about the causes of disability and some of the challenges associated with these causes. However, more people rated sensitivity training to be more effective (75%) than training that included information about the causes of disability and some of the challenges associated with these causes (50%). A number of supervisors indicated that they had received training on how to accommodate and support people with disabilities (46%), and 38% indicated they only received training on legal compliance issues.

**Two respondents wrote:**

“Attending Seabeck Camp years ago really helped my understanding of working with Deaf-Blind."

“No workplace training on working with a deafblind employee given as we are a deafblind services agency and know how to work with deafblind persons."

# IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

## **Limitations**

There are some limitations to the interpretation and scope of this research. A primary limitation to the generalization of this research is that it was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic when many employees may have either been temporarily working at home or have lost their jobs. Their job duties might also have changed. We did not ask supervisors to indicate whether or not their responses concerned the pre-pandemic or current work environment. Another limitation is that respondents were primarily well educated, upper management personnel working in professional fields such as education, government and social services. Similarly, their DeafBlind employees were primarily in professional careers. This limits the applicability of the results to entry level and skilled labor employment sectors.

## **Implications for Practice**

1. DeafBlind employees are successfully employed in professional careers and utilize a wide range of supports and accommodations in the workplace.

An important finding from this research is that DeafBlind people seem to be successfully maintaining careers in the professional sector with higher level job duties that one might expect from professionals in these types of careers and a high level of retention. Employees also seem to be utilizing a wide variety of supports and accommodations which points to a high level of awareness about the effectiveness of these accommodations by both supervisors and their employees. The use of both assistive and mainstream technology seems to be particularly important, both in terms of a DeafBlind employee's ability to complete their job duties and in terms of bridging communication barriers with their supervisors. This suggests the importance of technology and other supports and accommodations for successful employment outcomes for DeafBlind people.

1. While technology can bridge communication barriers between DeafBlind employees and their supervisors, communication is still an area of concern and needed growth for supervisors.

Communication is an area of concern for supervisors. Additionally, supports and accommodation related to communication are highly represented in this sample. For example, interpreters are most frequently used and are seen as the most highly effective communications method. Also, mobile devices and computers are often used as a means of communicating between supervisors and their employees. It also appears that DeafBlind employees don't necessarily use the same methods of communication at home as they do at work. For example, the use of assistive listening devices is lower at work as is the use of mobile devices and sign language without interpretation. There may be a need for better integration of communication access between home and work for DeafBlind people. This may include access to mainstream technological devices that otherwise are prohibited in the workplace i.e., mobile devices, better utilization of personal assistive devices such as, assistive listening devices in the workplace and improved training for supervisors in communication methods such as sign language.

1. Some supports and accommodations particularly those involving support from other people may be underutilized.

SSPs and job coaches were not as frequently utilized by DeafBlind employees as accommodations such as interpreters, assistive technology and environmental modifications. While the lower utilization of job coaches may be due to the fact that this kind of support is typically used in entry level or skilled labor positions rather than professional positions, one would expect the use of SSPs to be higher than it is. Both SSPs and job coaches can be an important tool for the DeafBlind person for accessing information and communication and performing their job duties effectively and efficiently. While assistive technology and environmental modifications can seem less expensive and easier to justify and there is a clearer mandate for the use of interpreters than other human supports, the long-term effectiveness of SSPs and job coaches should not be overlooked as an important workplace support for DeafBlind people.

1. Supervisors need better access to better information from a wide variety of sources about the capabilities of DeafBlind employees and the role of supports and accommodations in their success.

While on the one hand, it seems positive that DeafBlind employees are advocating for their support needs and educating their supervisors about these needs and the implications about their disability, on the other hand, it appears that DeafBlind employees are taking on the burden of this reasonability when it could be coming from other sources. While most supervisors were aware their employee was DeafBlind before they were hired, which indicates that DeafBlindness was not necessarily a barrier to hiring, supervisors did indicate that they had concerns about the employee's ability to do their job before they started work. Together, these findings point to a need for the provision of better information to supervisors about what their employees are capable of before they start work, the benefits of supports and accommodation in helping a DeafBlind employee to be successful at their job and answers to any questions or concerns that they may have. While it is important for the Deafblind employee to be able to communicate their needs to their supervisor, it is also important for supervisors to receive information from a variety of sources so they are well prepared to best support their DeafBlind employees.

1. Disability and DeafBlindness related training for supervisors should focus on the lived experience.

Most respondents did indicate that they had received training about disabilities or DeafBlindness. Respondents indicated that the most valuable aspect of this training included a focus on the lived experience of disability, including issues of stigma and identity. Just as with other sensitivity training focused on race, gender identity, etc., disability and DeafBlindness awareness training should foster an understanding of what it’s like to live with a disability/DeafBlindness. This type of training fosters empathy and understanding rather than a fear of legal reprisal or costs related to accommodations.

## **Implications for Research**

1. Further research is needed with employers who supervise entry level and skilled labor employees as well as non-education and human service industries.
2. Research is needed on the impact of specific types of supports in the workplace such as job coaches, SSPs and adaptive technology.
3. Research is needed that explores training and accommodations in more depth i.e., focus groups and interviews.
4. Research is needed from the perspective of DeafBlind employees about employment preparation, job search, retention and career advancement.
5. More research is needed on the relationship between the type and amount of training and information that supervisors receive and their comfort level of supervising a DeafBlind employee.