

THE DEAF AT WORK

As a veteran of something like 39 years in industrial relations, with special reference to deaf workers, I have a feeling of kinship with the men and women of the rehabilitation service. Chances are good, I think, that we speak the same language.

Your aversion to success stories keyed to sweetness and light, but ^{without} ~~not~~ much relation to the tough problems of real life, will match my own. At the same time, you will have no more use for sterile pessimism than I have.

An eminent psychiatrist stated it better than I can. "As long as there is life," he wrote, "there are positive assets --action, choice, hope-- not in the imagination, but in a clear understanding of the situation, goals and possibilities. Instead of running away from reality, there should be a positive selection of the sensible, workable resources ... attention to what can be brought into one's life, and what is attainable -- not merely an optimism with its counterpart in defeatism."

Putting these principles into practice at a seminar on industrial employment for deaf college graduates at Gallaudet College last May, I volunteered the thought that, to my imperfect knowledge, there were no jobs in office or laboratory made to measure for the deaf. Job functions and specifications were not drawn up with the deaf in mind in the first instance. Consultation, conference and telephone were normal job qualifications in every instance, either express or implied.

Nevertheless, I assured them, it has been demonstrated time and again that the white collar field is not closed to the deaf. There are jobs where oral communication is not quite so critical, and there are employers who are not constitutionally averse to a bit of tinkering with job specifications -- perhaps some inconsequential re-routing of function to reduce interpersonal communication to manageable proportions.

We know there are opportunities in this vicinity, and we also know that it may take some ingenuity to dig them out. To this end I suggested that prospects for the deaf college graduate probably would be enhanced if the employer had the opportunity

to talk things over in advance with someone familiar with the contours of their communication difficulty, one who also understood something about the kind of job-tinkering which might be helpful.

It was an informal session and at this point a student raised his hand for a question.

"You mean," said he, "that the deaf have to have a 'pull' in order to get a job?"

That set off an involved discussion of the nature and ethics of "pulls" and I am afraid we never did get a clear picture of the duties and function of this liaison or contact man I had in mind.

One way or another we always get de-railed when we try to face up to the tough facts.

As employment counselors, however, we have no real choice in the matter. Unless we do just that, we are more likely than not to end up as mere tub-thumpers and horn-tooters marching about the citadel with no prospect whatever that the walls will ~~crumble~~ ^{fall} ~~at our behest.~~ down on command.

Still on the realistic side, and a shade more gratifying, is the ~~feattering~~^{la} assumption that this country probably leads the way in educational facilities for the deaf and in total productivity of its deaf citizens. I take Kenneth W. Hodgson, the Englishman, for my authority on that point.

I mention this because it helps get things in perspective, not for the purpose of self-congratulation. For the truth is there is really little room for self-congratulation anywhere along the line, as I think I can show later on.

We have achieved that leadership while barely scratching the surface. Our solid accomplishments down to date provide little more than a clue to the true potential of the deaf worker and a challenge to finish the job.

Since my experience centers in Akron, Ohio, I must draw heavily on the situation in that city to illustrate this theme.

In the pinch of two world wars, The Firestone Tire & Rubber Co., and the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co., busily recruited all the deaf workers they could get. Although deaf workers were rather freely employed in a few other cities and industries,

particularly in World War II, in most cases they were closely confined to specified operations in defense production. Akron was, and is, I believe, the leader in range and stability of employment, as well as numbers.

The natural question is: Does the rubber industry have any special affinity for the deaf? Or is there anything in the industrial climate of Akron which is particularly salubrious for people who have no perception of sound?

Naturally, the answer must be "yes." These things don't just drop down from on high. There must be a reason.

But try and find it. It does not lie on the surface. The easy and glamorous assumptions simply do not pan out on close inspection.

First, noise is not a factor. No one risks his hearing when he works in rubber.

Second, no bright and shining benefactor unlocked the doors for purely altruistic reasons.

I spent fruitless years investigating both possibilities. Tough as it is to part from our sweet illusions, this pair must

be permanently discarded at once.

The deaf were employed for business reasons and on sound business principles -- so simple and sound that they remained diamonds under my feet for more years than I like to count. I confess with some embarrassment that I had only a rough idea of the forces which really were at work until I read an article by Eva Russel Stunkel in the September issue of the American Annals of the Deaf -- September, 1957, that is.

She was talking about learning and reasoning with nonverbal material when something clicked upstairs and all the well-worn facts of my experience in Akron suddenly dropped into their appropriate slots.

The resulting pattern was such a perfect fit for all known circumstances that I do not think anyone will wish to raise a question about it.

Best of all, Akron has no monopoly on that pattern. The pattern is shared with many industries in many cities. Not many industries have ~~been~~ recognized that fact, perhaps, but is there anything to prevent us from bringing them to realization?

You will appreciate all this the more after a glimpse at the total setting. Let me take the time for a comprehensive review.

In Akron, the deaf workers, men and women, have been employed on many operations quite unrelated to rubber products, especially in war time. You could find them, and may still find some of them, working as machinists, punch press operators, armature winders, painters, on gunmount and aircraft sub-assemblies and many other operations -- usually semi-skilled, but sometimes skilled trades.

In World War I, the superintendent of the School for the Deaf in New Mexico personally arranged to send three of his best boys all the way to Akron -- half way across the continent. In World War II, field workers for the rehabilitation service advanced transportation to Akron for deaf men and women from as far away as Florida.

Such official sponsorship takes this migration out of the realm of personal whim and fancy and clothes it with portents of the most significant sort for all who are occupied with the

utilization of deaf manpower. For one thing, employment opportunities for the deaf seem to be few and far between even in war time.

There was also a notable migration from Oklahoma during World War II without any official sponsor so far as I know. It is hard to say just what significance should attach to this except that the deaf can, and do, take the initiative in their own hands when the occasion warrants.

These were fine people, almost without exception. I wish you could visit with me some of the homes they have established in Akron. Considering that they were, in a sense, castoffs from their native states, you would wonder just how spendthrift Americans can get with their resources of deaf manpower.

Published reports of the numbers employed in Akron often have been highly inflated. Estimates ranged into the thousands, but hundreds would be much nearer to it even at the peak of war work.

Actually, there is no need to try to overawe anyone with numbers. It is obvious that the development was phenomenal,

regardless of numbers.

Far more significant is the fact that at war's end the readjustment was no more painful for deaf employees than for hearing. Some reduction of forces, downgrading and transfers were unavoidable. The deaf workers participated in all this share and share alike with the hearing -- with the result that the Akron area still has perhaps the highest concentration of deaf workers you will find anywhere in the world.

As hiring slowed down in the interval between wars, the tendency was for wider dispersal of deaf workers throughout the district, with more employers and industries. There is no yardstick which would measure this dispersal empirically, but the visible evidence points persuasively toward wider acceptance of the deaf in this region than in other population centers.

Everyone in Akron has had more or less close contact with the deaf. Many have lived as neighbors to a hard-working family headed by deaf parents. Salespeople and public servants of all description are familiar with the communications problem of the deaf and prepared, from experience, to deal with it without serious inconvenience.

When a deaf person applies for a job, it is not a novel experience for the employer and the application can be considered with more or less realistic appreciation of their aptitudes as well as their disability.

Would there be a similar employment pattern in any city with a similar proportion of deaf residents?

That seems to be a reasonable assumption. If the deaf were better known, they would be more widely accepted.

Right here we have the inception of the popular notion that the deaf need "more publicity." There is no question that they need to be better known, but do not expect me to put more than one very small egg in this "publicity" basket. It requires a fine marksman to hit the target with publicity of such a delicate nature and a miss may be disastrous -- a little like William Tell shooting the apple from his son's head.

Moreover, in our case, the very best publicity would not be the equivalent of personal acquaintance. We have heard too much of "publicity" for its own sake. Actually it is too weak a reed to bear our weight.

From the general slant of this argument, you may suspect that I am leading up to a proposal for "colonies" or "concentration centers" for the deaf at strategic points where they can work out their destinies with a minimum of friction. That has theoretical advantages, perhaps, but only theoretical. It would not work in an economy of free men.

The concept might be adaptable, however. It might be good strategy to focus attention on a few key employers in each metropolitan center rather than to aim for a thin dispersal of jobs over many employers.

What I really aim for is to center your attention on the most critical link in the chain of productive employment for the deaf: the point of contact between employer and the deaf job-seeker.

Sometimes a relative or near friend is in a position to effect a favorable introduction. Sometimes the employer himself has had previous experience with deaf workers. Employment can be effected through many different channels. So far as the deaf are concerned, however, you can be certain that special

agencies of one kind or another have been at work every time a deaf person is hired -- in factory, office or laboratory.

Some well-meaning volunteers undertake this function with disastrous results. A bungler is more likely to obstruct than to facilitate the introduction. I have seen that happen on several occasions and I would not leave it to amateurs. It is a job for professionals.

In view of the peculiar helplessness of the deaf at this contact point, it seems to me that the Rehabilitation Service would function most effectively if it departed from established practice just enough to give top priority to this critical juncture in its work with the deaf. The deaf, I believe, are unique in this respect.

Even in Akron deaf workers have fallen far short of optimum acceptance. If I gave the impression that Akron was a sort of Utopia for the deaf, that was an error. One of the three big rubber companies in Akron has steadfastly refused any kind of employment. Acceptance has been far short of exemplary in many other establishments. The marvel is that Akron provides exceptional

employment opportunities for the deaf with only limited acceptance. If limited acceptance accomplishes so much in Akron, what would you expect to find in the average city?

As I said, there is some evidence that acceptance is advanced a notch when there is better acquaintance. But casual acquaintance obviously isn't the complete answer. Is there any basis for this common pattern of exclusion, persisting even with the benefit of casual acquaintance?

I think there is. We may as well face it.

A broad sampling of popular sentiment in an average city some years ago disclosed that twenty-five per cent of the general population felt an ingrained aversion to the deaf; sixteen per cent had a special liking for them and the rest were indifferent.

From personal experience as a deaf worker and observer of many deaf workers, I would venture the opinion that this finding is probably fair enough. At rare intervals we meet individuals who obviously are embarrassed, and sometimes definitely irritated, in the presence of the deaf.

There are many ways to account for it. It may be the result

of what might be considered a "traumatic" experience with a deaf relative for example. But I also suspect that a personality survey of the same population by psychiatrists would show that approximately twenty-five per cent of the people exhibit characteristic symptoms of introversion, sixteen per cent can be identified as extroverts, and the rest somewhere in between.

In any event, how many people of your acquaintance enjoy 100% acceptance in all their contacts? The introverts among them probably do not like even themselves.

The foreman introvert is miscast in life, to be sure. Nevertheless, he is far from being extinct. And it is no trick at all for him to rationalize his aversion to deaf employees in a dozen different ways.

Yet we should not pass this off too lightly. It is more significant than the popular canard that "gentlemen prefer blondes." (I have to label it "canard" because my wife was a distinct brunette when I married her. She is a platinum blonde now, like my mustache.)

The serious fact is that we could operate much more

effectively in the employment field if we had more specific information on the size, shape and texture of this flaw in our personal relations.

I have observed it carefully from my first day in industrial relations but would not want to pose as a final authority by any means. I do, however, take issue with Hodgson on one point. Perhaps it is different in Britain, but so far as my experience goes, American workmen never resent the introduction of qualified deaf workers in their ^{work group.} ~~unit~~. The emphasis here is on "qualified." We cannot pretend that every deaf worker is a model of rectitudes.

I am perfectly familiar with complaints from deaf workers that they are not getting a fair shake in job assignments. So I go out in the shop and talk with the foreman. There may be a misunderstanding on either side. The situation may be easily remedied, or it may not. But in any case, I have never found outright discrimination.

Suppose a deaf worker complains that he is not getting a fair share of the overtime work in his department. The foreman admits it and explains that only one or two men come in for

overtime work and it is necessary for them to have special instructions for particular duties. They must also maintain contact with skeleton crews in other departments. The deaf worker says all this is duck soup for him. The foreman claims that it entails unreasonable delay and inconvenience.

How would you decide the issue? Is this discrimination?

The line of promotion to jobs of greater responsibility sometimes is blocked for the deaf. It may be a comparatively simple matter to tailor the starting job to the measurements of the deaf worker, but what about the next rung up the ladder and the one above that?

In our schools we aim to put a lot of spizz and self-confidence in our deaf boys and girls. This is an asset to them in reasonable proportions but when it soars to the vain boast that "The deaf can do ANYTHING," I object.

We want them to be energetic and self-confident, but they should also be equipped with a cushion of humility to preserve equilibrium in the face of inherent frustrations -- perhaps a certain sensitivity in respect to their own inexorable limitations

and also in respect to the compassion that surely motivates their hearing associates about ninety per cent of the time when it is merited. The psychologists have a name for it, I think. They call it "empathy." We could do with more of that.

Unfortunately, too many of the deaf are more sensitive to discrimination than they are to compassion. To some of them, even fancied discrimination takes on the aspects of insidious group antagonism after the pattern of racial and religious discrimination.

But to my mind, there is a valid distinction here which is very important. We can expect to encounter individual preferences and, in some cases, personal antagonism which are related to deafness only indirectly, if at all. But there isn't even a trace of group antagonism and, hence, no group discrimination as such things are commonly understood.

Most of the world is compassionate -- willing and even anxious to give us something better than an even break. To understand this is half the battle, I do verily believe.

Outright exploitation of the deaf is so rare that it has

never appeared to me as a problem. It does occur, however. In the deplorable 1930's an employer in another state went so far as to claim exemption for deaf employees under the minimum wage law, though deafness was no handicap whatever for the work on which they were engaged.

There can be no question that employment opportunities for the deaf are affected in some degree by workmen's compensation laws, group insurance plans, private pension plans and so on through the whole list. This is due mainly to misapprehensions about how the deaf are affected and employers today are generally better informed on this subject than they were a few years ago. I think it is not necessary to go into that here.

Several times I have dusted off my crystal ball and tried to peer into the future of the deaf workman as it pertains to the upcoming age of automation and nuclear fission. Even the experts, however, are not agreed on the extent and pattern of automation. The crystal ball remains cloudy. My feeling is that we may safely wait to cross this bridge when we come to it.

The long term drift of employment from manufacturing to

service and distribution industries is another consideration which strikes me as being of more than passing interest.

Vocational training programs need to be geared to such trends, but I must leave it for others to enlarge on that subject.

Time and again over the years I have been asked to furnish a list of occupations suitable for the deaf. After several abortive attempts, I gave it up.

One reason is that a job list of this sort would be exclusive as well as inclusive and I shuddered at the thought of putting any arbitrary limit on the versatility of deaf workers. They are constantly popping up in unexpected places and doing very well, thank you. Who am I to limit their range of opportunity?

For the most part, these uncommon careers testify to exceptional ingenuity in job tailoring. Means have been found to leap or to bypass the communications barrier.

For the average, we may say that the deaf can be trained for any occupation where a deafened person can work. Many are deafened on the job and only rarely is it necessary to remove them. To train a young deaf person for some of these jobs may

present obstacles but, in principle, this rule is good.

More particularly, we may say that the deaf are most effective on bench or machine where dexterity is at a premium and where they can produce as individuals rather than as members of a work crew.

This is a simple deduction. Training for a job of this type requires little verbalization. Interpersonal communication is reduced to a minimum in actual production after the operation has been learned.

These are generalities rather than specific job titles, but job-titles aren't as definitive as they look. For job content varies from industry to industry and from plant to plant for the same job-title--particularly with respect to the communications component, which is critical for our purposes.

Therefore, the best delineation of the jobs we are looking for probably will come within the province of such descriptive generalities.

It was in this area that I found the affinity between the deaf and the rubber industry. The job qualifications of the

one closely matched the typical job description in the other.

It was simple good business to hire the deaf.

Worked out in detail, you will see just what a close match this was. I am able to identify five points which seem to be critical.

1. In rubber we have a mass production operation with characteristic division of labor.

For our purposes, this means, among other things, semi-skilled labor. This is not to say that the deaf cannot qualify for skilled trades. Nevertheless, semi-skilled may be the optimum level for many who reason and learn more by means of symbols than through verbalization. So far as Akron is concerned, we had a hard core of effective semi-skilled workers building up ^N at attitude of general acceptance which eventually produced some more or less contingent opportunities in skilled trades and even in physical sciences. Today, Firestone has four senior grade deaf chemists.

2. The common pattern of production is at individual stations rather than on assembly line or work crew.

Though the deaf may, under proper circumstances, fit into assembly lines or work crews, it is easy to see the advantage of individual stations as a general thing. Interpersonal communications are at a minimum after the operation is once mastered. On airwing framing during World War II, Firestone had a crack all-deaf crew that set production records. This was an exception to approved practice at two points. Such grouping or segregation of deaf workers cannot be recommended in the normal run of employment. But the circumstances here were distinctly not normal. We had outstanding personnel at hand before we tried the experiment. It was a situation which will not often be duplicated.

3. There is a brief in-plant training period, invariably by the "show-them-how" method.

Very little verbal material is used even with hearing trainees. It is a simple matter to by-pass it with the deaf. Classes in aero-dynamics for airwing trainees were omitted for all but a few of the deaf. Most spent their class time at the bench learning to use the tools of the trade. This limited their

opportunities for advancement perhaps but did speed the day when they could produce their full quota on the production line.

4. Emphasis is on manual dexterity and organization of the job to reduce waste motion.

Rhythm, timing, coordination --resembling the skills of the athlete-- are prime requirements on typical operations. The demands are moderate, yet they afford enough satisfaction to remain attractive and stimulating for the average workman. Vocational training which provides familiarity in the use of tools and machinery in general, in the fundamental principles of safety and shop practice is ample to give the deaf trainee a head-start which makes him a prize pupil.

5. High level incentive pay on nearly all jobs.

So far as pay is concerned, these jobs compare favorably with skilled trades.

The rubber industry, and mass production industry in general, has no monopoly on jobs of this type. The description will fit many production jobs in many industries, both large and small.

Many people are critical of the vocational training program

because it does not produce a higher percentage of skilled craftsmen. My own feeling is that the objectives I have mentioned --familiarity with tools, machinery, processes, safety--probably are more in keeping with the limitations which are ^{inherent} ~~unavoidable~~ in a school of the type we are considering here.

It is axiomatic, I think, that vocational schools do not produce journeymen in the craft. In every case, some further apprenticeship is required, with more or less heavy demands on verbalization. When the situation is favorable, some deaf youths may wish to persist in skilled trades, perhaps in a trade that the school is not equipped to teach. The Rehabilitation Service makes this possible for them. There is only one common requirement for every able-bodied deaf youth. That is: thorough grounding in the fundamentals that are useful in all trades and occupations.

With few exceptions, the vocational training departments in our residential schools are doing just that. The deaf graduate is equipped with skills and discipline which are worthy of respect by any employer.

Under the conditions I have described in Akron, quite a few deaf young men who lacked verbal skills to get far in the academic department at school have ^Ndemo^Astrated great learning ability on various operations in the industry. Stunkel quite reasonably postulates an ability to learn with what she calls "non-verbal material."

I recall particularly one newcomer to the employment office while workers were urgently needed in war time whose verbalization during the employment interview was so faint and faulty that the case seemed almost hopeless.

In view of manpower needs at the time, however, it seemed advisable to consult the employment manager. It was hard to find words to present the case briefly but the manager and I had worked together for many years and understood each other's methods well enough.

I led my man into his office and told him, "Here is 185 pounds of good health. Do you need any good health today?"

Mr. Hannah, the manager, looked my man over without a word, riffled swiftly through his file of job requisitions and

silently handed me one. That was all there was to it.

It was a very good job, too. One that closely fit the job description already mentioned.

Never once did I have a complaint from this man's foreman. In the course of time he paid off a small mortgage on his father's farm, married, bought a home, and is now raising a family. I never heard that he owned a car, but that would be well within the range of the common pattern.

Speech and lipreading surely are conveniences. But at this time we are considering practical utility on the job and I, myself, have never seen speech and lipreading developed to the level where they were really dependable instruments for business communication.

An employer who has had little experience with the deaf is sure to say that he prefers deaf workers who can speak and read lips. As he sees it, such skills are the obvious solution of the whole problem. He is simply saying that he would like to have the communications problem solved. Nor is he alone in this. So would we all. But it is not quite that simple.

Within the past year, a young foreman with whom I had had no previous acquaintance stopped at my desk to consult me about a deaf man working for him who had taken to the bottle and was fast heading for serious trouble. Actual dismissal looms in hopeless cases of this kind.

We discussed various angles and I inquired if the employee was in any immediate danger of dismissal. "No. No. Nothing of that kind," the foreman exclaimed. "I don't want to lose him. I just want to see if you can't help straighten him out."

As he was leaving, he paused in the doorway and once more admonished me, "You understand, I don't want to lose him." He seemed genuinely concerned.

Except for certain personality traits, with which I was already familiar, this deaf employee was fairly typical of the group.

After the foreman disappeared, I stood for a long moment staring vacantly at the empty doorway. The bitter was all mixed up with the sweet. On balance, however --

That is the question. On balance -- what?

For my own part, I can tell you truly that I feel no
inclination whatever to surrender.

B. M. Schowe
10/22/57