

Systemic Barriers to Employment for Deaf People

Most initiatives to reduce the education and employment gap for deaf people are focused on interventions for the individual deaf person. Yet often these efforts feel like putting on a band aid because they only address short term needs. Equitable opportunities for long term, sustained success for deaf people in placement, retention, and career advancement have long been out of reach. Systemic barriers need to be addressed in order to reduce the employment gap for deaf people.

Accessibility: A Central Challenge

Systemic barriers typically stem from one central challenge: accessibility.

Access to language.

Access to language is the first barrier often discussed in the field. For those born with hearing loss, early language deprivation can have lifelong effects. For many years, parents of deaf children may not have known about their child's hearing loss until well into early childhood. This led (and can still lead) to significant delays in language development and later academic and [socioemotional development](#) in deaf children.

We know that robust models of language and strong communication during infancy and early childhood is a critical part of cognitive development, laying the foundation for later learning. More recent initiatives such as the [Early Hearing Detection and Intervention Act](#) (reauthorized in 2017) seek to ensure identification of hearing loss at birth (or soon after) as well as support to parents. For those with later hearing loss, this change often requires a shift to visual language and communication strategies, ones that take time to learn and require changes from family, coworkers and friends, changes that can be very slow to occur.

Tip: [Hands and Voices](#) offers a family-centered approach to networking and support. The local state chapters may have resources for your deaf clients and their families that focus on communication in the home.

Access to information.

A more subtle but important extension of barriers is access to information, which can be affected by access to language and communication. Often referred to as "[incidental learning](#)" in school or, for adults at work, "the water cooler syndrome", people informally share information in spaces and places outside of direct instruction. Deaf people often feel like they are operating on less contextual information than their peers, and rightly so. Deaf people commonly complain that if there is something missed in a meeting or in a dinner table conversation, hearing peers and daily members will say "oh never mind" or "I'll fill you in later", depriving the deaf person of access to the content, tone, and often important subtle cues that are included in these conversations.

Together with language deprivation, information deprivation can contribute to [experiences of trauma](#) that, if not addressed, can have lifelong and compounding effects on socioemotional development and mental health.

Media Mention: Access to Information can be a matter of [life and death](#), particularly in interactions with law enforcement. (National Public Radio)

Media Mention: [Advocates for Deaf and Blind and Netflix New Playback Features](#) (National Public Radio)

Access to skilled professionals.

This is a long-standing issue, both within VR and in related fields. It takes time for a [professional to build familiarity with deaf people](#) and, because [deaf people are so heterogenous](#), strategies that may be a good fit for one person will not be for another.

The availability of skilled access providers is also a challenge. Interpreters, speech-to-text, audiologists, educators, therapists, doctors, social workers, and yes, even VR professionals with both the cultural and contextual understanding of deaf people can be few and far between. This is particularly true when you consider the [under-representation of POC](#) in professional fields and the diversity of the deaf population.

[Skilled professionals](#) are also often siloed from each other and can experience burnout and fatigue associated with the lack of robust professional support. This is not just a supply chain issue, either: Generations of deaf people who have not had opportunities to build their careers are opportunities lost for future generations to have deaf professionals who can bring a deaf-centered perspective to their work.

Tip: [Telepractice](#) is a growth area in connecting deaf people with skilled professionals.

Thought Question: Where do you see opportunities to promote the development and mentorship of skilled professionals, both deaf and hearing, to work in the VR field? What types of formal training, hands on experiences, or other learning experiences may be available?

Access to positive role models, social contexts, and attitudes.

These are the relational and socioemotional parts of access that cut across all domains. For example, deaf people may not have access to peer groups that can share [social capital](#) and support each other in navigating hearing training and workplace contexts.

[Negative attitudes about deaf people](#), audism, and ableism are all embedded throughout our culture. Societal messages lead us to think of deaf people (and disabled people as a whole) as broken, less capable, and “something to be accommodated”. Experiencing these negative attitudes and lowered expectations can drain deaf people of their self worth, leaving less energy available to persist through the work of obtaining a job and advancing one’s career. Access to a

[supportive peer network, together with opportunities for self determination](#), lay the foundation for resilience and quality of life.

Media Mention: [Deaf musicians show we cannot make blanket assumptions about what deaf people can do.](#) (National Public Radio)

Media Mention: [14 deaf people who changed the world.](#) (AI Media)

Access to opportunities.

Opportunities for deaf people can be limited as a result of ongoing, compounding effects of inaccessible environments described above. Training opportunities, internships, jobs, and careers are often rooted in a hearing way of being and can be very difficult to navigate as a deaf person without a change in both attitudes and business practices.

One key role of VR is to bridge the gap between deaf people and accessible opportunities for success in training and [in the workplace](#). [Businesses and employers are looking for job candidates](#) that are strong problem solvers, think independently, communicate well with colleagues, and maintain a positive and constructive attitude. Yet these skills do not magically appear on their own, particularly when individuals have faced a life-time of audism and discrimination. Understanding the legacy and ongoing impact of systemic barriers is critical to directly re-shaping expectations and bringing resources to deaf people to be prepared for the workforce.

High stakes assessments are often part of how potential employees demonstrate their competencies and qualifications for employment. There continue to be barriers to accessible [certification and licensure exams for deaf people](#). Some issues include prohibitions against interpreters during licensure exams and other accommodations challenges. VR can identify these barriers and offer solutions to address concerns such as confidentiality and score validity.

Thought Question: COVID-19 has, in many cases, resulted in massive shifts in how and where people work. What new opportunities are there to expand access for deaf people to communication, skills professionals, and career pathways?

Tip: Lack of awareness of systemic barriers in the first place is, arguably, the biggest impediment to progress. VR professionals need an understanding of the longstanding issues that deaf people face. Furthermore, VR staff can play a lead role in dismantling systemic barriers by participating in collaborative efforts across both public and private partners.