

Signing on

Rotorcraft Systems sites improve work environment for deaf employees



By Lisa Dunbar
Photos by Bob Ferguson

When Robert Sherwood, James Albert and Ken Reitz get briefed on the latest processes, join the discussion in staff meetings or converse with their manager about the Apache helicopter wire harnesses they build, they use a sign language interpreter.

In the past, the three electrical technicians and eight other deaf employees who work at the Rotorcraft Systems site in Mesa, Ariz., often had to receive information from staff meetings in writing or had to postpone instructions from managers while they waited to access a sign language interpreter from outside the plant.

Impromptu requests were even more challenging to accommodate and often required that meetings be rescheduled.

Furthermore, the costs of bringing in an interpreter increased by more than 20 percent between 2004 and 2008, according to Bill Kipper, Mesa Site Human Resources generalist. "We had

to pay premiums for meeting cancellations and last-minute requests and had to pay for a minimum of two hours, even if we just brought someone in for a 20-minute meeting."

The solution: The site's Human Resources department hired a contractor interpreter to work a 20-hour-a-week shift at the site, becoming among the first across the Boeing enterprise to do so.

A deaf employee was included in the interview process for the newly hired certified interpreter, Sandy Pieper, who keeps her Outlook calendar available for deaf employees to schedule meetings as well as a special, dedicated cell phone for them to reach her for impromptu events.

The idea is working so well that Mesa Human Resources is proposing it as a Reasonable Accommodation (see related sidebar) best practice across Rotorcraft Systems and Boeing, Kipper said.

"Hiring Sandy Pieper has reduced annual interpreter costs

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– Robert Sherwood, electrical technician, Rotorcraft Systems, Mesa, Ariz.

by more than 22 percent a year, while providing better service to our deaf employees, managers and HR generalists,” Kipper said.

Deaf employees say hiring an on-site interpreter has enhanced their work environment and helped the business by improving the quality of the wire harnesses they build.

“Now that we have Sandy available, we understand more,” Sherwood said. “I am more aware of customer needs, which makes me a better employee. And I have a deeper understanding of business operations and what is happening in a broader sense with our work. Feeling more connected improves the quality of my work and the product I am producing.”

Managers are also pleased with how communication has improved with their deaf employees.

“When I had meetings with my team, I used to have to write everything down for the deaf employees,” said Roger Pazan. “Now I can call Sandy, or the employees can call her, and she attends our meetings, and the deaf employees understand and participate.”

The interpreter expertise, along with the formation of the site's Boeing Employees Abilities Awareness Association (BEAAA) affinity group, has served to increase awareness among all employees about the deaf community at Boeing.

“Since I have been here, the teams with deaf employees are now more cohesive because of the improved access to communication for everyone involved,” said Pieper, who—along with deaf employees Sherwood and Rodd Gatewood—has been teaching sign language classes at the site. “We have a beginning class, Level 2 class and a practice session available. It is done on employees’ own time, but has been a great opportunity to encourage communicating with deaf teammates and enhancing personal development goals.”

In January, Pieper and the deaf

employees collaborated with Cultural Diversity and Inclusion and the newly launched BEAAA to conduct two ‘Lunch and Learn’ sessions about deaf culture and communication, which included a question-and-answer panel with deaf employees. This event, the first for Mesa's BEAAA affinity group chapter, was followed by a second awareness Lunch and Learn in February and the launch of the sign language course.

The synergy between the affinity group, Pieper, management and the deaf employees has contributed to an accessibility process improvement for Rotorcraft Systems in Mesa.

“Employees learned to spell their names in sign language and watched television using closed captioning without sound,” Pieper said. “It was a real eye-opener for people.”

Across the country in Philadelphia, another Rotorcraft site is offering an American Sign Language class for the second year. This and other efforts coordinated by the Philadelphia Diversity Council to enhance communication among Boeing colleagues led to the Council winning a 2008 Diversity Award. ■

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A helping hand

What is a reasonable accommodation?

It's a modification or adjustment to a job, the work environment or in the way work is usually performed that allows a qualified person with a disability to perform the essential functions of the job.

What are some examples?

- Qualified sign language interpreters or readers for deaf or hearing-impaired employees
- Reserved parking for employees who have mobility impairments
- Readily accessible and usable facilities for individuals with impairments
- Adaptive equipment or devices
- Modified work schedule
- Reassignment to a vacant position

For more information on reasonable accommodation, employees should contact their manager or visit <http://insidees.web.boeing.com/AccomServ/template.asp?id=4760> on the Boeing intranet or e-mail: accommodationservices@boeing.com

PHOTOS: (LEFT) Interpreter Sandy Pieper assists deaf workers at Boeing's Rotorcraft Systems site in Mesa, Ariz. She is making a sign language symbol that can indicate “cooperation” or “teamwork.”

(BELOW) Rodd Gatewood, a deaf Boeing employee, helps teach sign language classes at Mesa.

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