

Project Evidence Brief #2

A holistic approach to improving employment inclusion for deaf employees

Lessons from workplace innovation in Kenya



Project partner: Association for the Physically Disabled of Kenya (APDK)
Funding partners: UK Government



Overview

To increase deaf people's participation in waged work, inclusion at all employment stages has to be considered.

Communication, social needs and mental health of deaf employees are important considerations, as is increasing general awareness and basic knowledge among employers and colleagues about deafness. These measures can promote communication between deaf and hearing employees and reduce stereotypes that may persist regarding employability and productivity in the workplace.

This Evidence Brief illustrates how empowerment of deaf employees was enhanced through the i2i project in Kenya (see box opposite) and can bring benefits to everyone – employees and employers alike.

Project: Innovation to Inclusion (i2i)

Location: Kenya

Timeframe: 2018-2022

Project partner: Association for the Physically Disabled of Kenya (APDK)

The objective of the project was to strengthen policies and practices for inclusion of men and women with disabilities in the workforce.

In Kenya, i2i targeted 3,000 persons with disabilities of working age in Nairobi, Kisumu, and Mombasa, aiming to equip them with the skills and tools to participate in waged work.

A critical aim of i2i was trialling and learning from innovative solutions, and producing learning on their scalability. The project planned a series of learning papers to capture the impacts and learning from a suite of pilot interventions focusing on a sub-group highly marginalised from the labour market in Kenya - deaf people.

Introduction

Deaf people are at risk of marginalisation because of attitudinal, economic, environmental, and institutional barriers which exclude them from socioeconomic activities. In the workplace, this exclusion is seen through challenges such as employers' reluctance to hire deaf people in customer-facing roles, citing a fear of negative impacts on the company's image and income. Employers and colleagues may have limited knowledge or experience in communicating with deaf colleagues, and a lack of workplace policies or budgets for reasonable accommodations does little to support positive change. As a result, deaf employees can find it hard to communicate with managers and colleagues, resulting in social isolation and workplace exclusion.

Methodology

The evidence for this brief draws from the i2i project end review, and learning papers. For this, questionnaires, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with

deaf employees, jobseekers, supervisors of deaf employees and human resource (HR) managers. Relevant policies and secondary literature were also reviewed.

An organisation of persons with disabilities (OPD), Deaf Empowerment Kenya, was highly involved throughout the pilot project and research processes, including the design of activities, identification of research participants, implementation and validation.

In March 2022, project partner, the Association for the Physically Disabled of Kenya (APDK), organised a workshop with pilot participants to seek their feedback on the draft conclusions of the research. This was used to refine the conclusions. Recommendations for the future were sought from participants and these are outlined below.

What the evidence tells us

1. To increase deaf people's participation in waged work, inclusion at all employment stages has to be considered

Feedback on accessibility and inclusion covered five key areas: (1) safe travel to work, (2) workplace communication, (3) skills and confidence, (4) employer knowledge and attitudes, and (5) inclusive workplace. The research identified barriers to deaf employees at all stages of employment, including recruitment (CV writing and interviews), employment (transport to the workplace, communication with colleagues) and future progression (continual training and promotion). To increase deaf people's participation in waged work, inclusion at all employment stages must therefore be considered and planned.

2. Communication, social needs and mental health of deaf employees must not be overlooked

Providing tangible workplace supports, such as accessible facilities and subsidies for transport are really important to facilitate positive workplaces for deaf employees. Support to help improve communication, or meet social needs and good mental health should not be overlooked. Frustrations experienced during job hunting among deaf employees, for example, indicated a possible need for counselling or peer support.

It is important to be alert to characterisations of deafness which carry negative implications for workplace wellbeing. For example, although some employers praised deaf employees for their work ethic, citing their highly focused and productive work output, this was linked to their limited communication opportunities, reflecting therefore barriers and social isolation and not a positive workplace culture for deaf employees.

Respondents overwhelmingly cited the presence and value of sign language interpreters as a benefit which practically eliminated communication barriers in the workplace. Interpreters were not available in many workplaces surveyed though, with cost cited as a major undermining factor.

"Presence of an interpreter makes my work easier as this allows me to communicate effectively and I am confident that the information I am passing across will be consumed and interpreted as intended."

Deaf employee, key informant

3. Increased awareness and knowledge among employers and colleagues about deafness can promote communication with deaf employees

People who do not understand Kenyan Sign Language (KSL) tend to assume it is grammatically similar to spoken language. This is not the case as sign languages are languages in their own right with established syntax and grammatical structures. This means someone whose first language is KSL can have difficulty following written English or Kiswahili. Increasing awareness and knowledge among hearing employers and colleagues on ways to communicate with deaf employees can be beneficial.

A small amount of sign language goes a long way. Employees noted that training in basic KSL and deaf awareness improved their ability to communicate with their deaf colleagues. Even an elementary level of sign language training for all employees helps enable basic communication with deaf colleagues in the workplace.

4. Stereotypes persist among employers meaning that deaf people remain among the least likely impairment group in waged employment

Reasonable accommodations for deaf employees include changes such as adaptation/modification of the built environment, provision of assistive devices or technology, sign language interpreters, and information in alternative formats. Employers are often not willing to offer reasonable accommodation to enable deaf employees to work effectively, mainly because of a lack of knowledge of disability inclusion as confirmed by several HR teams consulted, as well as budgetary constraints.

The majority of participants in the i2i employability training had not yet secured jobs by the end of the project. Potentially this results from the lack of awareness among employers. One highly qualified participant had applied for hundreds of positions without success, citing poor understanding and discrimination on the part of hiring employers. Sensitising employers to focus on the abilities and skills of deaf employees is vital.

5. Empowerment of deaf employees can bring benefits to everyone

Employers and employees alike emphasised that having sign language interpreters available practically eliminated communication barriers in the workplace, and meant deaf employees could work effectively, participate in meetings with hearing colleagues and avoid social isolation. Investments like subsidising transport for employees, practised by some employers, were also appreciated. However, more research, for example on the cost-benefits of reasonable accommodations, is needed to persuade employers that such investments contribute to better employee retention and productivity. With this, other employers could more easily be persuaded to follow suit.

Learning from experience

1. Inclusion of deaf people is important at all employment stages.
2. Deaf employees' communication, social and mental health needs overlap.
3. Raising awareness and knowledge among employers and colleagues about deafness is important to enhance deaf people's accessibility to work and to improve workplace communication.
4. More research on the cost-benefits of inclusive workplaces (for both employers and employees) would support advocacy with employers.

Recommendations

- The Kenyan government should put in place and implement a policy framework for disability inclusion in the public transport sector, and budget for its implementation and monitoring.
- NGOs prioritise further cost benefits research of employers providing free or subsidised transport to deaf staff, and other reasonable accommodations to reduce workplace access for deaf employees.
- Future skills development programmes to equip candidates with technical or vocational skills as appropriate should be complemented by employability skills and continuous career counselling and support services. To address the challenges faced by jobseekers with disabilities this support should include a focus on workplace confidence and mental health.
- Employers of deaf staff should hire sign language interpreters, especially for critical meetings, instructions and training, and explore the use of other technological assistance, such as the app Assist ALL.
- Employers should promote use of plain, clear, simple language in verbal and written communications. This has broader benefits of accessibility which extend to all staff.
- Employers must actively promote and enable collaboration and interaction across the workforce. Inclusive training, team-building activities and breaks can be an excellent and enjoyable opportunity to promote interaction and give colleagues a chance to practise their sign language skills.
- Employers encourage and provide opportunities for deaf colleagues to interact with one another and with hearing colleagues during break times, and consider investing in access to counselling services.
- Companies should form partnerships with OPDs, such as Deaf Empowerment Kenya, to continue implementing improvements to workplace accessibility and inclusion. OPDs must be fairly compensated for their time and expertise.

Conclusion

The evidence from i2i provides valuable insights to better understand the barriers to inclusion of deaf people in the workplace and some key intervention areas for improvement. OPDs can help gather the evidence to enable employers to understand the challenges and needs of deaf job seekers and employees. A holistic approach to inclusion is appropriate to different stages of employment and recognises the overlapping employment and productivity barriers related to communication, social and mental health needs. Collaboration between all stakeholders, including government, NGOs, employers and other colleagues, is essential to improve employment market access for deaf people.

References

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For further information please contact Advocacy@cbmuk.org.uk

Main image: Project participant – a deaf jobseeker – at i2i pilot project launch event in Kisumu county © Association for the Physically Disabled of Kenya

ⁱ The UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) are not responsible for the information contained within, and views expressed, and the content should not be taken as a reflection of the donor's official opinion.

Improving workplace inclusion for deaf people

Lessons from the i2i project, Kenya, 2018-2022

There are significant challenges for deaf people to participate in waged work:

Employers hold **stereotypes** that question the abilities of deaf employees

Staff find **communication** with deaf colleagues challenging

Workplaces do not offer enough **policies & budget** for reasonable accommodations

Inaccessible facilities & difficulties travelling to work are **barriers** to inclusive workplaces

How do we achieve workplace inclusion for deaf people?



INCLUSION

Reduce barriers to inclusion at all employment stages, from recruitment to employment and future progression



SOCIAL & MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

Avoid isolation by actively promoting interaction and team building across the workforce



COMMUNICATION

Offer basic sign language training for hearing colleagues and raise awareness on effective communication



ABILITIES & SKILLS

Combat stereotypes by profiling and supporting workplace skills & abilities



REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS

Increase budget for accommodations such as subsidised travel to work and hiring sign language interpreters



COLLABORATION

Governments, NGOs, OPDs, employers and colleagues all have a role to play



All the teachers and staff here know basic sign language. Here we work together as a team and have utmost cooperation together
Deaf employee, i2i project



Empowerment of deaf employees can benefit everyone by fostering effective team collaboration and avoiding social isolation.



An interpreter makes my work easier as this allows me to communicate effectively.
Deaf employee, i2i project

