

# Job Enrichment: One Avenue to Retaining Strong Staff and Providing Quality Service OR They Really can do More than Interpret

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## Abstract

Because of the physical limitations of sign language interpreting, when a postsecondary institution hires a full time interpreter, it is generally with the understanding that s/he will not interpret forty hours a week. Many institutions and administrators wonder what these employees will be doing after they have finished interpreting classes. This paper examines various approaches to hiring interpreters and the positive outcomes of enriching and expanding the variety of duties for interpreting staff. Higher quality, consistent and stable services for students and increased job satisfaction for staff are some of the possible benefits of retooling interpreter position descriptions. For those institutions using primarily freelance interpreters, these issues raise the possibility of creating palatable staff positions or developing new approaches to hiring interpreters who work in private practice.

## Introduction

Historically, postsecondary institutions in the United States have had difficulty hiring enough interpreters, slotting interpreters into appropriate human resources categories, developing job descriptions, and determining duties other than interpreting and preparing to interpret. This paper examines the variation in interpreters' roles at various institutions, focusing on the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee (UWM), and suggests that interpreter job duties can be enriched to include varied professional duties beyond in-

terpreting, thereby improving staff job satisfaction and at the same time leading to improved quality, consistency, and stability of services for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. This builds on research that interpreters are advised, due to repetitive motion injuries, to limit their number of actual interpreting hours to approximately 20 – 25 hours weekly. With this limitation on the number of hours a person can interpret, institutions are faced with the dilemma of fashioning positions to meet the interpreting needs, while at the same time creating palatable positions.

## Retention of Interpreters

Hiring and retaining qualified interpreting staff has long been an issue at many postsecondary institutions. As more students who are deaf or hard of hearing attend these institutions and work in professional positions on the same campuses, there are even more challenges in keeping strong staff than there might have been in the past. This issue is significant for numerous institutions. In 1997/98, both PEPNet and the Midwest Center for Postsecondary Outreach (MCPO) surveyed postsecondary institutions in their *National and Regional Needs Assessments Results: Priority Needs for Postsecondary Institutions Serving Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing*. The needs assessment reflects the need, both nationally and regionally, for knowledge of “managing interpreters” and “how to recruit, coordinate and fund quality interpreters.”

Also, the 1989/90 National Technical Institute for the Deaf/Rochester Institute for Technology (NTID/RIT) Repetitive Motion Injury research established the need for new standards on the number of hours per week someone can interpret to retain qualified interpreters, and this resulted in the lowering of the weekly number of interpreting hours at NTID and other institutions. In addition, the current tight labor market, competitive salaries and the development of more staff positions at community interpreting agencies, are additional reasons for postsecondary institutions to pay attention to retention of skilled interpreters.

One of the greatest challenges a DHH program faces is providing quality, consistent, stable and responsive services while at the same time retaining strong staff. Campuses would do well to analyze their own services and ask these questions:

1. Does the campus have established hiring standards in terms of certification, education, and experience?
2. Is the campus able to provide consistent interpreters for ongoing classes and meetings?
3. Are interpreters available for the full length of a student's needs?
4. Are the services responsive; are interpreters available for last minute one-on-one meetings with faculty?
5. Does the campus ask consumers to evaluate the interpreting services?

#### Historical Deaf/Hard of Hearing Programs Staffing Models

Postsecondary institutions have made a few attempts at creative position development for interpreting services. In general, the first and most common approach is to hire someone generically referred to as a "Program Manager/Interpreter." Many campuses have found this arrangement to be beneficial when there are only a few students who are deaf/hard of hearing. This arrangement allows the manager to serve as an advisor to students, to schedule freelance interpreters, and to do some interpreting also. This is a common model.

As programs expand and serve more students, a next logical step beyond hiring a Program Manager is creating a "Lead Interpreter" position. In

general, this person interprets, does scheduling of other interpreters, and might serve in a supervisory capacity as well. While these positions create new duties for the individuals lucky enough to land the Program Manager or Lead Interpreter positions, this does not create other interpreter positions with duties above and beyond interpreting. On many campuses, administrators look at the interpreting situation and request that staff interpreters also tutor. While this appears reasonable because interpreters often have "down time" between classes and understand deaf/hard of hearing students and their needs, due to conflict of interest or lack of subject knowledge, this is not always the best use of interpreters' time. There are other ways to retain strong staff, build interesting interpreting positions, meet campus demands, and make the best use of staff hours.

#### Applying the Theory of "Enrichment" to a Postsecondary DHH Staff

One approach to re-tooling interpreting staff positions is to "enrich" the jobs. According to Frederick Herzberg's theory of "job enrichment" (Herzberg, 1968, 1987), if you re-design jobs by giving employees more and varied duties, which are different than their standard responsibilities, they will be more satisfied and motivated, which in the case of a DHH program, ultimately leads to higher quality services for students and staff retention. This can be viewed as altering the jobs vertically - giving people more challenging duties which might have been done by supervisors, by people above them - instead of enlarging the jobs horizontally or giving staff interpreters more of the same duties they are already performing, in this case, interpreting. In fact, due to repetitive motion injuries, additional interpreting between 20-25 hours a week is generally not acceptable. If a full time staff member interprets half of the week, s/he has to carry other duties. With the above in mind, how can programs retain staff?

According to Herzberg, if employees are satisfied and motivated, they remain loyal, and organizations see less turnover. In terms of DHH staffs, less turnover means the campus retains strong individuals, familiar with the workings of the institution, familiar with the students, and committed to the office culture.

Job enrichment theory suggests that employees are satisfied and motivated by some of the following factors:

- achievement
- recognition
- responsibility
- intrinsic challenge of work itself
- advancement

While familiar issues such as salary, benefits, and institutional policies need to be fair, it is the above motivation factors which keep employees interested and committed to the work. In the early stages of the development of the interpreting field, interpreters were often relegated to the lower rungs of pay scales. Interpreters who were motivated by the work often stayed in the field because they were satisfied by other factors. Certainly, if an institution's pay scale is not in accordance with local standards, this will be detrimental to staff retention.

In creating interpreter positions with more and varied duties, institutions can reap some of these positive benefits of job enrichment:

- Answering administrators' questions about non-interpreting downtime.
- Making staff interpreters a more valued and integral part of the institution.
- Assisting in further professionalization and diversification of the interpreting field.

### Enriching a Staff Position

The following suggestions are not all inclusive of job enrichment ideas, but attempting the following can assist a campus in redefining staff positions:

- Remove controls: allow interpreters more power in choosing their schedules.
- Increase accountability: more varied duties means staff might have to report to more people.
- Create natural work units: encourage self-managed teams based on various projects or experiences.
- Provide direct feedback: have more one-on-one meetings to assist with new projects.

- Introduce new tasks: provide additional duties that might be considered a duty normally performed by someone higher up on the chain of command.
- Allocate special assignments: give staff the time to create a presentation for local, state, or national conferences.
- Grant additional authority: develop a mentorship/intern program and allow staff to supervise the mentees or interns; grant employees more power over planning and control, not just execution of a project.

### The University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee DHH Program

The University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee (UWM) is a medium-sized program with six staff interpreters with varying contracts (some full-time, some nine-month, some twelve-month), one program manager, and one assistant program manager. The campus also houses an outreach site for the Midwest Center for Postsecondary Outreach and sub-contracts interpreting services to other local postsecondary institutions. The use of job enrichment ideas at UWM might not parallel those of campuses of varying sizes, but some of the points can be used in programs of any size.

Following the concept of job enrichment, UWM has added these types of duties for interpreting staff beyond the standard 20-23 interpreting hours per week:

- Develop/manage internship site.
- Coordinate Deaf Issues Network on campus.
- Develop new faculty/staff training: Deafness 101.
- Administer RID testing supersite.
- Serve as liaison to UWM ITP advisory board.
- Coordinate student "Sign and Dine" program.
- Co-teach RID certification preparation course.
- Plan high school preview days.
- Handle accounting for notetaking and subcontracting services..
- Coordinate notetaker training.
- Provide TTY inservices.

- Develop/maintain national staff interpreter salary survey.
- Design/maintain web page.
- Manage Postsecondary Interpreting Network listserv.
- Manage student reflector.
- Assist with scheduling.
- Troubleshoot computer challenges.
- Manage graphic design projects.
- Assist with photography to document DHH program history.

The half-time staff members also have “enriched” duties, but not as many as full-time staff. In addition, UWM has several positions which include two jobs, such as, Interpreter/Program Manager and Interpreter/Outreach Specialist. These positions allow experienced interpreters to maintain their interpreting skills and at the same time expand their repertoire of experiences.

One might argue that job enrichment looks similar to “slash” positions sometimes used in primary and secondary settings, such as interpreter/tutor or interpreter/aide. These have been criticized because the duties often appear to be used to fill interpreters’ downtime. The difference with the job enrichment approach is that the duties are more challenging; hence, the term enriched, instead of expanding their jobs into “slash” positions, only to fill them with less meaningful duties.

### Hazards of Change

While enriching job duties for interpreters at UWM has met with positive reactions from the staff, is it also possible the idea might be met with resistance.

Interpreters might say, “We don’t want to be enriched.” If the staff is comfortable with fairly predictable positions, adding new duties might be overwhelming for some. During hiring of new interpreters, it will be important to clarify the expectation of the program or department.

The next question interpreters might ask is, “Are you going to pay us more?” The short answer to this is, “No.” This can be qualified by add-

ing, “If your job duties change significantly enough to warrant a transfer to a totally new job category, yes, your pay will be adjusted.”

Finally, managers might not be interested in job enrichment for staff interpreters because it generally means that managers relinquish some power. In addition, it might mean more time providing feedback as staff learn new duties. In general, managers can benefit by transferring some duties to the staff, thereby giving themselves more time for planning, working with students or program development. Many DHH Program Managers were or are interpreters themselves and might not have had the opportunity for any management training. Job enrichment of staff interpreters might provide time for professional development for managers also. In the case of UWM, these changes were viewed by all as positive and led to staff retention at the campus.

### “Quick Wins”

For some institutions, immediate, large-scale change is not possible. There are still means to attempt to retain staff interpreters while considering other changes. Also, campuses might try some of these ideas in retaining hourly or freelance interpreters. (During the sessions in Denver, the audience contributed some of these ideas for “Quick Wins,” or ideas to retain experienced staff. The ideas listed needed to be inexpensive, feasibly accomplished and have positive outcomes.)

- Nominate deserving individuals for campus, local, state or national awards.
- Remain flexible to personal scheduling needs for doctor appointments, children’s illnesses, etc.
- Provide passes to campus health and recreation facilities.
- Free parking.
- Tuition reimbursement if the campus provides it for other employees.
- Free tickets to campus events.
- Mental health days with classes covered by colleagues.
- End-of-year party or dinner.

## The Future of Work

Job enrichment for staff interpreters and “quick wins” are not a panacea for all DHH Programs’ retention challenges. Each program carries its own idiosyncratic issues. Job enrichment does take into account that the world of work is ever changing. Our original models for interpreting positions need to be examined and placed in the greater context of the current and future professional and technological world; postsecondary institutions are researching providing long distance classroom interpreting between several campus via remote video.

At the same time, we need to be aware that organizations will need to be more flexible and provide less rigid job descriptions. In the future, employees with varied skills/competencies - not only interpreting - will be valued more than those with one specific expertise. Those who can learn new skills/competencies quickly will be highly valued in our rapidly changing world. Job enrichment is one means to meeting those future challenges.

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