



Working with D/deaf, Deafblind & Hard of Hearing People

BARRIERS TO ACCESS:
EMPLOYMENT ISSUES FOR LOCAL DEAF PEOPLE IN
NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

Report by Rhona Stanbury and Helen Thew, March 2008

“The loss of one person’s contribution is a loss to society as a whole. The great objective of our society is to be truly inclusive, to give every citizen a decent life and a productive role to play”, (Flynn, 1999)

Introduction and Overview

As an organisation, Newcastle Deaflink has taken on board concerns and complaints expressed by the D/deaf community who feel discriminated against when seeking employment and when in the workplace itself. This informal consultation resulted in a brief report (Barriers to Employment for D/deaf, Deafblind and Hard of Hearing People in Newcastle, 2007, see appendix 1) by Newcastle Deaflink, which was presented to Newcastle Employability Reference Group, hosted by the Council for Voluntary Services (CVS). As a consequence of this 'Barriers to Access' was commissioned by CVS, and funded by Newcastle Futures to look at improving pathways to employment for D/deaf people.

Despite provisions made in the Disability Discrimination Act (1995), the employment opportunities for D/deaf people are still limited in comparison to hearing people. Research carried out by the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID, 2007) found that one in five of the D/deaf people surveyed were unemployed and looking for work, compared to one in twenty in the UK labour market as a whole. Respondents identified the attitudes of employers and lack of D/deaf awareness within Job Centres as key barriers to employment. Moreover, a third of respondents reported that even Disability Employment Advisors (DEA's) were not aware of the needs of D/deaf people. Once in employment, difficulties faced included lack of knowledge by employers of the Access to Work (ATW) scheme, social isolation because of their deafness and harassment/discrimination. These findings are supported by Sign research on mental health and deafness in the workplace, (2005) which found that D/deaf people's emotional and practical needs were not supported, resulting in isolation and stress.

'Barriers to Access' takes a snapshot of the experiences of Newcastle D/deaf residents, to ascertain whether the barriers to employment and discrimination in the workplace demonstrated nationally are reflected locally.

Aims of Research

The proposal was to carry out a small research project to:

- Gather statistics locally on unemployed D/deaf people
- Identify local D/deaf unemployed people
- Record the experiences of unemployment from the group, highlighting the barriers.
- Formulate recommendations on how to improve pathways for employment.
- Work with Newcastle Futures on pathways to employment which is accessible to the deaf community.
- Find out current provision and identify partners from the D/deaf community to assist in preparation, mentoring and training for employment.

Methodology

This report is a summary of research by Rhona Stanbury, Development Coordinator, Newcastle Deaflink and Helen Thew. Helen is Deaf and has experience of being unemployed, and therefore was ideally suited to work on this project; she is currently working as a freelance consultant and BSL/Deaf Awareness tutor. The research took place between September 2007 and March 2008. It was originally envisaged that the research would take three months. However, due to the time lag between contacting agencies and receiving a response, and the nature of conducting research within the D/deaf community, which needs face to face work, the project took longer than expected.

The research was aimed at gaining information from some of the 435 D/deaf BSL users in the Newcastle area (Deaflink, 2003). Research participants were recruited in two ways; through invitations being sent via relevant agencies, and through Helen's informal network. Contact was made with the Manager of Jobcentre Plus, who informed us that they only had six D/deaf clients registered as unemployed and looking for work, four of whom were working with a DEA. Social Services Sensory Support Team was also contacted. Both agencies agreed to pass on information to their D/deaf service users regarding the research and how to contact Deaflink to

take part (see Appendix 2 for flyer). Despite this Deaflink received no respondents from the formal agencies, which would indicate that this kind of recruitment would need to be done differently in the future. When Helen got feedback from her networks on levels of unemployment, it was found that there were far more than the six reported by Jobcentre Plus. This would indicate that there are a number of 'hidden' D/deaf unemployed who have withdrawn from the system and possibly rely on family or Disability Living Allowance for support. In the Tyne and Wear district as a whole, Helen found twenty-three people who were willing to take part in the research. However, only nine of them could be included due to the geographical limitations of the project.

All of the respondents were of employable age, with most being in the 26-35 age group (n=4, see fig 1). Gender was split equally between men (n=4) and women (n=5). All respondents were D/deaf BSL users, and classed themselves as white British. The respondents were invited to attend a full day workshop at the premises of Newcastle Healthy City where time was spent outlining the research and having informal discussions with the nine respondents about their experiences. The group was informed in BSL that their input would be confidential, and were given a confidentiality statement to sign (see appendix 3).

Due to the visual nature of BSL, eight out of the nine respondents agreed to be interviewed to camera, which was translated and transcribed at a later date. These interviews took place in conjunction with a written questionnaire, based on the RNID national survey (2007). The one participant who declined to be interviewed on camera filled in the questionnaire separately. The questions were structured to get comments and therefore a greater understanding of the experiences of Deaf people. The information was then collated into statistics and themed qualitative data, from the 'comments' part of the questionnaire (see appendix 4).

Findings

Background

'Childhood Dreams'

As part of the background to this study, Deaflink were interested to know what expectations the respondents had as children of working adult life. Would it reflect the low expectations that parents and professionals can instil in D/deaf children and young people? As children 90% of respondents said that they had 'dreamed' of what they wanted to do when they left school (fig. 2). A small percentage dreamt of high profile work e.g. Actor or Designer; however the majority contemplated relatively low profile work such as office work, driver, armed forces etc. Many of the respondents reported that they were told by school or parents that certain career options they were interested in would not be possible, due to their deafness.

Work History

All respondents had been employed at some point in a range of jobs including as a teacher of the deaf, punch card operator, cleaner, chef, youth worker, driver, gardener, deaf awareness trainer, artist, factory worker, child minder, retail assistant and office worker. However, 43% of respondents had spent the majority of their working lives working for deaf organisations, stating that this gave them a working environment where sign language was used. One respondent stated, *"I worked in an environment where I don't feel disabled and I communicated freely with my colleagues"*. Another said *"Being around staff that can sign comfortably and understand deafness to an extent; it limits choice of job greatly but is very important for mental health."*

Conversely, some respondents reported that work within a hearing environment proved to be a challenge, where there was regular communication breakdown and where D/deaf people were excluded, resulting in isolation and depression, *"somebody treated me like a little girl who didn't think I could do a task because of my deafness. Showed me jobs that didn't match my skills"*. However, there was evidence that some hearing businesses do have the capacity and will to support

D/deaf people in the workplace, *“I worked at M&S they were nice and gave me a pager and provided an interpreter for meetings.”*

Out of Work Experiences – Looking for Work

Employment Status

53% of respondents were long-term unemployed. The remainder were in casual work, and looking for permanent employment, or on long-term sick leave and looking for a change of career. 78% of our respondents were actively seeking work (fig.15). One respondent who wasn't seeking work seemed to have 'given up' on fitting into the hearing workplace, and therefore did not see the point in finding employment, *“I'm Deaf, difficult to relate on my own...I wish all could sign”*.

An area Deaflink was interested in was how D/deaf people could utilise their skills and abilities, for instance in BSL, through self-employment. 78% of respondents said that they had considered setting up their own business (fig 14). One person felt restrained by their lack of knowledge around taxation issues. Another stated, *“I was self employed for 3 years and received no support I was not aware of ATW. My income was not regular so I had to find a job which in the end did not use my talents”*. This suggests that with the right support in terms of set-up, tax etc, take-up of self employment could be successful within the D/deaf community (see RNID website for factsheets on how to become self-employed).

Job Search

Figure 16 shows how many jobs our respondents have applied for in the last year. The most common reply was between 1-10 jobs. Half of those who had applied secured only one or no interviews (fig 17). One person said that *“Human Resources sent me forms with a support letter 4 times. I was never offered an interview”*.

Interviews

We asked respondents if they felt that employers had accepted their deafness in interviews and 78% felt that employers were accepting (fig. 18). Three people said that they had applied for jobs in deaf organisations with interpreter support. However some of the respondents had experienced less positive approaches such

as, *“can sign but attitude bad”* or *“some use my deafness as an excuse, like cannot use the telephone or give inappropriate low pay work”*.

Deaf Aware Interviewers?

We asked if the people on the interview panel were deaf aware and 33% felt that their panel had some level of deaf awareness (fig. 20), which possibly reflects the amount of interviews which were for employment in deaf organisations. The rest answered that they did not know or that the panel were neither aware nor unaware. One person said *“sometimes I had to ask people to write things down as they would not speak slowly”*.

Barriers to Employment

78% of respondents believed that being deaf does make it more difficult for them to find a job (fig. 21), *“I’m not sure it depends on the attitude of the potential employer and it depends on how I present myself i.e. if a deaf candidate is better educated and has a better grasp of English and is more comfortable with hearing surroundings they are more likely to be looked on favourably.”*

We asked people to identify, from a list, what they thought were the main barriers to employment for deaf and hard of hearing people (fig 22). These are the results, in order of priority, with the biggest barriers first:

- Lack of communication and support
- Attitude of employers
- A lack of suitable jobs
- A lack of skills and training
- The attitude of DEA's
- Low pay relative to benefits
- The attitude of employment advisers
- A lack of English skills

Communication and support are evidently important throughout the process of finding work, and also within the workplace, *“When I was made redundant there were lots of meetings when I had an interpreter provided which helped me understand more. I then discovered I could have had them throughout my employment with ATW, but my manager did not know about ATW.”*

In terms of skills and training, one respondent had benefitted from a deaf focused 'School Leavers course' where he learnt about his rights under the DDA, how to write a CV and fill in application forms, how to use interpreters within an interview setting, this helped him gain confidence to negotiate the interview process successfully. However, he now felt that there were no suitable opportunities for further training, *"Couldn't find work in my chosen career (being a chef) so I took up part time youth work with deaf young people. Taking a gap like this for 3 years when the project closed meant I needed to get back on track with being a chef, so I need a refresher course as I do not have any updated experience."* Unfortunately the Deaf Youth agency that ran the School Leavers course has since closed due to lack of funding.

The list also shows that DEA's, who are supposed to support and assist people into work, were perceived as being a barrier to employment.

Out of Work Experiences – Job Centre Plus

Assistance into employment

The group were asked who had helped them get a job (fig 4). The most common reply was 'a relative'; this was closely followed by themselves or a 'professional' (a social worker, tutor). Fewer than 20% of respondents said that the staff at a Job Centre had helped them become employed. This highlights the stresses put on family members to act as a go-between for their deaf relative, who are equally frustrated in having to be dependent on others thus feeling disempowered at the start of their search for work. It has been brought to the attention of DeafLink that in some cases relatives have acted as 'interpreters', either due to ignorance about the use of interpreters or because of the shortage of interpreters in the region

Ease of Use (fig. 5)

This question asked people how easy they found it using the Job Centre Plus services. Of those who expressed an opinion 44% said that it was quite difficult. Reasons given were that *"staff couldn't sign so found it hard to be understood"*. One person said an interpreter was provided but they had no choice of interpreter. A respondent said that it was *"not easy without qualifications"*.

44% said it was neither easy nor difficult to use the Job Centre and the remaining 12% said that they had found the experience to be 'quite easy'.

Deaf Awareness (fig. 6)

We asked people how deaf aware they felt the staff at the Job Centre were. One person felt that they were 'quite aware' and gave the name of a DEA on the West Road who was '*not bad*'. Four did not have an opinion either way - 'it depends on which Job Centre'.

However, 37.5% of people who answered this question felt that the staff were not very deaf aware.

"To be able to use Job Centre Plus services efficiently and with confidence, deaf clients have to feel that staff are aware of their needs" RNID "Opportunity Blocked"

Helpfulness of the Disability Employment Adviser (DEA)

Figure 7 show that 66% of respondents had used a DEA. The following graph (fig.8) indicates that for 50% of those it was not a positive experience and they stated that the DEA was not helpful.

This could be attributed to the fact that all of those who had used a DEA said that the DEA was neither deaf aware or unaware with the exception of one respondent who stated that the DEA was '*not at all deaf aware*'. This was probably the same person who said "*The DEA had not met a deaf person before so panicked. That's not good enough.*" Another respondent said "*The DEA was disabled but was unsure how to communicate with me. I had to help her*". Deaflink acknowledges that DEA's have to have a generic understanding of disability and therefore may have limited deaf awareness knowledge. However, a lack of specialist knowledge can result in a lack of confidence in the service by D/deaf users, and DEA's should be accessible to all disabled groups.

Overall Satisfaction with Job Centre Plus service (fig. 10)

One person felt quite satisfied with the service "*I was emailed jobs for me to research*". The most common reply (33%) was neither satisfied nor unsatisfied. One person said "*This was a new experience so I did not know what to expect*".

Two people said that they were quite unsatisfied with the services, one of whom stated *“I was offered cleaning jobs which was well below my qualification”*.

Current proposals for reform by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) (2007), suggests that the trend for generic disability services within Jobcentres will continue. Moreover, they plan to direct as many people as possible into ‘mainstream’ provision, limiting access to specialist services for those with the most complex needs. This is in opposition to RNID’s contention, supported by this research, that D/deaf need *more* not less specialist support that meets their communication needs.

In Work Experiences – Access to Work (ATW)

Knowledge and Use of ATW

People were asked if they had heard of ATW and fig. 11 shows that one person had not heard of ATW, despite seeking employment. Out of the eight people who had heard of ATW, only 50% had used it (fig. 12). One respondent had only just heard of ATW from a friend and one person had it explained to them but was offered no assessment by the DEA. Another respondent stated that he had not used ATW because they *“they couldn’t match my need”* within his specialist workplace setting.

Helpfulness of ATW

75% of respondents who had used ATW had found it helpful (fig 13). However, one respondent stated *“the ATW funding is useful as the interpreters/communicators cost money but the ATW management/paperwork is not very flexible or efficient. For example, a small business with three or five employees all deaf would face complicated paperwork because ATW requires INDIVIDUAL log sheet PER week on ONE support worker from EACH budget (allocated hours of support work per employee). This is very difficult and time consuming as the employees share one or two support workers at a time and we don’t use one same support worker and it’s daft to have a support worker PER employee etc.”* This suggests a lack of flexibility in the administration of ATW. Respondents also expressed concern at the marked inconsistency in decision-making across the region, where one D/deaf person would

receive more support such as interpreter hours or equipment, than another in a similar position.

ATW is a vital resource for D/deaf people in the workplace, and yet the respondent's comments suggest there is much room for improvement, particularly in levels of consistency, flexibility and assessed levels of support. Within the DWP's intended programme of reforms, some of these concerns are being addressed. However, a more worrying development is that the DWP is considering putting an onus on employers to increase funding for accessibility to the workplace, linked to the DDA 1995 adjustments policy. Deaflink is not against this per se, but is concerned that it will lead to D/deaf people experiencing a lower level of support and provision, and also give employers another excuse not to employ D/deaf people.

In Work Experiences – the Working Environment

Why people left their jobs

This comment sections of the survey contained many stories of discrimination and isolation, which for some resulted in mental health issues. Responses included:

- Health problems linked to heavy work
- Considering leaving my job as currently on the sick due to heavy lifting. Work not offering an alternative.
- Worked for a Supermarket felt I was discriminated against as I could not use the phone, they said I did not have enough experience.
- I was lonely there was no communication.
- Felt isolated in workplace as other staff couldn't sign or include me in on chat.
- I did not get promoted like others because I was deaf
- I loved my job the manager used to check that I was okay. When a new manager arrived I was left on my own without any support. I became pregnant I was told I could return to work after maternity leave. When I rang (via my mum) five times over a period of 6 months to say I wanted to return to work, I received no reply. I saw my job advertised and despite constant efforts to communicate via the specialist social worker I had one meeting with Human resources and still no satisfactory response. I was left feeling very angry.
- Only worked with hearing but they didn't listen to my ideas and would ask hearing staff.
- Feel frustrated having to do a job where I do not use my skills.

These replies show that some respondents were working in inappropriate manual jobs or that communication was a barrier to doing the job or feeling included at work. For complete integration in the work place there needs to be good two way communication which will promote good teamwork and a positive effect on morale. In one case there are clear grounds for legal action under the DDA and an indication that this person did not know their rights under the DDA. The specialist social worker for the deaf was involved within an advocacy role which clearly did not improve matters.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This report is only a 'snapshot' of a small number of deaf people living in Newcastle upon Tyne and yet making comparisons to the findings in the RNID research "Opportunity Blocked" which interviewed 870 deaf and hard of hearing people nationally, the outcomes of both pieces of research are very similar.

Part of our initial struggle to recruit deaf people in some cases was due to apathy and a general giving up on the systems which they perceive to have let them down so many times. Rumours abound in small communities such as the Deaf Community that there are 'many, many deaf out of work' from deaf professional colleagues and the Deaf community themselves. There is almost a 'them and us attitude', hearing versus deaf, one would say this is to be expected from a community which sees itself as an oppressed minority, excluded from mainstream advantages.

The current situation in the city is that there is no specialist provision for Deaf people to gain advice in their first language BSL. The Tyneside Deaf Youth Project who managed and provided the Deaf School Leavers Course has recently closed due to lack of funding. The Job Centre Plus advertise the fact that they have a Work path programme but there is no evidence of Deaf unemployed people successfully going through this system.

As an organisation Deaflink has been aware over the years of issues of communication breakdown has led to discrimination in the workplace, where interpreters have not been provided for staff meetings, personnel issues or Union meetings where redundancies were on the agenda, those in positions of power such as Union representatives have not been Deaf aware and therefore unable to assist with matters of discrimination, redundancy or other important issues that may effect work patterns.

Within the RNID research "Opportunity Blocked" that 26% of respondents had been subject to various forms of harassment. As researchers we were made aware of the reluctance of some respondents to discuss this area for legal reasons where it is quite common place to have a compromise agreement which includes a

confidentiality clause. These are hidden stories which have been silenced with what we term as “pay offs” by companies who may be proud of their Equality status.

The barriers highlighted by the research are

Within the Job Centre

- Communication breakdown from the beginning, from entering a Job Centre right through to getting a job and some not getting work
- Lack of Deaf Awareness by staff at Job Centres, DEA’s and employers.
- Lack of appropriate preparation for work training. As noted by one respondent who had gone on a Deaf School Leavers Course managed by Deaf trainers which gave him the knowledge and information which boosted his confidence in getting work. Only one respondent mentioned Workstep, which he had lost contact with. This is a programme which aims to help disabled people overcome or remove barriers and yet within the research the benefits of the Workstep programme were not discussed.
- The need to promote the use of Access to Work scheme to potential employees and employers
- Low expectation of staff throughout the system as to what Deaf people could do resulting in low paid, inappropriate level employment. The most regular reason given for not giving a deaf person a job was their inability to use the phone. With the advent of technology, Computers, SMS and Type Talk (RNID Relay service) fax machines in our view that is no longer a valid reason. This only highlights the lack of information given to potential employers.

With the employers

- The need to be aware of their duties under the DDA and to ensure that new deaf staff is treated equally as others and to make the induction process accessible.
- To ensure discrimination is not tolerated in the workplace, where disabled staff are made to feel included in all opportunities for training and promotion.

With Deaf users

- Do not accept the low expectation other people put on them
- Need to be willing to report poor service and seek support to use complaint procedures

Recommendations

1. Acknowledgment that Deaf people is a specific vulnerable group who need specialised support and training that relates to their different language, BSL and culture.
- 2.. Idea of having a “Mystery Shopper” to go through and track the current system
3. Seek ways of employing appropriate Deaf advisers in Job Centres. This model has been done by Cleveland Fire Service, who employ a Deaf Community Liaison Officer to assist them in their work with the local Deaf community.

4. Raise awareness with employers in a positive way on their responsibility under the DDA and the Access to Work provision to support them and their Deaf staff.
5. In response to the aims of this small number it would be beneficial to have a local or if possible a regional working group set up by Newcastle Futures with interested parties to look at improving pathways in line with Government changes. This group would look at;
 - Why the system is not working for Deaf people?
 - Ways to make the system work as highlighted in the Job Centre Plus “Make it Work” guide to specialist services for disabled people.
 - Models of good employability practise.
 - The training needs that Deaf people need to make them employable such as;
 - confidence and assertiveness
 - knowing their rights/complaints
 - knowledge of Access to Work
 - the pathways as stated in Work steps programme.
6. Need to look at mechanisms of feedback on discrimination at work, for example when people are asked to “ring” when Deaf people cannot use the telephone!
7. More research needed to get a bigger sample within the region, including those from the BME community and with those employed in low status jobs, this will enable targets within LAA to be achieved.

As the world of work approaches the Blairite notions of inclusion and exclusion prevail. In essence Deaf people are not generally seen as being excluded from work because they tend to opt for employment that is not communication based. However, their potential to be fulfilled by appropriate employment opportunities is seriously curtailed. So there is not seen to be a serious problem with unemployment amongst Deaf people. There is not a significant high number of Deaf claimants of unemployment benefits and therefore few resources are targeted to enhance employment opportunities. This is economically rational as Deaf employees continue to contribute to the economy rather than make demands upon it.” Structure and Agency in Deafness Discourse: Binaries of Power. Sue Jones, Deaf Worlds International Journal of Deaf Studies. Vol 22 2006

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Questionnaire Answers

Figure 1

1) What age range are you in?

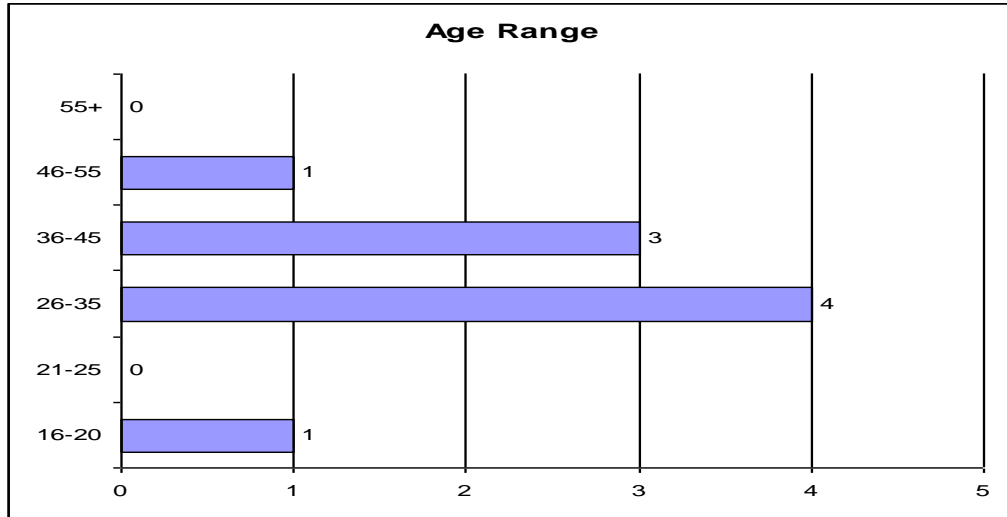
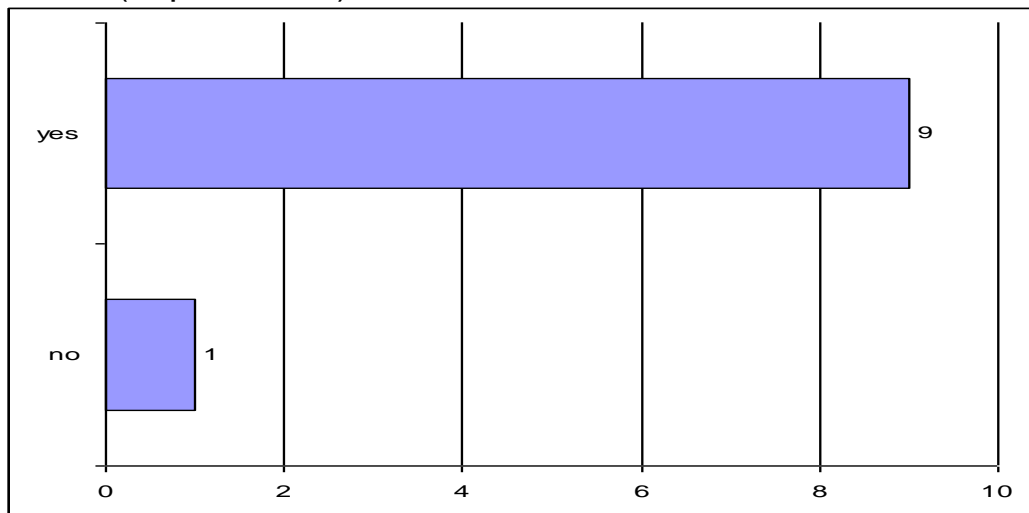


Figure 2

2) At school, did you ever think what you wanted to do when you leave school (hope, dream)?



If yes, what?

Office work, HGV Driver, Actor, Photographer, Designer, Fireman, Chef, Work for a Deaf Organisation, Soldier, Martial Arts

Figure 3

3) Have you ever had a job?

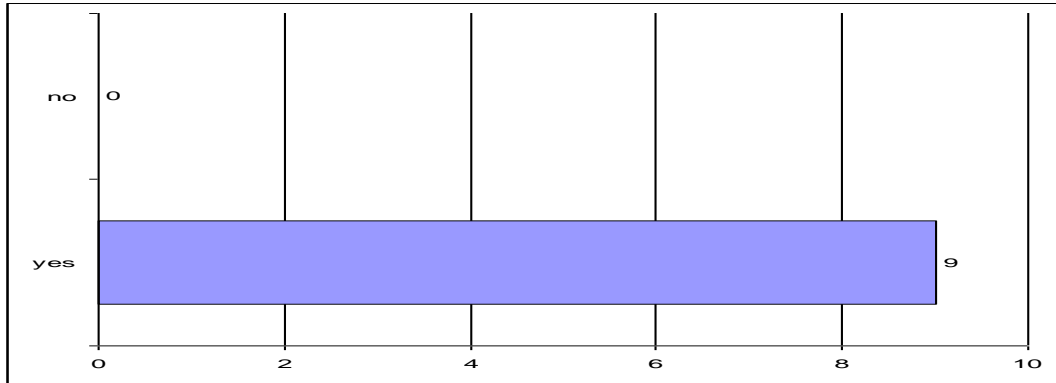


Figure 4

4) Who helped you get a job?

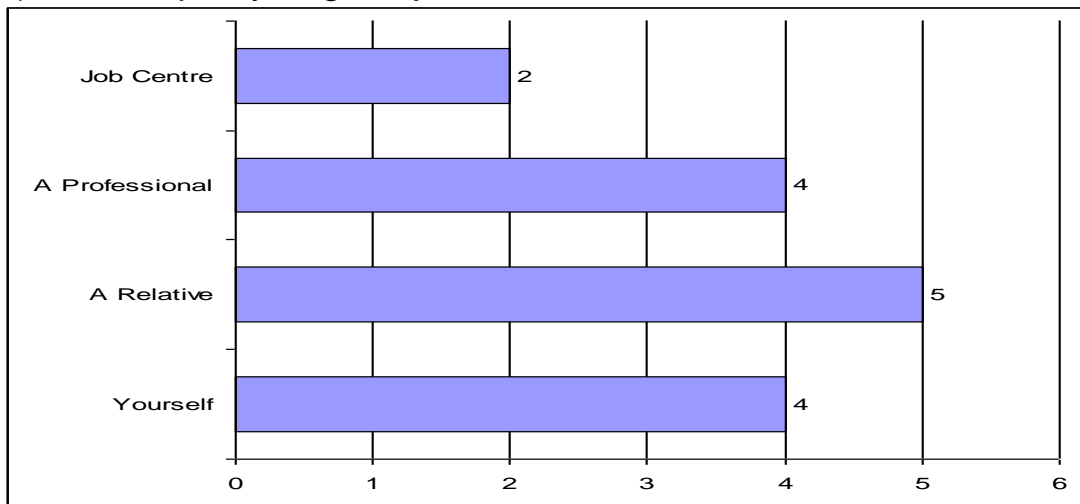


Figure 5

5) How easy to use do you find Job Centre Plus services, as a deaf or hard of hearing person?

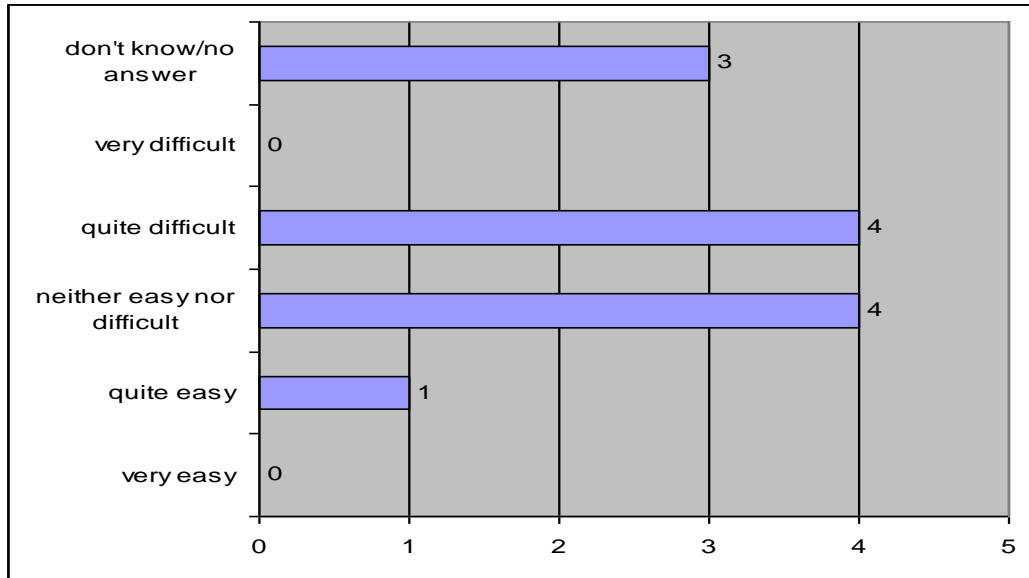


Figure 6

6) How deaf aware did you find the staff at Job Centre Plus?

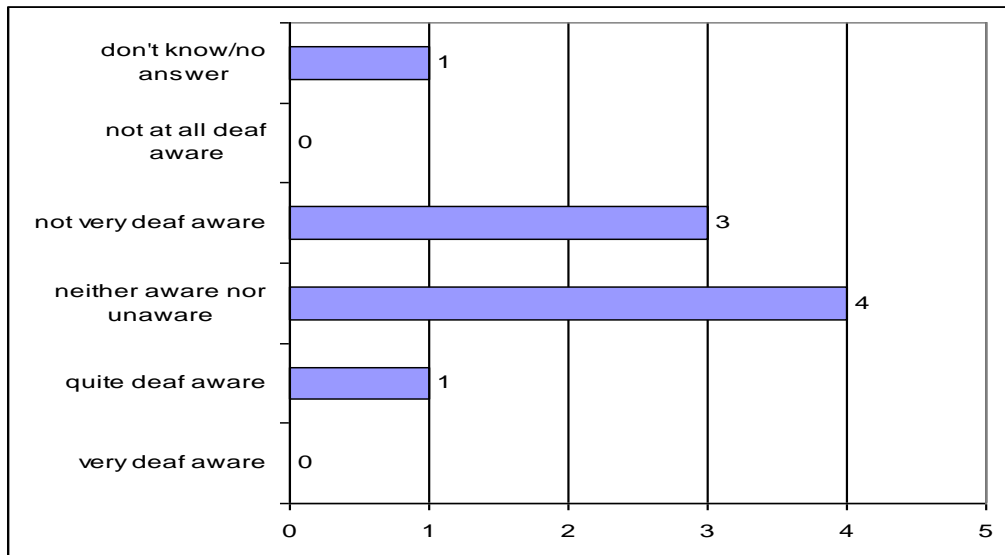


Figure 7

7) Did you meet with a Disability Employment Adviser (DEA)?

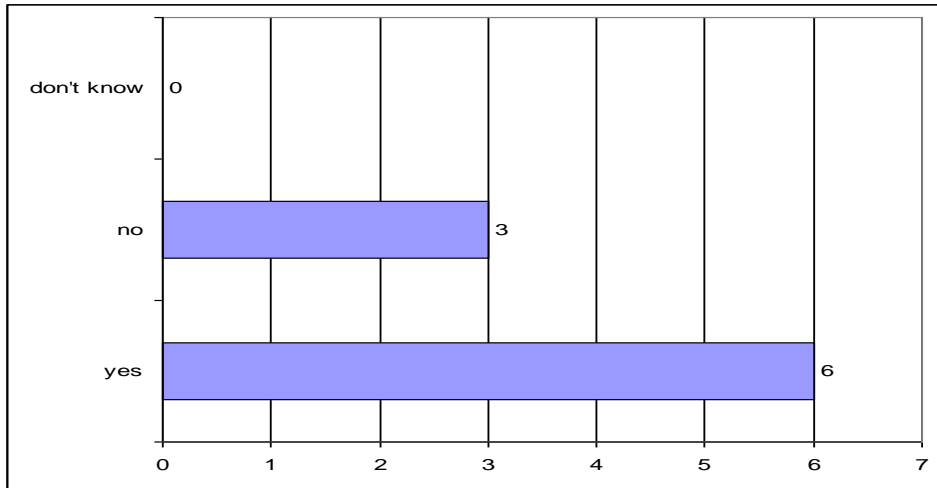


Figure 8

8) If yes, was the DEA helpful?

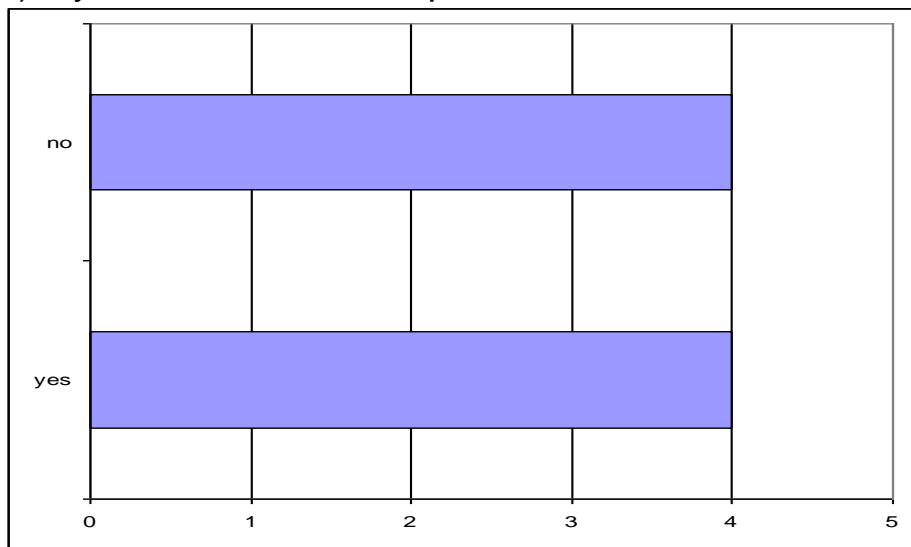


Figure 9

9) How deaf aware was the DEA?

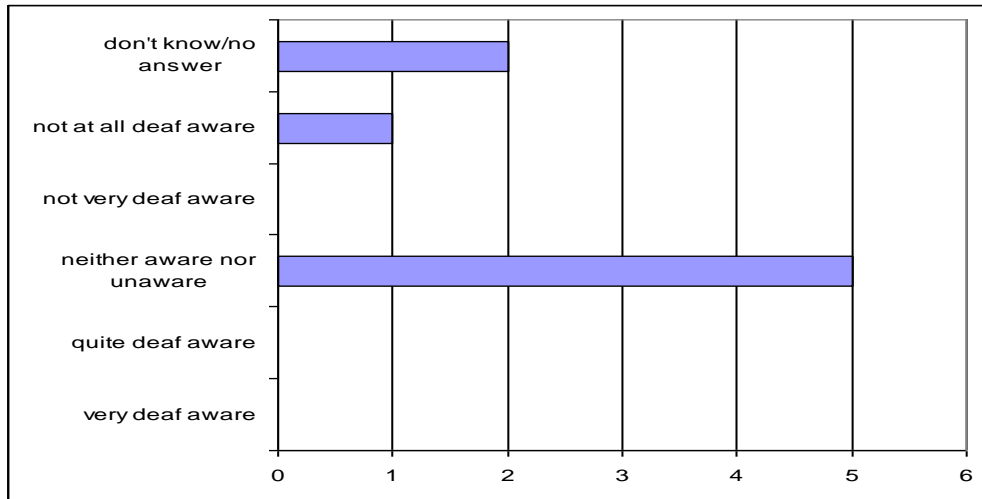


Figure 10

10) Overall, how satisfied are you with the service Job Centre Plus gives?

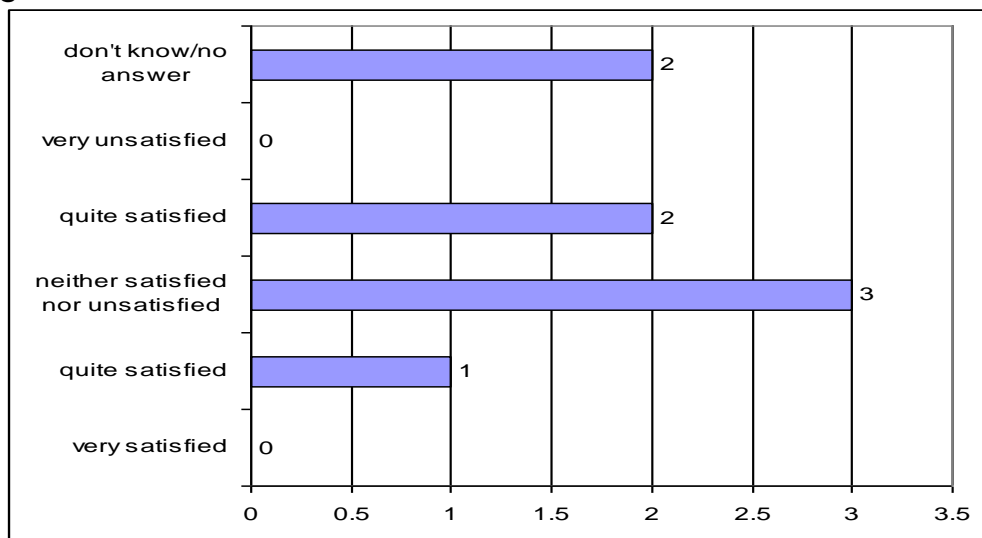


Figure 11

11) Have you heard of Access to Work (ATW)?

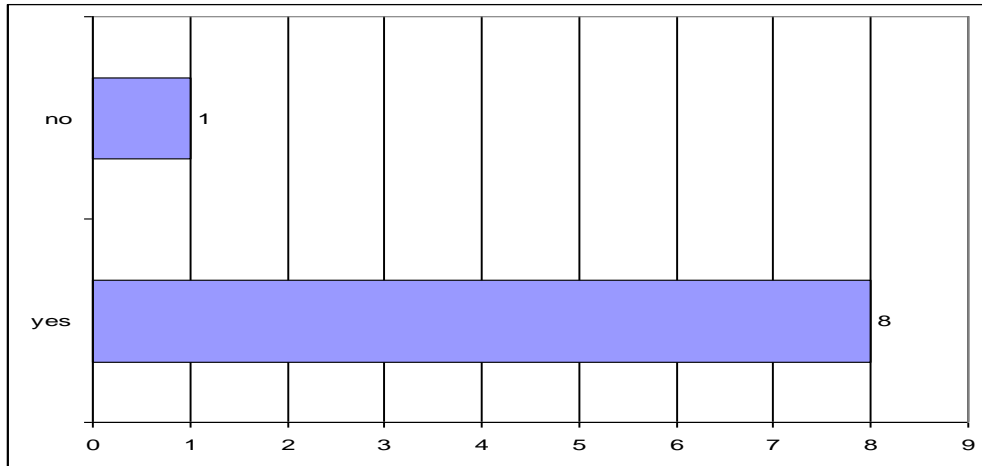


Figure 12

12) If yes, did you use ATW?

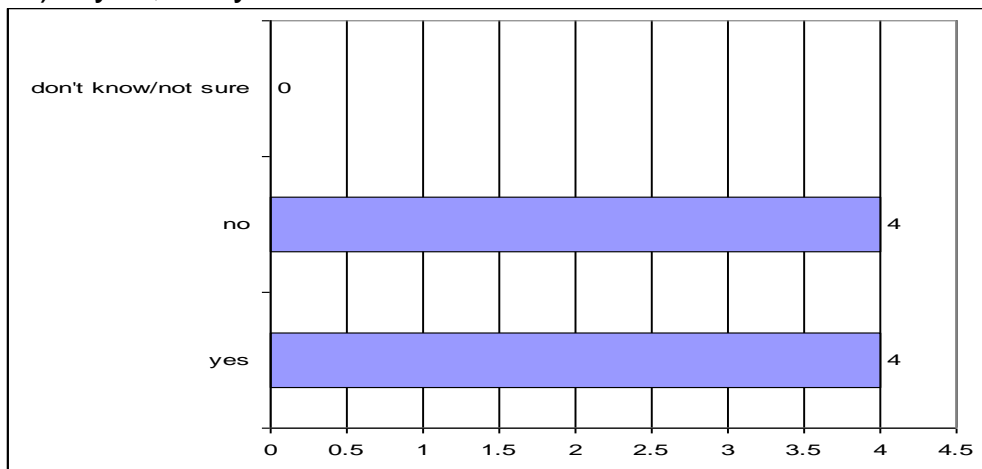


Figure 13

13) If yes, was it helpful?

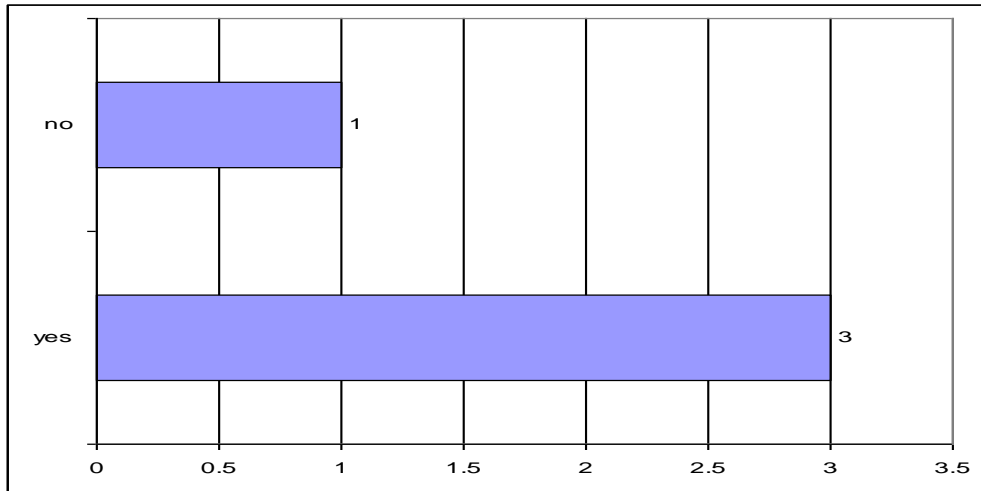


Figure 14

15) Have you thought about setting up your own business/work for yourself?

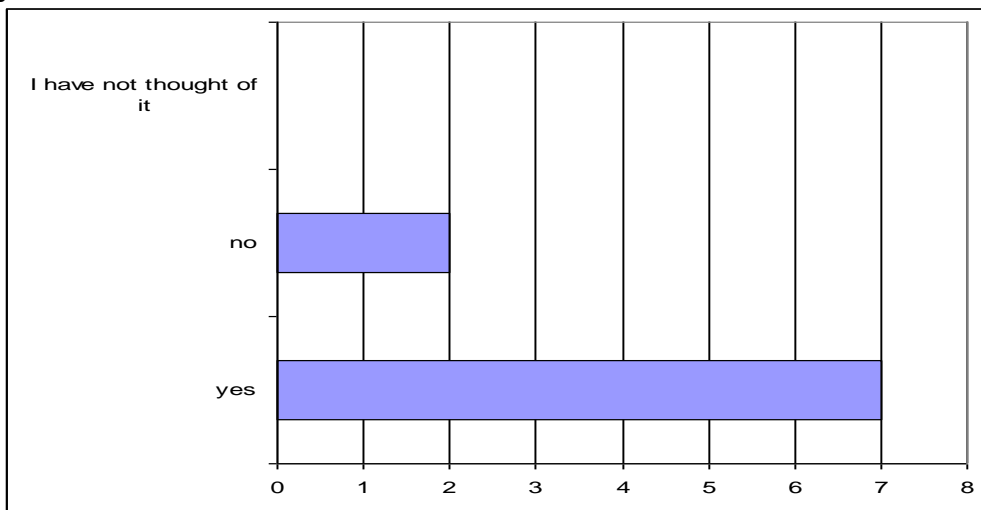


Figure 15

16) Are you actively seeking a job?

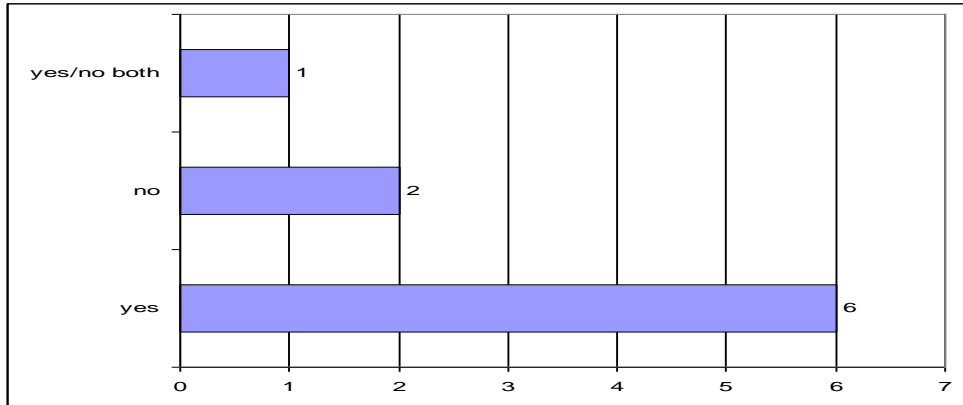


Figure 16

17) How many jobs have you applied for within the past twelve months?

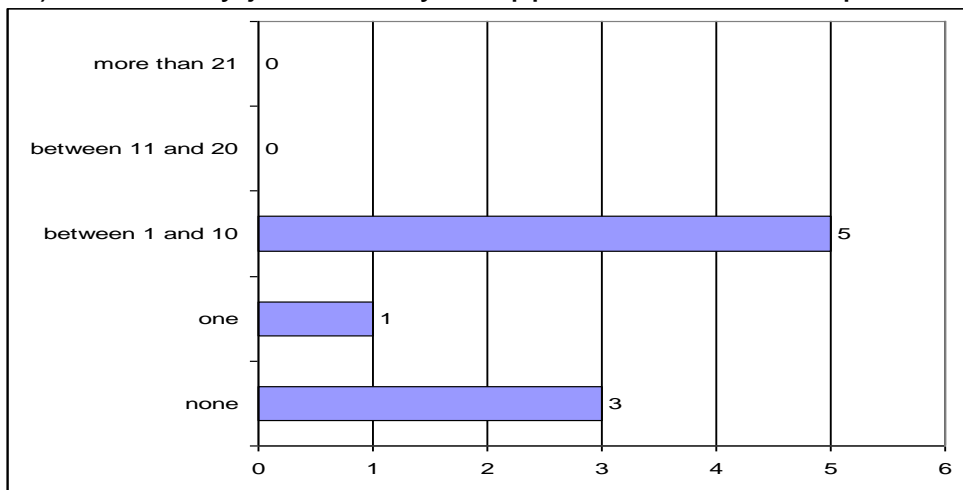


Figure 17

18) How many did you have interviews offered?

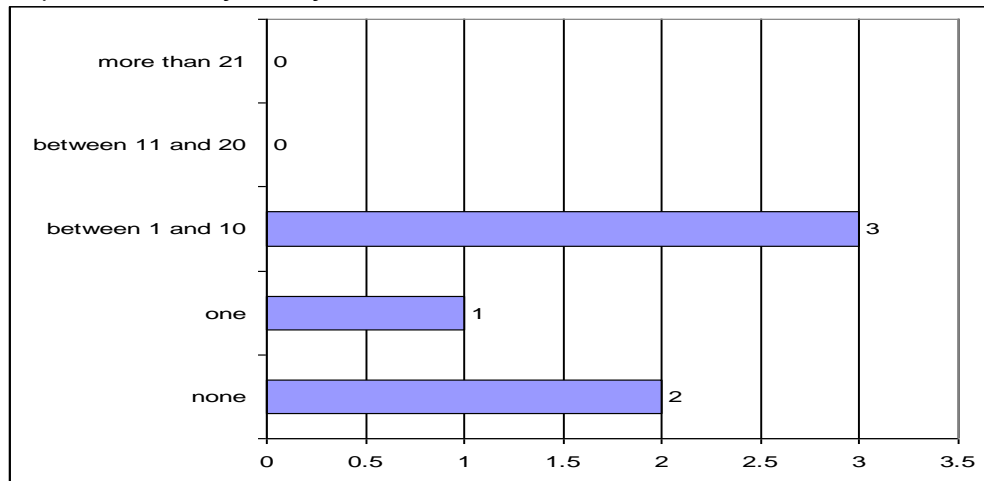


Figure 18

19) "Employers accept my deafness in interviews, and do not make a big thing out of it."

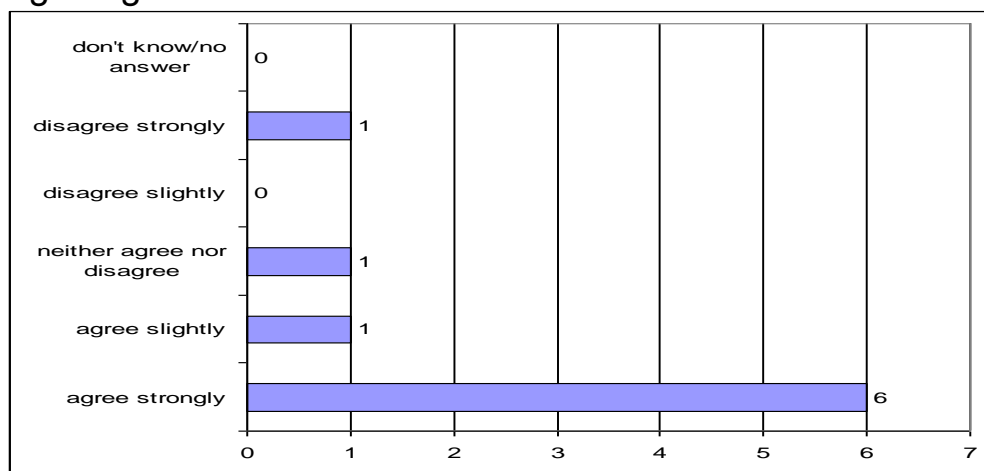


Figure 19

20) "How deaf aware were the people who have interviewed you?"

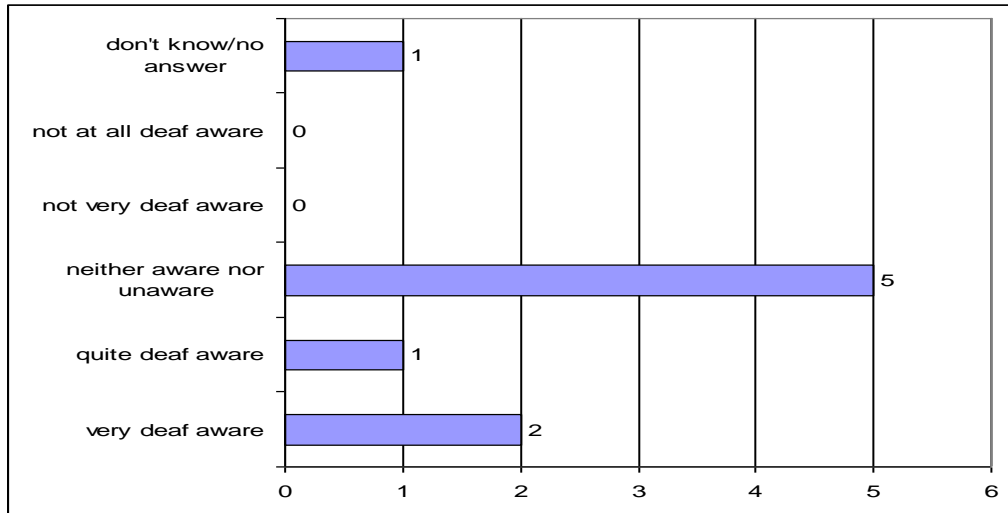


Figure 20

21) Being deaf makes it harder for me to find a job.

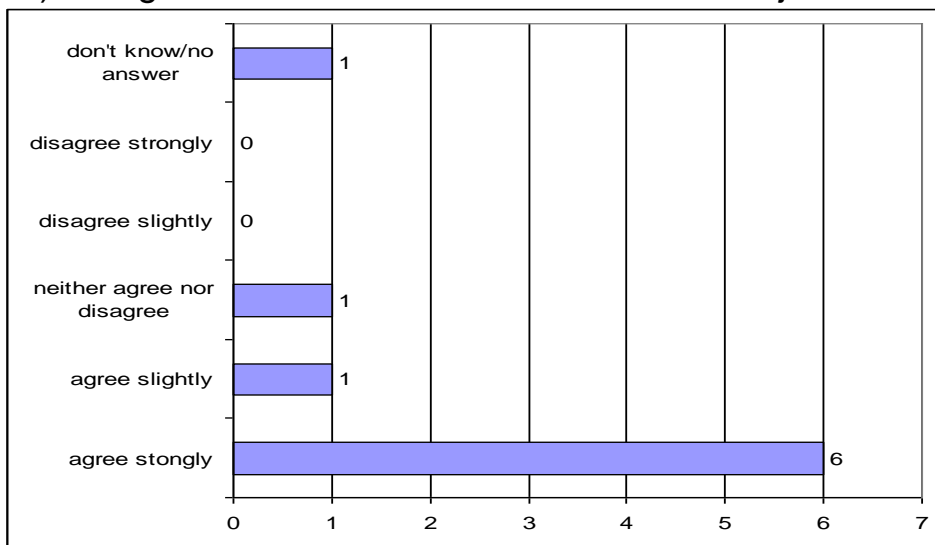


Figure 21

22) Being deaf made it harder for me to find a job.

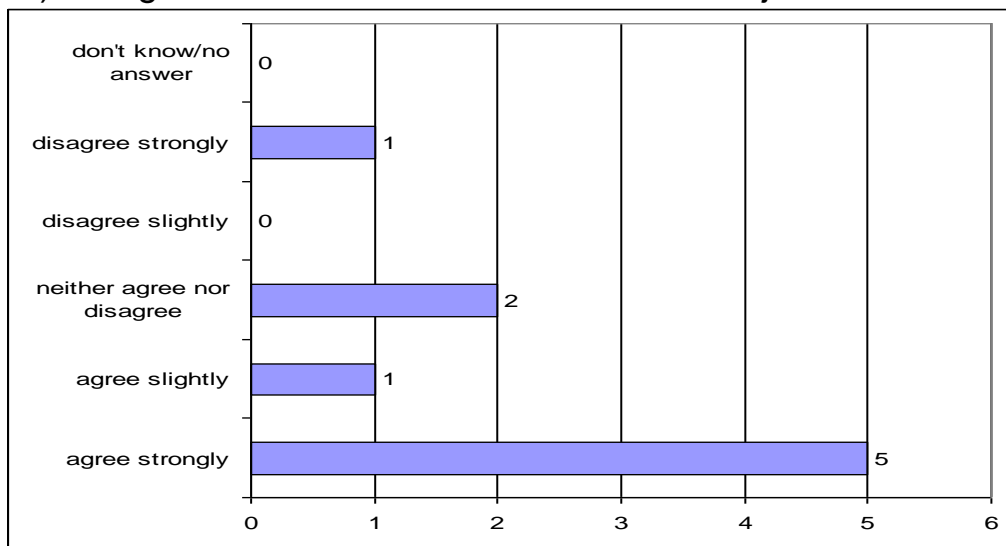


Figure 22

23) In your experience of looking for work, what are the main barriers to employment for deaf and hard of hearing people?

