"Learning to Obtain Workplace Communication Accommodations"

Presenters: By Steven E. Boone, Ph.D., Heidi Lefebure, M.S., and Douglas Watson, Ph.D.

Today we are going to talk about obtaining workplace accommodations. With me are Heidi Lefebure and Douglas Watson. We are from the Arkansas Rehabilitation Research and Training Center for People who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing. We want to introduce you to new resource to help people obtain on-the-job accommodations. Most people with hearing loss could benefit from better accommodations. Today's presentation will start with some data concerning the need for accommodations, and conclude with an introduction and demonstration of a new resource we have developed, *AcCOMModate*.

Jobs in the labor force change over time. In many instances, these changes result in changes in specific job duties. Consequently, they result in changing needs for job accommodations. Because of these changes, workers with hearing loss need to be up-to-date on new accommodation resources that might work in their job situation. You need to know how to identify and request those accommodations, and ultimately, negotiate with your employer to obtain them under the ADA.

Over the years, our Center has conducted several applied research projects that have focused on the experiences of workers with hearing loss. The results of these studies have provided a lot of information about the problems that people with hearing loss face on-the-job. We have identified the kinds of barriers that are experienced as well as the types of information that workers with hearing loss need to deal with these barriers in order to be happier and more efficient at work. We also collected a lot of information from employers of hard of hearing and late-deafened workers and found that there is not a lot of knowledge out there on either side of the fence about what is available in terms of accommodations.

Our research focused on the workplace, which. is a very complicated situation for most workers with hearing loss. These workers need accommodation, and yet there is little understanding of what 'accommodation' means. They say, "Well, I want to communicate better." But when you ask them to be more specific, you find that peoples' needs differ. But there are commonalities. For example, we found that most workers commonly face at least five or six situations where they need accommodations—such as work-related social situations and staff meetings. Some situations were more problematic than others with respect to the need for accommodations. For example, performance evaluations weren't usually a major problem. Even though this is a critical situation, many workers did not identify this situation as especially problematic for communication accommodations. When asked why, they said that many times evaluations are a one-on-one situation, and a written document is used. So the context of the communication is all set up, making it a little bit easier. On the other hand, employers themselves, who might not have a hearing loss and may not have a full understanding of the feelings and needs of those who do have a hearing loss, still felt that job evaluations were a major problem.

What kinds of accommodations do people typically receive? Although the Americans with Disabilities Act authorizes many different accommodations, employers primarily will tell you that they provide workers with devices. The most frequently provided device is a telephone amplifier.

For many persons, this device is not helpful. Many persons with significant hearing loss don't use the telephone anyway, and an amplifier certainly won't help. But it is a frequently provided accommodation by employers. Most employers know little or nothing about other categories of accommodations, such as CART or sign interpreters. Some of employers may provide those things, but not nearly as frequently as phone gadgets. Very few employers are neither aware nor knowledgeable of the full range of accommodations that exist.

Also true is that there are often accommodations that are quite simply not very good. They don't work well. The worker may want and need some accommodation, but there is a basic lack of information about what might actually be of help. Workers may simply be unaware of what would be the best choice for them. And now the range of options is continually changing, almost on a day-to-day basis, making it very, very difficult for either workers or employers to keep up on what is available.

This is the situation that led us to developing a resource to provide people with the tools they need to stay on top of information about accommodations. Information related to assessing work situations to identify need for accommodations, identifying those accommodations, and negotiating with an employer to obtain the accommodation is included.

About five years ago we designed a computerized, text-based curriculum to help people find solutions to their accommodation problems. When we had completed the curriculum, we took it on the road to find out just how well it worked. Our studies indicated that people prefer graphical material to pure text. So, with new funding, we redesigned the program using a new format and called it *AcCOMModate*. In this new format, we built in ways to find solutions to accommodation problems, including how to ask for accommodations, the need to describe accurately what is needed and why, as well as how such accommodations might work and, of course, how much they will cost. Most of all, we emphasized how such accommodations will improve job performance.

AcCOMModate is an interesting, interactive way to learn about workplace accommodations. This program can be used on PC or Mac platforms; and we believe it will be useful to a number of audiences. Service providers will be able to use it with consumers they serve as well as to educate employers. Consumers themselves can use it as a self-help program. Employers may use it to educate other employees. Postsecondary institutions may find it useful for both new students and those about to graduate and join the workforce. Users can work through one or all of the sections included in the program. I would also suggest that postsecondary education programs might find this program useful. It is beneficial for students who are deaf or hard of hearing and are entering universities or other postsecondary education programs to know about accommodations. They need to learn how to interview for jobs, for example, and how to request accommodations which they might need.

To insure access to the *AcCOMModate* program, everything that is spoken, including environmental sounds, is captioned. In the future, we hope to develop a similar program that is in sign language. Resource lists that can be viewed on the screen may also be printed for subsequent review. In fact, these materials are included as PDF files on the AcCOMModate CD. The glossary, which can be viewed on-screen or printed, is also included as a PDF file.

Figure 1

AcCOMModate is set in a teleconference format. (See Figure 1). In the introduction, basic user instructions are provided for using the program. The 'agenda' topics for the teleconference are also described. There are four topics covered:

1. What is an Accommodation?
2. Identifying Accommodation Needs (8 Situations)
3. Choosing an Accommodation
4. Marketing Your Request

Discussion in the first topic, introduces users to definitions of accommodations and their benefits. Topic 1 also covers the four primary categories of accommodations: equipment, support personnel, job restructuring, and workplace modifications to the physical environment. Specific types of accommodations such as CART, note-takers, interpreters, are discussed to show that accommodations are not just a matter of equipment. People are involved. Thus, the topic of accommodations is a very broad one.

Figure 2

Figure 2 illustrates what users would see on the computer screen in Topic 1. This looks very similar to most teleconferences - notice that there are actually participants seated in the first row? From time to time, these individuals make comments or ask questions. On the main teleconference screen, users view the moderator, video or other information that is presented. As previously mentioned, all audio from the moderator or other persons is captioned. Even the comments of the audience are captioned. Users have complete control over where they are in the program, and what they want to see happen. The remote control on the right side of the screen indicates which topic is currently being explored, allows access to the other three topics, and is operated using familiar keys: stop/pause, play, reverse, and fast forward. I failed to mention that throughout the program a HELP prompt is available at any time, as is the glossary.

To the right of the four participants is a computer monitor under the desktop. This computer monitor will be utilized in Topic 2, *Identifying Your Accommodation Needs.* The format for Topic 2 is illustrated in Figures 3 and 4. The perspective is as if the user is accessing the computer under the desktop. Users are provided the opportunity to explore accommodation possibilities for eight categories of workplace situations including: receiving instructions/talking with your supervisor, performance evaluations, department meetings, training, work-related social functions, socializing with co-workers, working with customers or the general public, and alerting devices.

Figure 3

Once a situation is chosen, users are presented a series of questions which they answer yes/no based on their personal perspectives and experiences (see Figure 4). These questions assist the user to assess the characteristics the situations that they face on their workplace. Answers to these questions lead to the development of a list of potential accommodations that may assist the individual.

Figure 4

Users may print the lists as they appear, or wait until multiple situations have been completed to print a summary list.

The program is set for a 5th grade reading level. Now, that may be high for some folks, but low for others. The problem with developing material like this is to try to find a happy medium. If a person who is deaf and has a lower reading level is using the program, it may be helpful for a person working with him/her to go through the program with him/her.

The third topic, *Choosing a Preferred Accommodation*, is presented by Maxwell Gadget. (See Figure 5.) Maxwell provides some comic relief for users while providing very useful information. He introduces six steps for individuals to use when choosing appropriate accommodations. These steps help narrow the list of potential accommodations to specific accommodations that best fit the workers' situation.

Figure 5

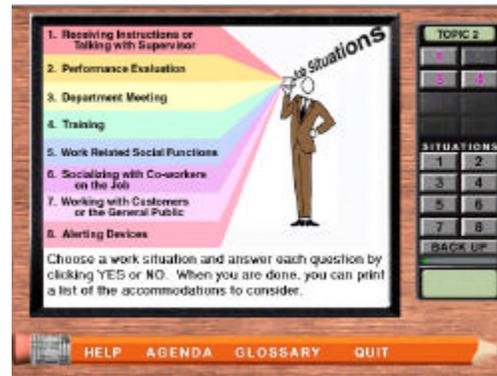*Marketing Your Request*, which is Topic 4, provides guidelines and examples of effective
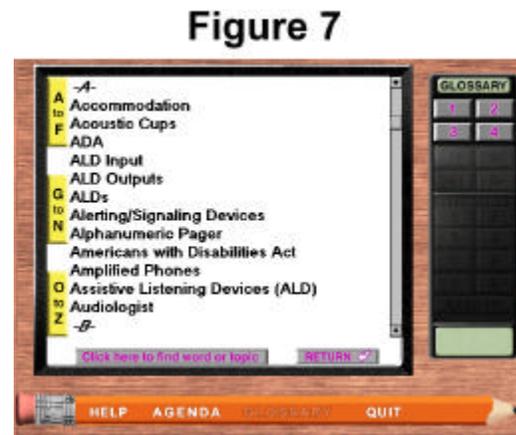

Figure 6

ways to approach employers with an accommodation request. (See Figure 6). Two types of requests are discussed. The first type is requesting simple accommodations, such as moving to a quieter place or using available assistive technology. The second type is requesting formal accommodations which involves a supervisor or someone else in order to get the accommodation, such as purchasing assistive technology or changing job duties. Several vignettes are included which demonstrate how to put the steps into practice. The last portion of this topic section also discusses how to deal with denied requests.

This multimedia program also includes a glossary that may be accessed at any time to obtain more information or an explanation of a specific accommodation. Throughout the program, users may see a term or phrase highlighted in red in the captioning. By clicking on the highlighted item, the glossary is accessed. Users may peruse the glossary whenever they like and simply pick specific terms from the listing as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Along with the text definition, often a graphic or short video is included to help better describe the term or phrase (See Figure 8). Many definitions also have related concepts listed enabling users to delve further. The information presented may be printed or users may return to the previous screen. This information can be printed as it is accessed, or the program user can access the same information provided in a PDF file on the CD.

Figure 8
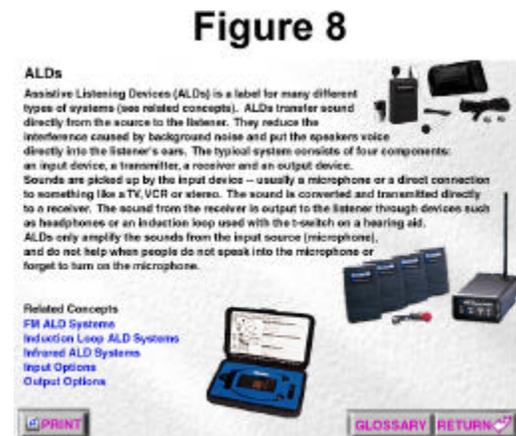
The whole program is aimed at teaching people to stop and think about their accommodations needs. Many times we respond poorly, we do the wrong thing because we haven't stopped to think. To problem solve, you have to stop and think. You have to believe you can resolve the problem facing you. And to do that, you have to have the information you need to determine possible solutions in terms of their suitability for your particular situation. You have to be able to pick and choose in terms of consequences and then know how to implement the appropriate solution. It is a basic problem-solving perspective. This is what this program does.

There is an extensive resource list included in the program. And the resource list contains specific contact information, websites, phone numbers and so forth in terms of where to look when you are experiencing problems.   Suppose you desire more information regarding how to advocate for your rights to accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act. The resource list provides you with the contact information that you will need. The resource list is as inclusive as we could be. We realize that resources change rapidly, but our goal was to include as much up-to-date information as possible.

If you desire more information about *AcCOMModate,* or other resources available through our Center, please check the Center's website at http://www.uark.edu/deafrtc. The website also includes information regarding how to order the *AcCOMModate* resource which is available at a cost of $25.

LEFEBURE, HEIDI, M.S.
Heidi A. Lefebure was a Research Associate at University of Arkansas Research and Training Center for Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing between 1996 and 2001. She joined the Center after earning her Master's degree in Rehabilitation Counseling with an emphasis on Deafness from the University of Arkansas. Her Bachelor's degree in Counseling Services to the Deaf with a minor in interpreting is from East Central University in Ada, Oklahoma. Ms. Lefebure worked on several Center projects, assisting in the survey research, developing resource curricula in job interviewing and job accommodations, and maintaining the Center's web page. She also regularly presents and teaches in the Center's Master's degree program.

BOONE, STEVE, Ph.D.
Dr. Boone is a Research Professor and Director of Research at the University of Arkansas Rehabilitation Research and Training Center for Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. His work has focused on enhancing social and job-related interpersonal skills for persons who are late deafened, hard of hearing, or deaf. Boone has coordinated the development of a number of video and multimedia based accessible resources and has conducted over 100 presentations and workshops at national and regional conferences and has authored, co-authored, or edited over 50 chapters, journal articles monographs, or books.

WATSON, DOUG, Ph.D.
Dr. Doug Watson has been the Project Director of the University of Arkansas Rehabilitation Research and Training Center for Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing since it began operation in 1982. Dr. Watson has over 34 years of experience in deafness rehabilitation. He specializes in rehabilitation program and policy issues, career preparation placement, clinical rehabilitation assessment and services for individuals who are low functioning or deaf-blind.