

# Work successfully

## in a customer service environment

People of all disabilities can work successfully in a customer service environment with a high level of customer contact. However success requires ongoing commitment from the employee, the team and management. The strategies to enable people of differing abilities do not have to be huge or costly. The strategies used at Maroochy Libraries were simple and show what can be achieved when employing an individual with a disability.

Maroochy Libraries employed a hearing impaired employee (Kerrienne) in a permanent part-time position for 12 months which was later extended to 18 months. Kerrienne's hearing loss is severe to profound, which means without hearing aids or visual cues normal conversational speech cannot be understood. She relies on hearing aids, lip-reading and visual cues in communication.

Her position is equally split between customer service and back room duties. When she began working for the library, it was clear that a number of strategies would need to be employed to ensure the success of the appointment both for Kerrienne and for the organisation. Jane, as manager, was aware that Kerrienne's hearing impairment would affect both the team and the customers.

### Strategies used

- Kerrienne explained her hearing loss to team in a staff meeting and described her needs for effective communication with team and customers: for example, in one-on-one interactions, make sure eye contact has been made before starting to talk, not to jump into conversations, and to be patient.
- Team members were given permission to touch Kerrienne on the arm to get her attention; a necessity in a busy customer service environment with a lot of verbal activity.
- Team members were invited to ask questions and express their concerns.
- Brainstorming activity: the team contributed ideas and suggestions towards managing challenges.
- Written information provided via staff newsletter, important for staff whose contact may only be via phone.
- A 'meeting buddy' was nominated who would clarify issues and information raised in meetings, verbal instructions throughout the day, and emergency situations.
- Special phones with flashing light and hearing aid compatibility were purchased. These are not 100 per cent perfect – indistinct voices, customers calling from mobile phones and outside noises picked up from clients environment pose difficulties, so in these situations another team member would take over the call.
- A request was sent to the wider library network for suggestions that other organisations have used.
- Signs in public areas alerting customers to hearing impairment are being trialled. Kerrienne also wears a badge that states she has hearing impairment and requests clients to speak clearly.
- Informal mentoring was provided via ongoing support, encouragement and advice and this helped Kerrienne develop confidence, improve ability to problem solve, and bridge gaps in skills and knowledge.

### Jane's viewpoint

The inclusion of a hearing-impaired team member presented a challenge to service delivery and the operation of the team in the library. We needed to make allowances for Kerrienne's hearing impairment and develop an awareness of her needs. However, having her on board as a team member has had huge benefits. As a team member Kerrienne assisted the library in reflecting our community, which includes members with a range of disabilities. Staff working with Kerrienne learnt to be more tolerant and patient of individual differences. On a daily basis Kerrienne demonstrated excellent customer service skills and her attention to customers and their needs was exemplary. The Maroochy Library has between 800–1200 visitors a day and in practice Kerrienne experienced no more difficulties with customers than any other staff member. Her challenges were different, but no greater than those faced by any customer service officer in a busy environment.

### Kerrienne's viewpoint

The positive and supportive attitude of my manager, team and management was significant in overcoming the challenges that arose from being a hearing-impaired employee in a busy customer service oriented workplace. I was asked what I needed and given time and space to determine those needs. This was very helpful as there were several interpersonal, environmental and technological factors that I couldn't have predicted without the opportunity to experience them. Once I had an idea of the needs and challenges were, steps were taken to deal with them. The steps took the form of strategies outlined above and the opportunity to participate in a variety of learning and training opportunities provided by the organisation. The public was not always tolerant or aware and I had the opportunity to access the Employment Access Service to debrief and learn some strategies to handle these situations assertively.

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