

Deaf Workers can be heard from at Lucent

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November 30, 1999 When Gary Etkie started working at the former Bell Labs in 1981, he felt isolated. As the only deaf employee, he would go to the library at lunch because he had no one to communicate with.

"I put up with it because I had to support my family," said Etkie, a software developer who lives in St. Charles.

Much has changed in Etkie's 18-year career, including the name of his employer. Today, Lucent Technologies employs 25 deaf employees and four full-time sign language interpreters who translate at meetings and presentations at the company's sprawling campus in Naperville and Lisle. And Etkie has a whole new attitude toward his job. "I love coming to work," he said. "There have been so many changes in the environment, and they've given me a more positive experience."

Etkie said he is especially fond of his technical manager, Becky Mark, who learned sign language to communicate with a deaf office mate. Now she uses it daily to oversee her staff. "Out of 16 employees working for me, five are deaf," she said.

Mark and Etkie regularly recruit entry-level workers and interns at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, one of eight colleges at the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, N.Y.

Communication within Mark's team occurs through several methods. Todd Hlavacek and his office mate, Yemi, a hearing employee, often chat by typing notes on the computer. Pencil and paper, along with "white boards" in a conference room, also promote conversation. During one-on-one meetings, Mark will sign with a deaf employee.

For staff meetings, however, Mark will bring in a sign language interpreter, "so I can focus on running the meeting, and everyone in the group has a chance of interacting," Mark said.

Sign language skills are honed with years of practice, but translating fast-paced, technical conversations is demanding even for the most proficient interpreters. Expressing the language and acronyms presents a constant challenge, said Cheryl Moose, manager of the Sign Interpreter Department at Lucent. She oversees three other full-time interpreters.

"American Sign Language is a language of concepts and ideas," Moose said. "You can't always translate the words directly. And the discussions are very fast-paced. Before one person finishes saying something, the next one jumps in."

In a group situation, Moose will watch Etkie, for example, who will signal to her or hit the table to express his desire to communicate. Then, Moose jumps into the conversation with "Gary wants to say" to begin his translation for the group.

A typical day for Moose and her staff is "meetings all day long," she said. "We have an administrative aide to schedule our time, and she tries to make sure we're not in back-to-back meetings." Interpreting for long periods of time can be very fatiguing, Moose explained.

Bell Labs first hired a contract sign language interpreter in 1988, when there were several deaf people on staff. Moose, who lives in Elgin, was hired in 1991, and as the employment of the deaf population grew, she has added contract staff. Since 1996, the number of deaf employees at Lucent's Lisle and Naperville locations has grown from nine to 25.

If necessary, Moose brings in additional interpreters from a staffing agency. That poses a new challenge: how to set priorities for the meetings and presentations that get experienced staff interpreters, versus the outside interpreters. Deaf employees need to trust that the interpreter is correctly representing their ideas, Moose said.

"We're trying to develop guidelines," said Hlavacek of St. Charles. "In-house interpreters have more familiarity with the language here and the environment."

Hlavacek is president of DeafNet, a support network of deaf employees at Lucent. The company has encouraged diversity by forming Employee Business Partner Groups for support, education and improved visibility.

DeafNet members conduct classes in deaf culture and sign language to broaden the knowledge of fellow employees. For example, Hlavacek and Etkie want people to know that touch is important in their culture, and they may not realize they're walking between two people who are conversing.

"Intro to Deaf Culture was one of the first things I took when I started working here," said Yemi Odusote, Hlavacek's office mate. "I easily forget that Todd is deaf. We get along great, and he doesn't limit himself to deaf people as friends."