

Employers and Employees Must Ask: *What Do We Need to Do Differently?*

Janel Grossinger is the third generation of her family who is deaf. Having grown up in a home with a parent and a sibling born with the same hearing loss, Janel raised her own family in a primarily deaf lifestyle conversing in American Sign Language along with her husband, who is also deaf. It wasn't until Janel accepted a position at U.S. Department of Education that she realized just how deaf she really was.

Janel attended Gallaudet University with financial support from Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) of Nebraska. Majoring in business administration, she accepted a work-study position with the university's financial aid office to make ends meet. After 27 years, having excelled through the ranks and becoming the financial aid director, Janel decided it was time for a change. Three months after leaving the university and still unsure about what she wanted to do next, Janel decided to contact the Washington, D.C. RSA



Though she knew the vocational rehabilitation (VR) process well, Janel soon discovered that she wasn't as prepared as she, and others may have thought she was for a new job search. While her VR specialist was blasting her resume across many job search sites, mock interviews revealed that she needed to brush up on her technique. She invested a great deal of time into doing online job searches and attending job fairs and networking seminars—activities that not only often required an interpreter, but required that she step out of her comfort zone within the deaf community. Energy devoted to resume blasts and online applications paid off with numerous calls for interviews, but once potential employers heard the voice message asking them to wait for an interpreter they realized Janel was deaf and the calls stopped. Even the hiring manager at the Department of Education was surprised when she called Janel to set up an interview.

Supervisory Program Analyst Cynthia Battle never questioned whether or not to interview or hire Janel; it was a matter of figuring out the logistics to make the process work. “We had to determine what it was that we as an employing agency needed to do to further assess the background and compatibility of a qualified applicant. Both parties—management and Janel—had to be willing to step out of their comfort zones to discover what could be done differently or better to bridge the gap” and ensure that an employee with a disability could perform the job in a manner complementary to the team and the department.

Janel credits former colleagues at Gallaudet for giving her the foundational skills and experience necessary for her current position as lead program analyst for the Title IV program Teacher Education Assistance for College and Education (TEACH), a federal grant designed for teaching programs to prepare students to teach as highly-qualified teachers in high-need fields, such as bilingual education and English language acquisition. As the point person for operational policy, Janel describes her job as “amazing.”

Battle noted that although Janel has been with the department just under one year, her performance and attitude have been exemplary to the point that colleagues forget she is deaf, even though they make sure reasonable accommodations and cultural respect are maintained at all times. And Janel has made the adjustments well from an office culture in which all employees were expected to sign,

to a high technology based environment where the majority of people do not sign. “There has to be some give and take,” she commented. And that’s the key that Battle says employers need to have at the forefront of the hiring and managing processes. “Employers and employees, with or without disabilities, have to be willing to invest the time and effort to learn from one another to make the workplace more productive and positive.”