

Who's Been Left Out Of The Room?

A Consideration of 401k Education for Deaf Employees

Earlier this year, for the first time in my 14 years of experience educating employees, I was asked to coordinate with a 'signer' in a group 401k meeting for Deaf employees. I spoke the presentation, she signed to the attendees, they responded in sign and she then verbally relayed their questions to me. It was a time-consuming and laborious process but we managed to make it work. Even so, as I packed up my car and headed home that afternoon, I was left with a gnawing uneasiness. Surely this was not the only company in all the hundreds I had visited with Deaf employees. Where had they all been during my previous meetings? Who was teaching them about their retirement plan? And why hadn't I been more aware of this population of employees and their right to the same personalized retirement plan education provided to others?

Shortly thereafter when frankly my attention had shifted to other issues, I received a call from a financial professional in Austin Texas inviting me to collaborate with him in a 401k/403b educational service designed specifically for Deaf employees. As a member, himself, of the Deaf Community he was sorely aware of the absence of direct and meaningful retirement plan education for this population. He made a compelling case. My interest and my conscience were raised. But I had a lot to learn, and that's what I want to share with you.

Did you know?

Did you know that the Federal Government is the largest employer of Deaf individuals? As of 1994, that number was 4,750. And that Relay Services companies such as Sprint, GoAmerica, Viable VRS, SnapVRS, CSDVRS, and Hawk Relay are also major employers. Relay Services is the amazingly effective and seamless method allowing a Deaf individual in one location to have a conversation with a hearing individual in another location via an Interpreter who signs to the former and speaks to the latter – a video-conferencing technique that has become very popular.

Corporations familiar to you such as IBM and Dell employ hundreds of Deaf workers on all levels as do hotels, hospitals, financial advisory firms, and manufacturing companies. In short, **surveys document roughly 8 million Deaf and hard of hearing adults across all industries in the labor force.** Source: National Center for Health Statistics, Data from the National Health Interview Survey Series 10, Number 188, Table 5, 1994. There seems to be scant updated research information on Deaf employees since most research concentrates on children under

the age of 18 with a view toward education. Suffice it to say that Deaf workers are present in every industry. We just haven't been introduced to them.

Definition of Deaf

You might have noticed that I have been capitalizing the word, Deaf. This is intentional. Here's the distinction: Deaf capitalized refers to a linguistic portion of the population whose primary language is signed and who may also practice social and cultural norms distinct from those of their surrounding hearing community. It's a designation larger than just those individuals who are clinically or legally deaf; it may also include the hearing children of deaf parents, individuals with partial hearing, and others who identify with the Deaf community because of shared experiences.

The Retirement Plan Problem

Typically, the educational effort for Deaf employees regarding their retirement plan falls into one of several configurations: 1) The employee is handed an enrollment kit and is on his/her own, 2) A Financial Advisor inexperienced in ASL (American Sign Language) makes a well-meaning but feeble attempt to explain the plan, 3) An Interpreter (signer) who can communicate effectively but who is not well versed in 401k plans meets with employees. (Interpreters are certified by a body such as The National Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf), or 4) The advisor and interpreter stand side by side one speaking, the other signing, and back and forth as in my personal experience described above.

This last model is frequently used. It does indicate a sincere attempt to reach out to Deaf employees but there are weaknesses. For the employee, the method of communication is tedious, indirect, and imprecise. For the employer, there is the additional arrangement and cost to secure an interpreter as well as the additional time lost in productivity due to the lengthy back and forth. And for the interpreter and advisor the process is time-consuming and uncertain. Are plan details regarding loans, deferral limitations, investment choices being conveyed with the accuracy required? Signed language is, after all, distinct from the spoken and written word. The exactness of the advisor's language and intent is being received, modified, and then communicated via sign by an interpreter usually no more acquainted with retirement plans than the audience. It's a faulty connection.

History and Legislation

Let's enlarge the scope of our discussion for a moment to position the current educational challenge within the context of history. A major incident was the 1988 student protest at Gallaudet University in Washington D. C., a watershed moment in the awareness of the Deaf culture by the American hearing culture. This well-publicized uprising achieved the selection of

the university's first Deaf president, an event that helped frame the struggle of Deaf people within the comprehension of a civil rights movement.

Significant legislation followed in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. In the private sector, Title I of the ADA, 29 C.F.R.S 1630.9 (a) states ".....employees are entitled to equal access to general information, employee benefits and training opportunities available to other employees....." And for our purposes, "failure to provide a necessary accommodation may subject an employer to liability. Complaints of discrimination based on failure to provide reasonable accommodation should be filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission." A reasonable accommodation is defined as "a modification or adjustment to a job, the work environment, or the way things are usually done to enable a qualified individual with a disability to have an equal employment opportunity".

In the Federal Government Section 501 of the earlier Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C. 791 provides equal access to training opportunities and the expectation that reasonable accommodations be made to worker's disabilities. In industries as disparate as Health Care, Housing, Transportation, and Public Facilities, inequities have and are being addressed and corrected.

Our Track Record

Perhaps this is a good time to remind ourselves in the retirement plan industry of our successes in accommodating other 'forgotten' populations of workers. We are after all a creative and responsive industry!

Over the past 10 years for instance, a great deal of attention has been given to educating women about the world of investments, most providers now offering 'Women and Investing' presentations. For 7 years I taught 'Women and Money' classes through continuing education departments at several Massachusetts universities. Classes were standing room only. Through a recognition of the need and a concerted effort to design both materials and approach appropriate to the demographics and unique gender issues of women (some power point presentations go as far as flaunting pink backgrounds and bullet points in flowing script), our industry has succeeded in getting women into the room. The door that was only cracked has now been opened wide; women have the information, the tools, and the confidence to take responsibility for planning their own financially secure futures.

That same capacity to recognize an under-served population has more recently been apparent in Bi-lingual Education, especially as it pertains to Spanish speaking employees. It is rare now not to see enrollment kits, power point presentations, and transitional memos detailing mapping schedules and blackout dates written in Spanish as well as English. Most importantly,

for both populations it is women and bi-lingual educators who are making the on-site presentations overcoming then not only language barriers but cultural and experiential differences as well.

What is Quality 401k Education?

Research continues to demonstrate that on-site customized retirement plan education far surpasses kits, slides, worksheets, calculators, and complicated charts and graphs in informing and motivating employees to participate in their retirement plans, understand the value, and take responsibility for investment choices.

Education, quality education, makes all the difference. A case in point: Recently, my company received a request for a 401k meeting at a physician's office. A new plan for 30 employees. The office manager wearily informed us that only the physician and his wife were interested in enrolling. The physician acknowledged that several years earlier he had instituted a plan, a financial advisor had come out to meet with employees, had left them confused and uninspired, and no one had signed up. He wanted to try again with a different educator.

How did the second time go? In the middle of an economic and market downturn with housing values falling, gas prices over \$4 a gallon, grocery prices soaring, unemployment at frightening levels, and the stock market displaying deep losses for the year, every single one of these employees signed up for his/her 401k plan. Whether they were as young as 30 or as old as 70, they signed up. Whether they made \$20,000 a year or \$80,000, they signed up. Whether they were male or female, single or married, they signed up. Not because of enhanced features or additional investments; there wasn't even an employer match! Nothing changed except the education.

What's the Magic?

The educator was prepared; she knew the plan backwards and forwards and could answer questions knowledgeably. She encouraged an informal, conversational interaction in which she asked questions, heard and responded to concerns, shared anecdotes, engaged the audience. She modified her language and style to the employees in the room – not using terms unless first defining them, organizing the material in a way that would build on the knowledge they already had. She understood her audience, kept her eyes on them, took her cues from them.

After the group presentation, she made herself available to answer individual questions and assist with paperwork. Always in the forefront of her mind was the objective: for all of these employees to understand their plan and its value for their financial futures, and to feel more confident in selecting appropriate investments and managing their own accounts. **The magic was that she remembered what it was like not to know.**

That's what works. Whether employees are contractors or consultants, software analysts or secretaries, male, female, Spanish-speaking, or Deaf, they must be understood, listened to, and communicated with appropriately. That's the definition of quality retirement plan education that connects, informs and motivates employees. And every employee deserves nothing less.

Solution

We all appreciate the efficacy of collaboration. When designing retirement plan materials for women and Spanish speaking employees, our industry solicited ideas from members of those demographic groups. And in our efforts to customize those presentations even further, we employed female and bi-lingual educators to communicate directly and effectively. The unequivocal consequence has been increased equality and opportunity. Now, to achieve those same results collaboration is called for between the retirement plan industry and the Deaf community.

The Deaf refer to 'glass walls' – those communication barriers that Deaf and hard of hearing people face in the workplace because they do not speak or speak as well as others. Walls invisible to most of us. But now that we know about them, we have the opportunity to shatter them.

The financial professional who contacted me those months ago made me see glass walls for the first time (I already knew about glass ceilings!). Together, we created an educational module that provides quality retirement plan education in an on-site personalized approach by Deaf educators communicating in ASL. It is the direct and effective method that is no more than has been done for other employee populations.

Some estimates are that less than 30% of Deaf employees participate in their retirement plans. Deaf employees are understandably hesitant to join a plan that they don't fully comprehend. They too are working long hours and do not have the time to 'dig out' the details on their own. They too will get older. They too will need savings to secure their futures. So, let's bring them into the room. It's big enough for all of us you know.

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