Deaf and confident at GCHQ

To mark Deaf Awareness Week, Richard, a hearing impaired member of staff, tells his story.

This blog is part of GCHQ's Deaf Awareness Week celebrations, told in Richard's own words as he reflects on his experiences of being the Chair of the Hearing Impaired Network in GCHQ.

As an intelligence agency, GCHQ is often given the outdated description of 'listening post'. It therefore isn't the kind of organisation you might expect to have a substantial number of hearing impaired staff. But we do, with over 50 individuals scattered across our different sites. I have personally worked at GCHQ for over a decade despite being profoundly deaf and relying on lip-reading for verbal communication.

Increasingly, GCHQ is recognising the benefits a diverse workforce can offer and how it can help us do a better job. As the co-chair of the GCHQ Hearing Impaired (HI) committee, I lead the team to raise deaf awareness throughout the organisation, identify technology that would benefit the wider HI community, and offer support to those members who require it.

Best of all, GCHQ offers paid special leave to disabled staff to attend medical appointments, and we get support from Employee Assistance in dealing with the consequences of long term health issues. Together, this removes much stress and allows me to focus on my day job.

Throughout my time here, I benefited hugely from mentors who gave their time to provide coaching and guidance, which alongside unlimited patience and support from my colleagues provided an office environment in which I could develop my skills confidently. Feeling valued, respected and listened to has meant my deafness has not curtailed my career. In fact, I have been fortunate enough to have had interesting and varied roles across the department, including overseas, and gain promotions.

Walking through the perimeter security fence on my first day over a decade ago, I was apprehensive about joining a team that had no experience of working with a deaf colleague. Despite being very welcoming they were curious as to how I would communicate with them given that I am profoundly deaf and rely on lip-reading to communicate verbally.

Effective communication requires interaction by all participants to make it work, but lip-reading especially so. It is an ever changing alchemy of faces, surroundings, distractions and interest levels. But even before you face that challenge, you first need to admit you are deaf, and ask for the help you need. It takes confidence to show this vulnerability and initially I lacked that confidence, concerned that I would not be accepted as an equally able colleague.

I found it energy sapping to get to know my immediate team in the weeks that followed, but I am very glad I did. By sharing with them my background and interests I was able to connect with them, and build trusting relationships to be open about asking for their help. I also noticed that the rest of the office learnt from their actions, reducing the pressure on me to begin every new conversation with the dreaded words, "*sorry, I am deaf and I lip-read*".
It took me several years, one or two setbacks, and much hard work to become disability confident enough to accept that my deafness is not something I should feel the need to apologise for, and to take responsibility for asking for help when I needed it.

I feel privileged that my role in the Hearing Impaired Network leads to members sharing their experiences with me, not least because I continually learn from them too. GCHQ is truly a remarkable organisation. It provides me with varied and interesting challenges; learning tailored to my needs to help me develop as an individual; but most importantly - the opportunity to protect the UK and its citizens.

Richard

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