



Lipreader Jane Cordell explains how she uses lipspeakers to fulfil her potential

my ear on the world



‘Could you eavesdrop for me please?’ This may seem a strange request, but I say this quite regularly to the lipspeakers I work with – both in my job and elsewhere. They are my ‘ear on the world’. Colleagues may be shocked at me asking, but it allows me to operate in the way they do. These days, so-called networking is crucial to developing your career and contacts. How are you to do this without the ability to overhear?

After I lost my hearing as a young adult, I continued to think of myself as a hearing person with something gone wrong. So I carried on trying to behave as a hearing person, teaching English language to multi-national groups of students (on reflection, this was probably one of the most difficult jobs for someone with hearing loss).

It never occurred to me that I could have communication support to make the job easier. I enjoyed the work and tried to find ways round the difficulties. But the strain

was enormous. The most difficult situations were large gatherings, such as staff meetings. Often I relied on the goodwill of colleagues who would write down the key points for me.

It was a revelation

I discovered lipspeakers almost by accident. Apparently this is quite common. There are so few lipspeakers and their resources, as a group, are quite limited. I was due to attend a conference for teachers in Manchester, my home town. My mum mentioned that one of her ex-students had become a lipspeaker, and suggested using her during the conference. It was a revelation. For the first time in years I was able to understand everything being said. And more importantly for me, as a creative person who loves language, I could contribute too!

At that time I was considering a move into a new career. During the conference I

met a contact from the publishing world who told me about a vacancy coming up. Without the lipspeaker there to facilitate our conversation in the noisy conference area, I doubt I would have been able to sell myself as effectively as I did.

In my new job, as an editor on educational materials, I booked lipspeakers when attending training events or important presentations and used Access to Work to help fund this (see box below).

I then applied to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in 2001. I liked their inclusive recruitment campaign, emphasising that they needed to reflect the diversity of UK society.

how do I pay for a lipspeaker?

There are a number of ways to pay for a lipspeaker.

- For lipspeakers at work, you can use the government funded Access to Work scheme. (See www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk for more information.)
- If you need a lipspeaker to access public services, it is your right that one should be provided and paid for by the service provider.
- If you are a student who needs a lipspeaker or notetaker for your studies, you can get financial support through your local education authority.

Part of the recruitment process was at a one-day assessment centre, a tough nine-hour day including interview, role play, group discussion and written tests with psychometric testing. Many people with hearing loss would balk at such an experience. I had booked two lipspeakers who I knew well and with whose style I was familiar and comfortable. Having them there meant I could really demonstrate my abilities, although it was nerve-racking stuff.

I was amazed to get through all the stages of recruitment and be offered a job. I have worked at the FCO for over three years and now use a regular team of four freelance lipspeakers three days per week. Their fees are almost entirely met by the Access to Work scheme. They help me in a wide range of situations: formal diplomatic

what is a lipspeaker?

A lipspeaker is a hearing person who has been trained to be easy to lipread. The lipspeaker sits opposite the lipreader, listens to what is being said and silently repeats it to the lipreader in a clearly lipreadable way.

The lipspeaker reproduces the rhythm and phrasing of the words used by the speaker and supports their meaning with gesture and facial expression. If requested, the lipspeaker will also fingerspell

the initial letters of any difficult words.

A lipspeaker may also be asked to speak the words aloud using clear communication techniques so that the lipreader can make use of his or her residual hearing. If necessary, lipspeakers can relay what a deaf person is saying to hearing people if they are having difficulty in understanding the deaf person directly.

For general information about how to book and pay for a lipspeaker, and for our leaflet *Lipreading and lipspeaking*, contact the RNID Information Line (see contact details overleaf)

meetings, training events (both as participant and trainer), social ‘networking’ lunches and one-to-one discussions. They have enabled me to talk freely to everyone from administrative staff to the Foreign Secretary. As a diplomat, it is crucial to be able to understand not just the words used but the tone and emotion. Lipspeakers let me do that. With their help I can access 90-95% of what is said; without them I could not do my job to the best of my ability.

Makes deafness visible

There are other benefits to lipspeakers, which may not be immediately obvious. When I am working with my lipspeaker, she makes my deafness visible. This encourages people to think about the way they communicate with me and promotes good practice. In my current department, ▶