

Audism – “Deny it or admit it and change”
By Chris Kenopic,
Executive Director,
The Ontario Association of the Deaf

Several people have asked me for my opinion about the audism article written by Gary Malkowski, “Interpreters: Supporters of an Audist or Audist-Free Zone”. Of course, before I answer, I ask for their opinion. Many found it to be offensive and insulting. A few found it to be true and there’s no escaping the truth!

As an advocator for the past 12 years there’s no question that audism is happening and that it hurts the Deaf community. Most importantly it blocks us as Deaf individuals from employment opportunities and from services equal to those enjoyed by hearing people.

I have been involved in over 200 human right cases, I have made several court appearances as an expert in Deaf issues, I have been a consultant on government policies and to agencies providing services to the Deaf community...and the list goes on. In every experience, I have had to face comments that were undignified and patronizing.

What amazes me is that the people who met with me were well educated. They work for agencies/government that promote equality and denounce discrimination. Yet, these very same individuals practice audism, a behaviour or mind-set that belittles the Deaf individuals that they are hired to serve.

It is a fact that many Deaf individuals have been turned down from employment opportunities within the deaf sector because they do not have the “essential skills” (as told by agencies and hearing employers). Personally, I’ve been told the same thing. In some cases, a hearing person with little or no signing skills is hired to work at a job that serves ASL users because s/he has a good background in management skills. This is just one common example of audism.

How are Deaf people supposed to get promoted when they do not have any other place to increase the so-called “essential skills” that the employer is looking for? Sometimes too much emphasis is placed on ESL issues completely ignoring the fact that many Deaf people use two languages successfully on a daily basis and not enough emphasis is placed on the fact that most hearing candidates cannot compete.

Sometimes within the deaf sector, Deaf staff feel that they cannot make recommendations or represent the views of their own Deaf community for fear they could be jeopardizing their employment or futures with their employer. Audism happens when Deaf employees must abide by policies even when these practices may be inappropriate.

In my view, if we had more say about our needs, then the services provided by agencies would be much better. We would not be faced with over 80% of Deaf people being unemployed and underemployed in Ontario. We would not be faced with a shortage of

ASL/Spoken English interpreters. We would not be faced with so many Deaf children and youth whose educations are suffering, and the list goes on.

If you are a Deaf person who has experienced barriers and discrimination then you are the victim of audism. This is an attitude that views you as inferior and views you as not being independent enough to make or influence decisions. This audist attitude exercises undue authority over the Deaf community and creates barriers that hurt us.

Audism is a disease. It's one of the main contributors to the apathy within our Deaf community. Take a minute to think about it. You have been told you can't do this or get the service that you want. You feel anger and speak out, yet you still do not get what you want. Finally, you leave without it and give up without a fight. This is where we can say audism has won and conquered your hopes.

What must be done to remove audism? Deaf people must stand up against those who slam shut the doors of opportunity. We must get out of the closet (not hide) and tell the community what's happening. We must form a group to tackle audism, to educate and/or remove individuals who promote audism.

Our hearing allies, friends, professionals and family members must speak out against audism and not leave it to us to tackle on our own. Deaf professionals who long ago stood up as youths for Deaf rights and equity must wake up. Once again, they must join us in the fight to tackle audism.

We all know the old saying of "Deaf and Hearing people building bridges and working together". Unfortunately, this bridge is now hanging by a thread and if we do not end audism now the two worlds will be divided once again.

Many of us are tired of the endless and unnecessary battles to ensuring the Deaf community is not looked down upon. If society and individuals can admit they have practiced audism (even unknowingly) then that's a positive step in the right direction.

So let us work together to remove audism.