
Shared Group Practice a Success

*by SignOn: A Sign Language Interpreting Resource
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On February 8, 1997, a group of experienced, RID certified, freelance interpreters met in Seattle, Washington. We shared a frustration with the isolation and inefficiencies that are inherent in working as an independent interpreter. At that time, much of the interpreting work in Seattle was done on an independent basis - customers would have to call twenty or thirty interpreters and wait for responses to see if anyone was available. The system wasn't satisfactory to us as interpreters, or to our consumers. We decided to do something different. That evening saw the birth of SignOn: A Sign Language Interpreting Resource -- a shared group practice.

At our first meeting, facilitated by an experienced organizational planner, we spent several hours brainstorming what "something different" would look like. We all desired to give the best possible service to our customers - to be able to give back to the deaf community which had raised us as interpreters and professionals. To do this meant we needed a structure that streamlined administrative functions, provided support to its members, and, above all, operated within a framework of integrity. We looked at not only what we wanted professionally, but also where we saw our lives going personally. This led to an articulation of our values as interpreters and individuals. Over the evening, a blank sheet of butcher paper became a vision of a central resource where services could be provided in a professional, efficient, and consumer-oriented manner. We envisioned schedules that made sense, quick access to information via pager and email, and a system which honored consumer preferences.

Once we had articulated our vision and values, we had to decide what to do with them. Were these enough to create a viable business entity? We tried to fit all the important elements that we had agreed upon into a business structure, always keeping in mind how our practices would affect our clients. We decided to form a Limited Liability Company, which allowed the founding members (at this point, six of us) to each own equal shares of the company, but which protected personal assets from liability. This structure seemed to best fit our needs because it allows the managing members to share equal authority and ownership. We do not have a CEO, a president, or even an executive board; rather, each of us has an equal role in managing the business, which is done by consensus. By linking our decision-making to our values, we have had amazing success (despite all professional wisdom against having such a large management team!).

During this startup phase, we found ourselves solidifying into a cohesive group. One of the original members decided not to continue her involvement; two new members were invited to join (after unanimous agreement from the group). As the final group of seven coalesced, each person found her role to fulfill within the company. We have members who are global thinkers, and members who are detail-oriented. Some of us tend to follow our instincts, and some need to analyze every option before committing. As seven women who were previously used to functioning independently in business matters, this process was not always easy, but we soon realized the potential of working within such a well balanced group.

We opened our doors for business on October 1, 1997, after eight months of frequent meetings, long hours of research and business-plan writing, and not a few heated discussions. We started on a shoestring budget, each providing many unpaid hours to get the business up and running. We also owe a large debt of gratitude to our spouses and partners, all of whom provided help in their areas of expertise (legal, marketing, computer setup, office remodeling, etc.).

One of our managing members has the position of Business Manager; she does not provide any interpreting services, but handles the business contacts (contract negotiation and advertising), as well as taking responsibility for overseeing the internal workings of the business. The other six managing members provide interpreting services as well as sharing in the administrative tasks of the business - scheduling, billing, and accounting. As sole practitioners, we had become accustomed to performing these tasks during our "off" hours, but as a group we committed to valuing the time these duties required by paying members for time spent on administrative tasks. Because our group was relatively large and diverse in personalities, skills, and backgrounds, there was always someone uniquely suited for each task. Several people, who had experience working for a referral service, became the core of the scheduling team; another who is detail-oriented and equipped with good organizational skills took on accounting tasks. Others took on billing, computer support, and documentation duties.

One of SignOn's goals was to consolidate scheduling functions into one point of contact for both customers and our member interpreters. This would allow us to assign jobs in a way which made sense in terms of geography and travel time. This also allows us to honor preferences by moving "un-preffed" work to other interpreters, freeing the consumer's preferred interpreter to take the assignment. Our first "office" was in a member's home, staffed four hours a day by one of the members of our scheduling team. This person is responsible for assigning work to all the interpreters within the group. This required a high level of trust in the schedulers. It also requires members to analyze what types of work they want, what they honestly feel qualified for, and under what parameters they are willing to work. All these issues had to be articulated from the onset so that the schedulers would have a clear basis for making scheduling decisions.

In the year since starting SignOn, we have revisited our original "vision" periodically, and we have found that much has been accomplished. We have found that most of our goals (even those which we expected to be long-term goals) have been realized: we have moved from a back bedroom into a "real" office which is now staffed 8:30-5 daily. We have become recognized within our community as a viable resource. We are certified as a woman-owned business, and can even take Visa and MasterCard! Most importantly, we have grown to the point where we are finally able to look outside the group, taking on employees and developing relationships with the greater interpreting community.

We continue to meet weekly to reevaluate our business and make plans for the future, which gives us the opportunity to quickly respond when a procedure does not work well. At times, we seem to be working harder, since we now have a group to maintain as well as customers to serve. However, during the past year, each of us has experienced personal crises, large or small...deaths in the family, illnesses, new relationships, personal upheavals...and it is then that we notice the power of the whole. The synergy of the group makes it possible to share the load, so that our customers can seamlessly receive the high quality services that they expect and deserve.