



IT Training Offers Deaf People in South Africa an Opportunity to “Live Their Dreams”

In South Africa, a country where four-fifths of the population has historically been disadvantaged in terms of education and economic opportunity, deaf people are an especially marginalized group. eDeaf, a small company with a big mission, is tackling this problem with the conviction that in some career fields, including information technology (IT), the deaf excel as employees. Through participation in the Microsoft IT Academy program, eDeaf is offering South Africa's deaf community industry-relevant skills and certification as a path to meaningful employment, financial empowerment and independence.



Customer: eDeaf

Web site: www.edeaf.co.za

Number of students: 12 in first phase, with goal of 200 per year

Number of faculty/staff: 9

Location: South Africa

Industry: Education

Customer profile: Employ and Empower Deaf (eDeaf) is a service provider to the deaf community in South Africa. Based in Johannesburg, eDeaf works to provide skills development and meaningful employment opportunities for deaf people as a key enabler of their independence.

Software and services: Microsoft IT Academy Program

Education Needs

Given limited education and skills training, South Africa's deaf population struggles mightily to find work in a country where the national unemployment rate is 22 percent and nearly 10 million people are out of work. Those who provide services to the deaf community estimate that of the half million or so people who use sign language as their first language, two of every three are jobless. Most live in informal settlements outside cities, often in poverty. Forced to subsist on monthly government disability grants of 1,100 rand (about US\$109), they typically depend on family members for housing and financial support.

South Africa's deaf community has been marginalized further by limited access to education. This is especially true for the 80 percent of the country's 47 million people who are black. The most glaring example is the generation of adults who received an unequal education before apartheid was abolished in 1991. Educational disparities persist today. Of the 44 schools for the deaf in South Africa, only 10 are academically focused; the rest focus on practical skills.

Such statistics spell an urgent need to increase education and skills training for deaf people, according to Employ and Empower Deaf (eDeaf). Recognizing that the IT industry is one of the fastest-growing sectors within South Africa, eDeaf has launched a project focused on IT training as a step toward a better future for the hearing-impaired.

“We are of the strong belief that a deaf person can do the work of the IT industry better than any other person,” says Jesse Kotze, managing member of eDeaf. “Deaf people are more focused on what they need to accomplish. Whatever data they need to capture can be done without any interruption of telephones or other work.”

eDeaf serves the unemployed deaf community with a staff of nine, of whom Kotze is the only hearing person. About 80 percent of eDeaf's clients are 18 to 35 years old; the rest are people 35 to 60 who want to work.

Solution

For access to technology education resources, eDeaf turned to the Microsoft IT Academy program. The program offers eDeaf a range of benefits, from an extensive e-learning portfolio and skills curricula to industry certifications that emphasize real-world experience.

“Our focus is to get unemployed deaf people to empower themselves through education and training, especially in the IT field, whereby they come in and train themselves at no cost,” Kotze says. “We equip them to reach a level where we can employ them, starting out as data capturers, to Web designers, to IT technicians — whatever their scope is within the Microsoft IT Academy program.”

Training begins with the Microsoft Digital Literacy curriculum, which provides essential PC skills for learners who are new to computing. eDeaf clients then move into training that leads to Microsoft Certified Application Specialist (MCAS) or Microsoft Office Specialist (MOS) certification. Kotze says those entry-level certifications demonstrate to prospective employers that eDeaf clients are proficient Microsoft-qualified users. Under the IT Academy program, eDeaf receives discounted vouchers from Microsoft to help pay for certification exams.

Training is provided in a deaf-friendly environment by three on-staff IT instructors who are qualified as Microsoft Certified Trainers, another resource available through IT Academy. As much as possible, all training of deaf people is done by deaf people, although the trainers support the students with sign language as needed.

eDeaf is also in discussions with South Africa’s Sectoral Education Training Authorities (SETAs), which focus on skills training for industry sectors such

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—Jesse Kotze,
Managing Member, eDeaf

as banking, IT, services, wholesale and retail. Kotze says a partnership between eDeaf and the IT SETA could open up opportunities with businesses that require higher qualifications. If that happens, eDeaf would use IT Academy resources to add more Microsoft certifications to its training program.

eDeaf became an IT Academy member in 2008, joining at the Essential level, but it expects to move to the Advanced level within the next several years.

“As the business grows and as our deaf clients grow into the e-learning system within Microsoft IT Academy, we will move up into the higher level, get more qualified trainers on board and continue to take our training further,” Kotze says.

Benefits

The first 12 students have completed their IT skills training at eDeaf and have begun finding jobs. eDeaf is seeing initial success in the healthcare and government sectors but is working to open doors wherever employers need well-trained IT staff. Kotze hopes eDeaf can train 200 people in its first year and believes that access to high-quality,

credible training will offer them an advantage in the labor market.

“A person who finishes the IT training provided through IT Academy will earn a certification that is accepted internationally,” he says. “And with the Microsoft brand attached to it, that gives the person extra recognition and authority. It stipulates, ‘I can do what’s expected of me.’ It gives people a step up above others when they apply for a job.”

More important, Kotze says, is the sense of purpose and empowerment that such training instills. It gives deaf people the opportunity to get jobs — jobs they want, jobs that pay well, jobs that fit their culture, and jobs they can excel in. He describes it as a path out of the poverty cycle and into meaningful employment and independence.

“It’s the sense that ‘I now have the tools to take me to a different level where I can improve myself,’” Kotze explains. “That’s the biggest benefit. We are teaching people how to equip themselves to go out and live their dreams.”

He adds that eDeaf’s IT training also benefits employers because trained workers help increase productivity. Hiring well-qualified deaf people also addresses South Africa’s Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) initiative. Passed to redress the inequities of apartheid, BEE legislation requires all governments and businesses to employ at least 2 percent disabled people.

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