

## The Architecture of Access

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Video relay service centers are the nexus at which various people's work of creating access meet and become tangible. The *architecture* of the video relay centers is a broad term that refers not only to physical structures, but also the organization of activity within these spaces. The physical structure of the call center houses multiple people and pieces of equipment, and it creates a defined space. In doing so, the architecture also organizes the relations that occur in that space. People who enter this defined space physically or virtually have specific roles and titles. Whether they are client, employee (contract or staff), manager, or custodian, their behavior is organized by the space they are in and the title they have in that space. In addition to highlighting the organizing effects of the layout and work processes of the center, this chapter gives readers who are unfamiliar with VRS a glimpse into a center.

Years before VRS became a reality I attended an interpreter training program. A talented interpreter came to one of my classes and talked about her work as an interpreter. She opened her presentation by saying "We interpret everything from birth to death." That statement stuck with me throughout my training, and since. I have been called on to interpret business meetings, promotions, terminations, loan applications, doctor's appointments, the birth of children, the burial of loved ones, depositions, criminal trials, and a whole host of other interactions in which deaf people find themselves having to deal with non-deaf, nonsigning people. The advent of VRS has made it possible for my colleagues and me to enter into yet another realm of deaf people's lives that interpreters have not often been privy to on a consistent basis: telephone interactions.

People, as social creatures, are constantly devising ways in which we can maintain connections to one another. Using various mechanical devices, people are able to stay "in touch" with people across the street or across the globe. The telephone represents one such way. It is used to connect people to friends and family, to place orders for everything from foods and gifts to services and clothing. Although the passage of

the Telecommunication Enhancement Act of 1986 enabled deaf people to have text relay services that enabled them to use the phone (National Center for Law and Deafness 1992), through VRS, deaf people can now stay in touch with friends and family and order goods and services using their first language, ASL. They are able to enjoy the benefits their non-deaf counterparts have enjoyed since the telephone first appeared in U.S. homes in the early part of the 1900s.

Telephone service, and the human connections it encourages, is also a business. The success of that business depends on the ability of the technologies to perform effectively. Businesses spend a great deal of money to ensure that the technology, environments that house the technology and the operators who interface with it operate correctly. To do otherwise would be bad business.

Although I have and draw on my experience as a sign language interpreter working in five different VRS centers, the data I discuss are primarily based on participant observations I conducted at two VRS centers for one particular provider, Ease Communication.

## **THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT**

The call centers are in locked office buildings that require access cards to enter. On the multiple occasions I did not have my access card, I had to ring the doorbell and wait for another interpreter to let me in. Of course, an auditory doorbell would be distracting to interpreters and callers so the centers have visual alarms—slow flashing strobe lights—to alert people that someone is “ringing” the doorbell. There are also deaf staff members in the centers. These visual doorbells also allow them to know someone is at the door.

The centers I worked in have cubicles in rows. Each interpreter sits in a cubicle that has a 32-inch television, a complete computer, with Internet access, and a videophone. In addition to the hardware in the cubicle, each station, as they are called, has various documents. These documents include the protocol for processing different types of calls (e.g., local or international) and for transferring calls, training information, and scripts that are to be read aloud to the non-deaf person or signed to the deaf caller. Although the location and manner in which these various texts are displayed differ (one center had them in a binder while the other one had them pinned to the cubicle wall), the information is the same type.

These protocols are located in a place that makes them easily accessible to the interpreters but out of sight of the deaf callers. This does not mean that deaf people are unaware that these documents exist. In fact, on many occasions when a deaf person asked for the number to technical support, I hurriedly looked around my cubicle trying to find the number. Undoubtedly, they were able to see me looking around. I also would, at times, open up the binder to the correct page, in front of the camera, and sign the number to the caller while reading it off the document. But to have too many papers in the background of the interpreter could be distracting to callers.

These documents provide quick resources for a variety of technical issues that could arise for signed language interpreters. Another reason for these documents is to standardize practices. The goal is to cover a range of scenarios in order to limit the amount of individual discretion each interpreter must exercise. By increasing standardization, VRS providers aim to make interpreters interchangeable and thereby allow Ease Communication to use interpreters to fill a time slot rather than a communication need. That is, the primary goal is to have enough interpreters to cover the expected call volume. Whether or not the interpreter is the right interpreter for the particular call is a secondary consideration.

Figure 2.1 is a sketch of one of the VRS centers I worked in. The environment has typical office equipment. A facsimile machine, a copy machine, and a printer are all available for us to use. In addition to the office equipment both centers also have a break room. (One center I worked in after I completed my research does not have a break room. It only has a large table in the middle of the room where interpreters congregate to eat and chat.) The break rooms are different in size and setup and in the items provided. I was told that it was up to the center manager to decide what items to stock in the break room. For example, in one center there is a variety of snacks. The other one simply has bite-sized candy (e.g., M&Ms and Jolly Ranchers). One of the centers has a soda machine from which interpreters can purchase drinks for \$1.50; the other has only a water dispenser. The larger of the two has two couches where interpreters can (and do) sleep during their breaks. The other one has a paraffin wax hand bath that interpreters can use to soak their hands in at the end of their shift to help with aches and pains related to repetitive strain injury,<sup>8</sup>

8. Repetitive strain injury can “result in carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, tennis elbow, and brachial neuralgia” (Humphrey and Alcorn 1994, 183).

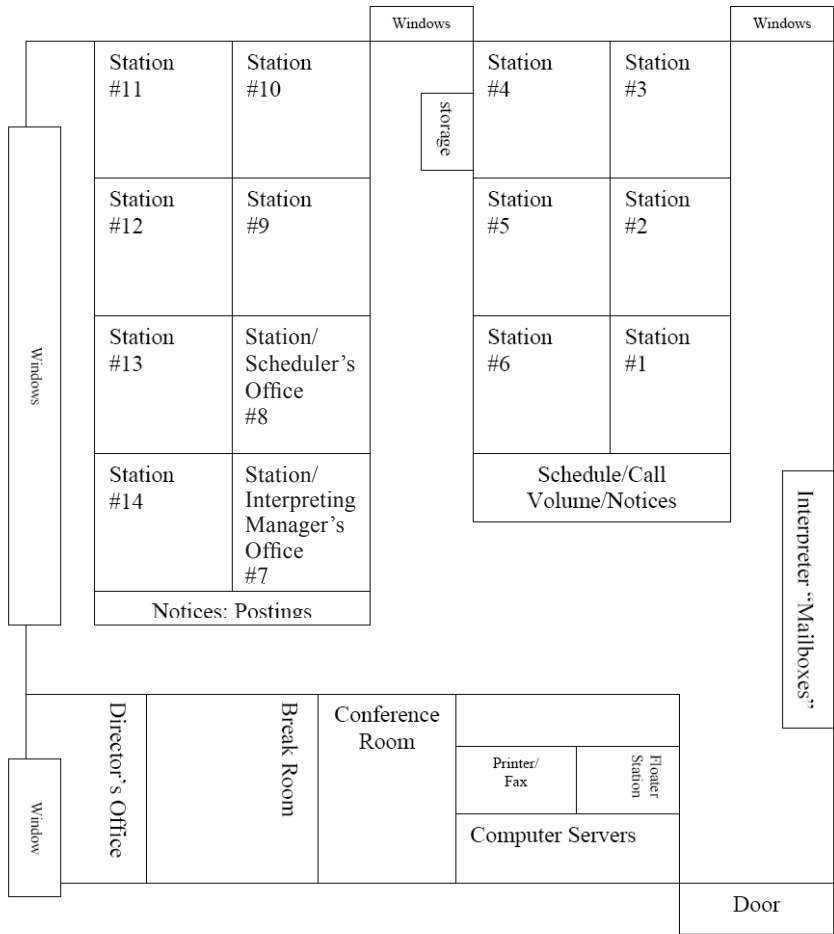


FIGURE 2.1. *Ease Communication, Inc., Relay Interpreting Services Center: Southwest site.*

which can end an interpreter's career prematurely. Both centers have sinks and notices about safety and the federal minimum wage on the walls.

Outside the cubicles, the walls of the centers are adorned with information about schedules, events, trainings, certification test dates and locations, interpreting-related news (e.g., conferences), and praise. Both centers have an entire wall devoted to certificates of appreciation for different interpreters. Some interpreters have multiple certificates from deaf callers. To receive these certificates, either caller (deaf or non-deaf) must send an email or call customer service and report their appreciation for the interpreter's work. (I will return to these certificates in chapter 5,

where I will discuss their uses and their relation to other texts used to monitor interpreters' work.) In one of the centers, there is another wall that congratulates newly certified interpreters or interpreters who received another certification from RID.

In VRS centers that are regulated by the FCC, call confidentiality is a consideration. And, although the call centers are laid out in rows, they differ from traditional "call centers [that] are of necessity open-plan, with each team's workstations grouped into cluster or row formation" (Baldry et al. 2006, 239). In traditional call centers, such as those that Baldry et al. (2006) discuss, the open plan allows for supervisors to observe several employees at one time. In contrast, each wall of the cubicles in these VRS centers is six feet high. The design is intended to prevent eavesdropping by those who pass by the cubicle and by those interpreters who are working nearby, to protect the privacy of the callers.

VRS centers are also designed to create productive workers. Another function of the six-foot walls is that interpreters are not likely to become distracted by things outside the cubicle. If the walls were lower, interpreters could look over and see other deaf people who were making calls. Furthermore, there is the potential for a deaf caller to see other deaf people if the walls were too low. Due to the height of the walls, the only way to see into the cubicles is through the door-size opening used to enter and exit the cubicles.

Since the walls are high, there are lights on top of the walls to alert others that there is a call being interpreted. When assistance is needed, interpreters can either send a message to all interpreters using the Instant Messaging program or, because of the close proximity, they can simply ask for assistance from a nearby interpreter who is not interpreting a call at that moment.

### **Two- and Three-Tier Centers**

Ease Communication categorizes its centers by its layers of management. Whether a center is considered a two-tier compared to a three-tier center has little impact on the daily work of the interpreters, but there is a certain level of prestige, at least for management, associated with a three-tier structure. When I first heard about the tier classification, I assumed that three-tier structured centers could handle more calls than did two-tier structured centers. I was incorrect. In fact, the two-tier center I worked in, housing twenty-four stations, is much larger than the three-tier center, which has only fourteen stations. In the two-tier centers, the

administration consists of the scheduler and the manager; a three-tier center also has a director.

## **CAST OF ACTORS**

Each center is filled with various people who perform different functions. Depending on the size and location of the center, the hierarchal structure of the center and the number of roles within that hierarchy may differ somewhat.

### **Sign Language Interpreters**

In VRS centers, a sign language interpreter is called a video interpreter (VI). Each center has a number of interpreters working at any given time. Some interpreters prefer only to work days, Monday through Friday, while others prefer only to work at night, depending on the interpreter's other responsibilities (i.e., families, school, and other paid work).

There are three classifications of VIs at Ease Communication. That is, VIs are either on staff at Ease Communication or work for the center on a contract basis. A VI who does not hold a national certification from RID is considered to be an "interpreter-in-training." Interpreters-in-training are staff employees, but their continued employment is contingent on them taking and passing RID's national certification examination within a given time frame, typically six months to a year. However, some interpreters-in-training unable to pass the RID exam or to get a testing slot because there are not enough spaces available are terminated. Interpreters-in-training provide an inexpensive source of labor for Ease Communication because noncertified interpreters are paid less than certified interpreters, but they can still accept calls that the center bills to the FCC.

### **STAFF INTERPRETERS**

Interpreters who choose to become employees of Ease Communication, like I did, are required to fill out an application, provide information for a background/credit check, and submit to a urine test to detect potential drug use. Staff interpreters may have additional responsibilities in addition to interpreting calls. These responsibilities can include creating a newsletter, helping out with reports, sitting on committees for birthday parties (i.e., getting cakes and cards), morale improvement, and other non-interpreting-related activities.

In one center, all of the staff interpreters are also assigned chores, typically focused on cleaning the break room, to complete during their shifts. There is a list of duties and interpreters assigned to each affixed to the break room door. The interpreters place their initials next to their name to indicate the task was completed. I did not experience or witness any consequences when interpreters did not complete the duties they were assigned. Regardless of their additional functions, their primary role is to provide sign language interpretation for callers.

Staff interpreters can be classified as either part-time or full-time employees. Their status depends on the number of hours per week they work. Typically, part-time employees are not allowed to work beyond 29 hours a week. When I asked about this rule, Belinda, the manager for one of the centers, told me, “Working an average of 32 hours a week in a quarter constitutes full-time employment. Therefore, 29 hours gives us some wiggle room. Also, this allows interpreters to work more in one week if the call volume is high.” Although the rule is 29 hours, and this turns out to be the average in a given quarter, when the call volume is high, centers lift the cap on the number of hours an interpreter can work.

Full-time employees are scheduled for 40 hours per week, but they are only on the phones (e.g., interpreting calls) for 32 hours. The other 8 hours are spent assisting with administrative tasks and taking care of other, noninterpreting tasks.

#### FREELANCE INTERPRETERS

Similar to staff interpreters, the primary function of freelance interpreters or independent contractors is to interpret calls. However, unlike staff interpreters, freelance interpreters are only responsible for interpreting. Although they may, and some do, participate in committee work, many of the freelance interpreters I spoke with only provided interpreting services.

Freelance interpreters also have a different application process. Freelance interpreters must satisfy the Internal Revenue Service’s definition of an independent contractor. One manager pointed out a manual provided by the federal government that aids companies so that they can ensure that their contractors are indeed contractors according to the IRS’s policies. To accomplish this, the interpreters must provide an invoice with their own letterhead and their tax-identification number. Furthermore, they must provide a statement that they do and will continue to work for other agencies.

Requiring freelance interpreters to provide additional documentation protects Ease Communication from workman's compensation claims. Without this additional documentation, interpreters who were unable to continue to work due to repetitive motion injuries or carpal tunnel syndrome, a common occurrence among interpreters, could claim that their injuries were the result of working at Ease Communication and file a worker's compensation claim against the center.

Not only do freelance interpreters have limited responsibilities, at Ease Communication they are also paid differently and not provided benefits. Because taxes are not paid on the employee's behalf, the additional documentation provides proof to the IRS that the interpreter, not Ease Communication, is responsible for their employment taxes, which include the federal income tax withholding, Social Security and Medicare taxes, and the federal unemployment tax.

Just as part-time staff interpreters are limited to a maximum number of hours they can work in a week, so are freelance interpreters. Freelance interpreters are not permitted to work beyond 29 hours per week. Because part-time employees and freelance interpreters are not able to get benefits, they are typically paid based on their certifications and experience alone. Therefore, it is not unusual to find part-time employees who earn just as much per hour as a freelance interpreter.

#### INTERPRETERS-IN-TRAINING

In an effort to increase the pool of interpreters, Ease Communication instituted a program for training would-be interpreters.<sup>9</sup> These interpreters are theoretically within six months of gaining a national certification from RID. Often they have very little experience in any arena and thus bring very little practical experience to video relay.

Ease Communication provides these interpreter hopefuls with training and guidance as they study for, and eventually pass, the national exam. This training often includes sitting with certified interpreters, meeting weekly with a trainer to discuss situations and prepare for their certification examination, and attending workshops. Training that takes place while sitting with certified interpreters depends on the certified interpreter's

9. One video relay provider has also started an "institute" for training interpreters. Although this might increase the number of interpreters for video relay service, it also further stretches the already thin resources of interpreter trainers (see Brunson 2010).



style. In my case, I allowed interpreters-in-training to watch me interpret a few calls, then I would ask if they were ready and willing to take some calls with me by their side. After each call, regardless of which of us was interpreting, we would take a few minutes to talk about the pros and cons of the choices we made while interpreting. I have spoken with other interpreters who never let interpreters-in-training take calls and those who immediately put them on the phones and took breaks. The idea is that interpreters-in-training, as long as they are in training, will work alongside a certified interpreter so they are able to receive helpful feedback. However, it is not uncommon to see these interpreters working alone taking calls just a few weeks after starting and prior to earning certification.

In some cases, interpreters-in-training are allowed to work without a certified interpreter immediately even though they have not received the full training. At times, this is the subject of great discussion among certified interpreters because interpreters-in-training are being scheduled for hours that could go to the certified interpreters. When I asked a trainer about this, he said, “I was told that it is very costly to have the [training program]. We are paying these people but they are not processing calls. That means that we are losing money.” Some interpreters-in-training have left Ease Communication immediately upon receiving their certification. This is another way that the company is not getting their money back from the training they provide: interpreters-in-training get all the training and mentoring from certified interpreters and earn money during their training period and then leave once they are certified. Understandably, Ease Communication needs some way to recoup the money they spend on interpreters-in-training; the company allows trainees to take calls on their own sooner so they can bill the FCC for the trainees’ time.

Since they are not certified sign language interpreters, Ease Communication pays interpreters-in-training anywhere from \$10 to \$18 less per hour than a certified interpreter. It should be noted that even at \$20 per hour, trainees are earning considerable money without holding any credentials in interpreting. However, they are still earning less than they would if they were to interpret outside of VRS without any credentials. In addition, the use of noncertified interpreters is not unique to Ease Communication or to VRS. Many agencies have an increasing pool of noncertified interpreters working for them.<sup>10</sup>

10. In response to the growing use of noncertified interpreters some states have passed legislation requiring interpreters to hold national certification to work in their state.

The licensure issue raises questions of jurisdiction for VRS. For example, when an interpreter is working in Arizona but interpreting for callers in the state of New York, and the state of Arizona requires a license to interpret but New York does not, which state law should apply? When the law was proposed and later passed in Arizona, the rationale was to provide protection for members of the Arizona Deaf community. As a state legislation, it covers only the practice of interpreting in the state of Arizona. I was told by one manager that Ease Communication requires all interpreters in states with licensure requirements to hold a license to “cover their bases.” Although this may be the stated policy for Ease Communication, I have heard of interpreters working without such license in VRS centers.

### **Scheduler**

The scheduler is a part of the operations department and is therefore supervised by the operations director, who is in the national office. In both of the centers, the scheduler is someone who is not an interpreter.<sup>11</sup> Initially, the scheduler did just what the title suggested. Schedulers were responsible for filling time slots with the required number of interpreters. They were told by the national office the number of interpreters needed, and they would contact interpreters and see who was available and willing to take which shifts. This process has become more automated now, causing the scheduler’s duties to change.

Schedulers are no longer responsible for contacting interpreters to fill shifts. Interpreters are now able to log into a system through the Internet and see which shifts need to be covered and place a bid. The stated practice is that the scheduler then approves the bid based on the interpreter’s seniority.

Although schedulers have a great deal of control over the amount of work an interpreter gets, they do not have any supervisory responsibility and have very little, if any, interaction with the interpreters. Furthermore, the scheduler was often the focus of hostility from interpreters. In fact, many of the interpreters I spoke with talked about the fact that the scheduler who worked in their center seemed to them to be extremely incompetent. The interpreters were often angry with the scheduler because they did not get the schedule they wanted.

11. This is common even outside of video relay service. Many schedulers who work for referral agencies are not sign language interpreters.

The control a scheduler is able to exert over interpreters depends on the status of the interpreter. That is, full-time employees have a set schedule; they work the same days and same time every week. Unless an interpreter takes a vacation, her schedule does not change. Part-time interpreters and freelancers are much less consistent. As a part-time employee, I would be able to view the shifts that needed to be covered by logging into the computer system. This can be done while at a center or from my home. These shifts are in thirty-minute increments. Once I have submitted the schedule I want, the scheduler then is able to approve or deny my request. The scheduler's decision is based on the needs of the center and whether someone else has also requested the same schedule. Seniority also affects the schedule an interpreter gets.

Part-time and freelance interpreters are not guaranteed a minimum number of hours each week. Part-time employees who have the higher seniority are able to request the more ideal schedules. New or freelance employees are given the hours that are left. This provides an incentive for people to become and remain employees rather than independent contractors. It also encourages part-time employees to become full-time so that they can get a set schedule. This benefits Ease Communication because then they can be assured that the employee will cover 32 hours a week. Even though they would provide benefits to full-time employees, the amount of money they would be able to earn based on billable minutes generated by a full-time interpreter would be substantially more.

Even though it is stated that seniority is used to determine schedules, one interpreter, Kathryn, told me that she does not believe schedulers take seniority into consideration.

I have been working here for nearly five years. I was one of the first interpreters hired on here. [ . . . ] Don't you think that would make my seniority high? Well I do. But I know for a fact that there are other interpreters who have been here less time than me and still get the schedules they want and I don't always get the schedules I want.

When asked whether Kathryn had confronted management about the inconsistency she witnessed, she stated:

Yeah, I asked. I have asked several times. The first time I was told that it was based on seniority. Then after a couple of weeks of not getting the schedule I wanted and seeing others with less seniority getting the

schedules they wanted, I went back and talked to the manager. He then said, that it was not only based on seniority but they also considered a person's [billable minutes].

Kathryn's experience could have been due to the scheduling needs of the center. Whether an interpreter is meeting the numbers of a center does not change when interpreters are needed. Most businesses, including VRS, have peak hours and off hours. Kathryn's ideal schedule may have been during the off hours when they did not need additional people.

Management is also responsible for seeing the big picture. Because we do not have management's account of this situation, it is not clear if there are other reasons for not giving Kathryn the schedule she wants. It is not unreasonable to assume that management may have information that Kathryn does not, such as when others are available to work. Regardless of the reason, it has been communicated to Kathryn that based on her numbers she should have the schedule she wants. Her frustration comes from the seemingly arbitrary awarding of schedules. Regardless of management's motivation, inconsistencies in adherence to policies can be just as frustrating as strict adherence.

Kathryn is the only person who complained about the seniority issue. In my own experience, I was always given the schedule I wanted at one center but at another center I was often not given my ideal schedule. Given that I was working for Ease Communication two years before the second center was opened, I figured I would have the highest seniority. When I asked management about this, I was told that seniority only counts at the first center worked at. That is, because I started at another center, I would have high seniority there but since others had started working at the second center before me, they had higher seniority. I never pressed the issue.

## **Manager**

The manager is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the center. Managers are responsible for hiring interpreters and for seeing that there are enough interpreters to cover the call volume. Even though they are responsible for making sure there are enough interpreters to answer the calls, managers do not supervise schedulers, a point that has irritated at least two managers with whom I spoke who complained about this. This is because managers' annual evaluations are dependent on whether they

are able to staff the center with enough interpreters to cover the call volume for the day, which in turn depends on the schedulers' abilities to do their jobs. Since the managers' evaluations depend on the work of others, they feel they should also supervise the schedulers.

In both centers, the manager is also an interpreter.<sup>12</sup> In terms of the company, this comes in handy because the manager is also able to interpret calls, which will increase billable minutes. While I was working in one of the centers, I received a call that required two interpreters. It was a conference call that was going to continue for approximately two hours. All of the other interpreters in the center were on calls, and my manager was able to assist with the call.

While it is useful to have a manager who can help out when you are interpreting, it is also nice to have a manager who understands what it is you do. In discussing some of the dilemmas faced during a call, a manager who is also an interpreter is able to relate.

The field of sign language interpreting is very small and most interpreters in a particular area will know each other. The managers are chosen from the community in which the center is located, and this helps with recruitment of other interpreters. Often interpreters have worked with each other in a variety of settings. They have seen each other interact with members of the Deaf community and have had deaf people tell them about what they like and do not like about certain interpreters. A local interpreter who is hired as a manager knows the strengths and weaknesses of their colleagues. They are better equipped to assess whether a particular interpreter is going to meet the needs of the center and handle the type of calls they are likely to receive. Furthermore, when the manager is a respected and a well-liked colleague, as was the case in one center, she is able to staff the center with friends who are willing to work hard to make the manager look good.

The manager is also responsible for ensuring that new interpreters are trained. In some cases, new interpreters are assigned to an experienced interpreter who will train them. However, more often it is the manager who sits with the interpreter and walks them through the protocols for various calls. Once the interpreter is done with training, he will sit with an experienced interpreter and begin to take calls.

12. Only in one video relay service center where I worked was my direct supervisor not an interpreter.

## **Director**

In addition to the manager and the scheduler, a three-tier center also has a director. Whereas managers are responsible for the day-to-day operations, directors may have managers at multiple centers who report to them. Even though the director is also an interpreter, he rarely does the training for the center; that is left to the manager.

## **Video Relay Provisional Coordinator and Other Support Personnel**

Some centers also have trainers. These trainers, called interpreter-in-training coordinators, are responsible for training. The interpreter-in-training coordinator will also coordinate trainings for the rest of the interpreters. These people report to the national training department of Ease Communication, which is part of the national office.

Whether a center has an interpreter-in-training coordinator depends on whether it can support an interpreter-in-training program. If there is enough need (i.e., an abundance of noncertified interpreters available), then a center can request to be considered for the interpreter-in-training program. This is not dependent on whether the center is organized in two or three tiers.

Some centers also house technical support staff. The technical support staff responds to both internal and external customers. They do not report to any person within the center. Like the interpreter-in-training coordinator, whether a center houses technical support staff does not depend on the tier category of the center, but on other factors, such as size of the facility.

## **CLAIMING SPACE**

Interpreters in VRS centers carry out their work in cubicles. The cubicles are not assigned to individual interpreters, officially. However, interpreters who have the same schedule each week or who are employed by Ease Communication as staff employees rather than independent contractors will typically sit in the same cubicle and decorate it with their personal artifacts. To ward off would-be squatters, interpreters place their name and scheduled hours outside the cubicle. There is a sense of ownership over the space and some interpreters become territorial. At times, this practice leads to animosity and outright hostility among interpreters.

Kathryn, an interpreter with over fifteen years of experience, has been working at Ease Communication for nearly five years. Here Kathryn describes a situation that occurred when one interpreter asked another interpreter to leave “her” cubicle:

You see, the part-timers can't get a regular station, but the full-timers can. Sheila, I think she was a part-timer . . . yeah she was a part-timer. Well, Eleanor [who is a full-timer] came in one day and she always sat in [station] 11. Well that day, Sheila was sitting in the station. Eleanor told [Sheila] to leave. [Eleanor] said, “I am here now and this is my station.”

Even though every interpreter can, and many do, bring family photos or other personal items to place in the cubicle they are working in, part-time and freelance interpreters do not have an assigned cubicle that they will use every time they work. The unspoken policy, which varies among centers, is that full-timers get to use the same station when they are working.

As Kathryn continues, she says that even though Sheila was on a call, rather than finding another station to sit in, Eleanor stood next to the cubicle, presumably to hurry Sheila along. Sheila told Eleanor to leave—which she did, but not until she was able to collect her personal items, such as pictures that were in the station.

A sense of ownership is one reason that interpreters may have an affinity for a particular station. Another reason is that the station may be set up in such a way that makes it conducive for the interpreter to perform her or his work. For example, one part-time interpreter, Marianne, explained that she only likes to use the stations that have the computer on the right of the television screen. She also does not like to use the select stations that have the ergonomically correct keyboards because she has “trouble typing on those types of keyboards.” I, on the other hand, did not mind the ergonomic keyboards, but I typically chose a cubicle that was further away from the place where interpreters may congregate to discuss schedules, wait for a station to become available, or read the various notices posted on the wall.

Although allowing interpreters to claim dominion over a particular station for either comfort or consistency provides interpreters with a sense of belonging, it seems counter to other aspects of VRS work that aim to reduce individuality and promote interchangeability. The goal is to create an environment in which any interpreter can use any cubicle and produce

billable minutes. Assigning cubicles to particular interpreters and allowing them to place personal belongings in the cubicles reduces the interchangeability. On the other hand, as Kupritz (1999) suggests, personalizing one's space may produce a more productive worker.

### **Shared Spaces**

In addition to the individual cubicles that are designed for interpreting phone calls, there are other shared spaces throughout the centers. These spaces have a particular function. One particular space is the break room. The break rooms provide needed respites from calls and interpreting. Interpreters who are on break at the same time can gather in the break rooms and recount information about particular calls. Even though interpreters are not supposed to provide details of calls, most interpreters would provide enough information that others who had experience with a particular caller would know exactly who was being discussed. This was often followed by others chiming in to tell about their last experience with that particular caller. Many times these callers were given descriptive nicknames. For example, one caller who liked to call and show the tip of his penis to the female interpreters was called "Dick Head," a name that is both descriptive and insulting.

Female interpreters would sit in the break room and tell stories about their recent call with Dick Head. Often interpreters would giggle and provide each other with support as to how to handle Dick Head's calls. On one occasion a new interpreter was being warned about Dick Head:

Diane: You are working late tonight, right?

Kimberly: Well, you will probably get a call from Dick Head tonight.

Diane: Really? What should I do?

Kimberly: It is up to you but I usually just hang up on him and send an email to whoever is in charge. They can deal with it. He really is harmless but he just likes to show you his dick.

Cathy (interrupts): Yeah, I just hang up on him.

Diane: I don't want to see that. (giggles). I will just hang up.

Even though there is no discussion of the identity of Dick Head, both Kimberly and Cathy know who he is. This is because it is not uncommon to get calls from the same caller while working a particular shift. This is more likely to occur during the graveyard shift because there are fewer centers open and fewer interpreters working.



Other times interpreters talk in generalities and the intent is much more cathartic. For example, Tina tears up as she walks into the break room and, talking to nobody in particular, relives the call she recently received:

Wow! That was hard. I just had a call between a boy at college and his mother. He was yelling at his mother. He was telling her that she really hurt him because she never learned sign language. He said that he was glad that he went to a residential school so that he didn't have to be around people who didn't talk to him. He then said that the Deaf community was his real family.

Even though Tina does not address anyone in particular, we all listen intently to her story. Then Beth Ann asks, "What did his mother say?" As Tina tries to regain her composure, she says, "She said she knew. She said that there was nothing she could do—that she didn't know any better." As if she just could feel the boy's pain, she says, "and then the mother just said, 'Listen, Keith. You have been calling me for a month now complaining about this. Why haven't you gotten over it yet?'" At this point, every person in the room started to provide their opinion on the subject. These opinions were in support of both Tina for having to endure the emotional call and Keith for having to endure his mother's ignorance. Nobody in the room spoke in support of the mother.

Another shared space is called the Floater Station, where interpreters wait for a station to open up. Here they can log onto the computer, surf the Internet, and submit their timecards and invoices. The Floater Station is not a separate space like the break rooms, so discussions are rather minimal. However, people do use the time here to catch up with colleagues they have not seen for some time.

## **TECHNOLOGICAL INTERFACE**

Aside from the physical environment, computer technology has a significant role in organizing the work of interpreters in this setting. Technology is abundant in most offices in a postindustrial society. In VRS centers, computer technology is used to distribute calls and to predict call volume, among other tasks. The information gathered to perform these two tasks is also used to create schedules.

An indispensable component of a call center is the automatic call distribution (ACD) program (Taylor and Bain 1999). ACD programs not only

direct calls to available interpreters but they can also generate reports that calculate the number of calls received per minute, predict call volume, and calculate the number of interpreters needed for a given time period. The number of interpreters needed for a given time is made available to interpreters who can then bid for shifts.

While ACD programs have streamlined the scheduling process for Ease Communication and lessened wait times for callers, these programs also strip interpreters of their discretion. Instead of depending on interpreters to determine their ability to provide an accurate interpretation, a computer program determines when and how many interpreters are needed at any given time. The current computer program does not evaluate whether the interpreters they are scheduling are the most qualified to provide interpreting; this means that a concern for covering the calls dictates who works, rather than interpreters' professional judgment.

### **Call Distribution**

Now, all calls to VRS centers, originating from anywhere in the world, go into a national queue. However, because the FCC reimburses VRS providers for calls, for funding purposes at least one of the parties must be in the United States.<sup>13</sup> The call is then routed to the next available station and interpreter.

When I first began working at Ease Communication, calls were routed locally so three or four centers shared the same queue and the technology was such that I was able to see those callers waiting in the queue. That is, I could see the number they were calling to and from and I could see the name the phone assigned to the videophone used to place the call. This capability allowed me to see if the next caller was someone I could, or wanted to, work with, as well as see how long they had been waiting in the queue. In some cases, if the deaf person who was next in line to receive an interpreter was someone I knew and for whom I felt I would not be the best interpreter, based on my skill or his language needs, I chose to take the next person in line. If several interpreters did this, a caller could be waiting in the queue for several minutes. The FCC determined that this was tantamount to preferential treatment and ordered that the practice

13. Occasionally, both the caller and the person being called are located in other countries, such as Canada, where various video relay service providers have distributed their equipment widely. When this occurs, Ease Communication policy states that the call must be terminated, politely, but immediately.

be discontinued. Now, calls are distributed based on when the interpreter logged in. The goal is that the interpreter who has been available the longest gets the next call. This practice helps with burnout. Some providers still have technology that allows the interpreters to see the next person in the queue and are able to see how long the person has been waiting, but it limits how often interpreters can “jump the queue” and skip the person who is next in line to receive an interpreter.

The call volume is higher on certain days. Typically Mondays and Tuesdays are the busiest. In addition, certain holidays, such as Mother’s Day, are extremely busy. The call distribution program helps on these days, but interpreters are still answering calls back to back. Because the hold time for callers is longer on these days, callers are more likely to be disgruntled when they finally get an interpreter. Some interpreters have chosen to avoid working on these days. On these days when the call volume is expected to be high, Ease Communication offers incentive pay to entice interpreters to work.

## **Scheduling**

The scheduling process for Ease Communication has changed over the years. In the beginning, schedulers were responsible for scheduling individual interpreters by hand. As the technology has advanced, schedulers’ jobs have been limited to approving and denying schedule bids.

People’s schedules determine what they can do in a given day, week, month, and year. Interpreters cited the schedule as one of the benefits of working in VRS. More than once I was told that VRS is an ideal source of interpreting income because some interpreters can get the same schedule every week. Every VRS center I worked for schedules interpreters a month in advance, which allows interpreters to know their schedules in advance, at least for the month.

Even if interpreters are not guaranteed a particular schedule, there is certain amount of consistency with video relay interpreting. The pool of consumers, deaf and non-deaf, is large and not limited by geographical area as it is in-person interpreting. Also in contrast to in-person interpreting, video relay interpreters know exactly how much money is coming in, and they are able to schedule other jobs and errands accordingly. Furthermore, unless the technology goes down there are no cancellations in VRS. Also, since some VRS centers are open 24 hours a day and 365 days a year, interpreters can depend on video relay for a paycheck when other types of work are scarce, such as during the summer and holiday season.

As a sign language interpreter, I am used to being at the beck and call of other people's schedules. Although I could limit my working hours to a 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., Monday through Friday, schedule, that would reduce the income I could earn. There is a lot of business that deaf people take care of during those hours; however, there are situations when deaf people use the services of an interpreter that do not occur between 9:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M., Monday through Friday, such as emergencies or night classes. Therefore, most interpreters who are freelance practitioners have to be willing to work around the clock. This may mean that they interpret a medical emergency at 2:00 A.M. and an 8:00 A.M. board meeting later the same day.

Interpreting in video relay service is clearly call-center work. According to Hinrichs, Roche, and Sirianni (1991), "For increasing numbers of employees the length of the working day and working week is becoming a variable or flexible feature of employment, influenced primarily by the pattern of demand confronting the firms in which they work" (4). In call centers, employees' schedules are dependent on call volume.

When Ease Communication started providing VRS, scheduling interpreters was center-specific. That is, the national office knew how many interpreters were needed during any given period and would attempt to distribute those among all of the centers. No one center knew how many interpreters were needed nationwide for a given time period. For example, if there were ten interpreters needed from 9:00 A.M. to 9:30 A.M., one center might be responsible for finding two interpreters while another would be responsible for locating four, and still another center would be charged with scheduling four more. However, if one of those centers was unable to find the right number of interpreters, then other centers would be bombarded with calls to compensate for the number of interpreters who were not scheduled for that time slot.

Another problem that could occur was that one center might be able to schedule five interpreters but had only been allotted three slots; therefore, two interpreters would be turned away. Since interpreters talk with one another, as do all employees, about their shifts (not the call contents but the call volume), it is not uncommon to hear some interpreters complaining about the number of calls they had during a given shift while another complains that she or he asked to work and was turned down. A manager, Jake, explained the process to me:

We don't decide the number of interpreters we schedule. That information comes from headquarters. So they tell us that we need to schedule

four interpreters, for example, and we do it. The problem is that if they would say, for example, that we need 120 interpreters from this time to this time then each center could schedule as many interpreters as they could until the whole 120 slots are filled. But how it works now is that they tell us to schedule four, they tell St. Louis to schedule fifteen, and then they tell [the center in] Houston to schedule six. Well then once we have scheduled our four, if other interpreters want to work we have to turn them away because we already have the four interpreters we need.

Now that Jake has explained the process, he continues by explaining the problems inherent in the current process.

Now the problem happens because maybe we got the four people, but St. Louis only got twelve of the people they needed. So then the interpreters here get slammed with calls. We are all connected, but headquarters doesn't want to give up control over that. It would just be easier if they had a set number like the 120 and just let each site schedule as many interpreters as possible until the whole 120 was covered. That way if we have a lot of interpreters available then we could cover more than the four slots they allotted us. So we should all have the same size site; for example, we should all have twenty-five stations.

Jake's recommendation would mean that some interpreters would not be able to get any work since scheduling would be done on a first come, first served basis. Furthermore, because the centers are not the same size those areas with larger centers and larger pools of interpreters would fill more quickly than the smaller ones.

As a manager, Jake must deal with the impact of not having enough interpreters. If there is not enough downtime or time when an interpreter can catch his breath between calls, burnout is more likely. As such, it behooves management, to an extent, to increase the time that interpreters are not processing calls. To do this, there must be more interpreters available to take calls so that the time between calls per interpreter is extended. In addition to the frustration experienced by managers and burnout by interpreters, there may be an increased holding time for callers that could violate the "speed of answer" required by the FCC.

The "speed of answer" is a measurement of the total number of seconds a call can remain in queue. The goal of the relay, text and video, is to make the telephone experience of deaf people more functionally

equivalent to that of non-deaf people. Kelby Brick, director of law and advocacy for the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), along with the other members of the National Video Relay Service Coalition,<sup>14</sup> stated in a comment to the FCC:

Deaf and hard of hearing customers are tired of long waits before they can call anybody. Speed of answer rules will provide customers with access to telephone services and be a step closer to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)'s requirement for functional equivalency. (www.nad.org)

As a result of this comment, and others, the FCC required that by January 1, 2007, VRS providers would answer 80 percent of all calls, calculated monthly, within 120 seconds, in order to receive remuneration from the National Exchange Carrier Association. This standard assumes a great deal about the interpreting that occurs within VRS centers. First, it assumes that interpreters do not call in sick for work. When this happens, there is going to be one less interpreter available to respond to calls. Furthermore, it puts additional strain on those interpreters who are working. This means that they may experience a greater amount of burnout or fatigue. When this happens, interpreters may be apt to take more breaks during the day. This would undoubtedly increase callers' wait time.

This regulation also assumes that there is an "average" call, with relatively little divergence from the typical call length. However, there is no way to know how long a call will take. The VRS Task Analysis Report, completed by the Distance Opportunities for Interpreter Training (DO IT) Center at the University of Northern Colorado in 2005, found that "there is no limit to the types of calls that require interpretation" (10). Calls may range from brief calls in which a caller informs a friend or family member that they are on their way to more lengthy calls that include several people discussing in detail a business agenda for nearly two hours. Although the first type of call would not interfere with adhering

14. The National Video Relay Service Coalition is an ad hoc group that includes the following organizations: Telecommunications for the Deaf, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Consumer Advocacy Network, National Association of the Deaf, the Association for Late Deafened Adults, the American Association of People with Disabilities, Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Government, the California Coalition of Agencies Serving the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, the Student Body Government of Gallaudet University, and the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf.

to the speed of answer regulations, the second would mean that at least one interpreter, or two if the call was difficult, would not be able to assist with incoming calls for nearly two hours.

Furthermore, standard practice in the field of sign language interpreting is that two interpreters work as a team for any job that requires more than one and a half hours of constant interpreting. This means that when an interpreter receives a call that is likely to go beyond the hour-and-a-half threshold,<sup>15</sup> such as a business conference call, she automatically calls on another interpreter to assist with the call. Another interpreter can also be called on for assistance if the interpreter who receives a call feels he cannot effectively interpret the call on his own, for example, if a deaf caller is difficult to understand because of cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, or any other distracting motor impairment, or if a deaf caller uses a particular dialect of sign language that is particularly difficult to understand. A non-deaf caller may have a thick accent that the interpreter cannot understand, or there may be a lot of background noise. All of these situations can lengthen the speed of answer of future calls while the interpreters work to provide a quality interpretation.

To meet the minimum standards set by the FCC, each center must account for interpreters calling in sick, for spikes in calls, and for calls that require more time to complete. Individual schedulers have taken up different ways to meet the needs of the centers and also adhere to Ease Communication's own policies. For example, in anticipation of situations like those described above, schedulers schedule additional interpreters. Sue, a scheduler at one of the centers, explained to me how the process of scheduling worked:

We can schedule three [interpreters] over our target. So you can see (as she points to the schedule in front of her) here, I only needed five interpreters but I scheduled seven. Later, I needed three but I only had two. Hopefully another center was able to schedule over their target.

Sue's practice of scheduling more interpreters for a given time period than she needed is one way the different centers exert control over their work. Even though she did not contact the other centers to tell them she

15. All of the VRS centers that I have worked in and heard about have technology built into the computers that indicate to the interpreters that it is time to take a break after twenty minutes.

was unable to fill all her slots, she was “hopeful” that they overschedule when they can, like she does. Scheduling over the number of allotted interpreters at one time and not being able to find enough interpreters at another time balances out in the end.

The scheduling system focuses on numbers and was developed and implemented by people at headquarters who have likely never worked in a VRS center as interpreters; therefore, it is unlikely they understand the full ramifications of the practice. The process of scheduling at Ease Communication continues to evolve. The technology that predicts call volumes has become more sophisticated and thus has reduced the flexibility of video relay schedulers. Rather than allot individual centers a portion of the needed interpreters, people at headquarters now put out a call for a total number of interpreters needed during a given time, just as Jake suggested. As interpreters are scheduled or schedule themselves via the online bidding system for these shifts, the number of available slots is decreased by one automatically. This ensures a more accurate accounting of the number of interpreters needed and hired for a given time period.

In order for the various forms of technology to work successfully, there must be an accurate tracking of interpreters and the time interpreters are available to accept calls. To track this, management uses various texts to make interpreters and the system accountable. The Log, according to Sue, is a mechanism used by the scheduler to “adjust” interpreters’ time sheets. Much like the practice of balancing one’s checkbook, the scheduler cross-references the report produced as interpreters log in and out, also known as the Productivity Report, and the Log. Although this practice is referred to as “adjusting,” it is actually a way for Ease Communication to accurately reflect what interpreters are doing and accurately bill the FCC. I will discuss these tracking and surveillance texts in more detail in chapter 5.

Once interpreters are inside the center and have begun to work at a station, they continue to interface with various machines and programs that are used to produce a textual account of their presence in the center, and connect them to other interpreters and to the callers.

### **Instant Messaging**

The call distribution program is not the only technology interpreters interface with while performing the task of processing calls. Because interpreters, while sitting in their cubicles, may be unable to see if someone



needs assistance, is on break, has left for the day, or is available to help out on a call, Ease Communication uses Instant Messaging (IM) technology so that interpreters can “see” who else is in the center and keep track of them.

After logging into the computer, but before accepting calls, interpreters are supposed to log into the IM program. Using the IM program, they can see how many interpreters are on break and whether the ratio of interpreters working to interpreters on break is such that they can take a break. One document that is taped to the wall in the cubicle is a document that explains how to use the Instant Messaging program correctly. It provides interpreters with information about what “Online,” “Busy,” “Be Right Back,” and other statuses mean. It also outlines how many people can be on break at one time. This practice ensures there are enough interpreters available to take calls.

As I discussed earlier, the IM program also allows interpreters to “see” who is available to assist with a call or who is the point of contact for the center if there is no supervisor on site. This is useful when a caller wants to talk to a supervisor to file a complaint or provide praise. In actuality, the person acting as a supervisor is another interpreter who has agreed to be the point of contact for the center.

Each interpreter in the center is assigned Point of Contact (POC) duty on a rotating basis. Any person, except an interpreter-in-training, can be a POC. The POC usually is only the POC for three or four hours of her or his shift. There is no pay increase for doing this and no additional authority. The ability to call on someone else who is the acting supervisor allows interpreters to give the perception that they are elevating a caller to the next level. In addition, interpreters are able to contact one another when they are unable to understand either the deaf caller or non-deaf caller and ask for assistance. This is all done by sending IMs back and forth. While interpreters can refuse to be the POC for a number of reasons, it does provide interpreters with additional responsibilities and perceived authority. For this reason, few interpreters refuse POC duty.

Not only can interpreters use this system to “observe” their colleagues, but they can send IMs to each other, as a group or individually. During slow times, I carried on conversations with interpreters in the center that ranged from my plans for the weekend to participating in my dissertation research. In some cases, interpreters “meet” each other for the first time in cyberspace. In this way, this technology allows interpreters to feel connected to one another despite the isolating layout of the center.

## **RECEIVING A CALL**

After logging into the computer and the IM program, making sure they are on camera, and fitting their headsets on, interpreters are ready to begin accepting calls. Again, because the schedule is carefully calculated to ensure there are just enough interpreters to cover the predicted call volume, the wait for a call is typically minimal.

### **Call Setup**

“Call setup” refers to the period when the interpreter is connected to only one of the callers and has not dialed the intended party. This is the time when the caller (deaf or non-deaf) communicates with the interpreter before the other individual is called. This period includes the deaf caller telling the interpreter what number to call and who to ask for, the actual dialing of the number, and the phone ringing or giving a busy signal.

Those first few seconds of interaction between the deaf caller and the interpreter are crucial to a successful call. When a caller is already annoyed because she has had to wait for an interpreter, the interpreter’s ability to defuse the situation immediately helps ensure the call will go smoothly. Otherwise, the tension could run over into the call.

### **Billable Time**

VRS providers cannot bill the FCC until both callers are connected. Therefore, to ensure that VRS providers can bill for the interpreter’s time, once a call appears on an interpreter’s computer screen and is accepted (i.e., not returned to queue) the computer initiates a clock. This clock tallies that amount of time the interpreters spend “setting up the call.” After thirty seconds the clock begins to flash on the computer screen to remind the interpreter that he has not placed an outgoing call yet and is not billable. Here is an example from my field notes of such a situation:

The deaf woman comes up on my screen. She seems nice. She is older. I would say she is in her early seventies. (I am not good at determining age.) The woman says, “Hello.” I respond, “Hello. Thank you for using Ease Communication, Inc. I am interpreter number 9999.” The woman tells me that I sign very well. She then tells me that she is going to call her doctor. She continues, “I was supposed to call my doctor yesterday but I got busy. Then when I got home it was too late. I hope they are not upset that I didn’t call yesterday.” Halfway through the

caller's explanation, the computer begins to flash. I can see it in my peripheral vision and know that it is warning me that I am not billable. I choose to ignore the flashing light and continue with the brief dialogue with the caller.

Deaf people are often isolated in a world of nonsigning people. Therefore, it is not uncommon for deaf people to use VRS as a way to interact with someone who understands their language. While in the break room, I heard many interpreters talk about the "sweet old lady who didn't really have to make a call but wanted to talk with someone." Nobody I spoke with ever told me that they told the caller they could not talk.

### **Types of Calls**

During a shift interpreters interpret for a variety of calls: a deaf person calling a family member, an office manager of a doctor's office calling a deaf patient to confirm her appointment for the following day, a conference call between executives. There is no guarantee, but calls of a business nature are more likely to occur, for obvious reasons, between the hours of 8:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M., and calls of a more personal nature (e.g., calling to ask someone out on a date) are more likely to occur after 5:00 P.M. Still, because interpreters are working with people all over the world and in varied time zones, "expecting the unexpected" is a terrific motto to adopt. In fact, the DO IT Center (2005) found that adaptability was one of the competencies necessary in VRS interpreting:

Along with experience, interpreters must be quick minded. [. . .] For example, calls may be made that are very familiar to interpreters, such as calling a doctor's office to set up an appointment for an annual physical examination, or calling a secretary at a school to notify the teacher that their son, Pete, is sick and will not be attending school. Other kinds of calls are more difficult to interpret, for example, when colleagues are talking to each other using acronyms that are unfamiliar to interpreters. Or when several callers are on the line for a conference call, it may be difficult to identify who is talking, in addition to what they are talking about if it is highly technical or heavily laden with inside humor. (10)

Indeed, most interpreters who work in VRS have placed a call to a doctor's office or a child's school. And, most interpreters have interpreted a phone call between a deaf person and her boss. Interpreters have more

than likely had both personal and professional experience in each of these settings; therefore, it is not difficult to conceptualize the contents of a meeting and use closure skills (defined below) to fill in when certain information is not presented. However, it is at times when interpreters do not have any experience or knowledge that they can use to fill in a context for the call that they typically struggle with providing a successful interpretation.

*Closure skills*, or what Oller refers to as “active hypothesis testing” (cited in Patrie 2000, 197) are perhaps an interpreter’s best friend in all kinds of interpreting situations. Every interpreter, indeed every person, uses closure skills, meaning the drawing on previous knowledge and common sense to fill in gaps in understanding. In interpreting, the gaps occur when the interpreter does not have all of the information that those for whom they are interpreting have. For example, a deaf person places a call to her doctor. The doctor answers the phone and says, “Hello Mrs. Smith.” The deaf caller states, “Hello doctor. It’s back.” The doctor then responds, “Oh. OK. Well, do you still have the ointment? Have you put it on it?” In ASL, the pronoun “it” does not exist. While the doctor and the patient both know what “it” is, the interpreter must wait until some clue is given to provide an accurate interpretation. Furthermore, because ASL is visual, the interpreter must know where “it” is on the body so that he can properly interpret “putting it on.”

In some cases, the interpreter will ask what “it” is. In other situations, the interpreter may wait until she can figure out what “it” is. If this is not stated explicitly, the interpreter must rely on her closure skills to interpret. Sometimes this is easy. The interpreter may remember that the call was placed to a podiatrist and therefore “it” is something on or around the feet. However, if the call is being placed to a dermatologist and the deaf person has severe acne on her face, the signed language interpreter could assume that “it” is some form of acne but where exactly on the body may not be clear. In this situation, the interpreter could guess or just wait until more information is provided. Either way, the interpreter uses closure skills to determine meaning not provided in the original statements.

### **Identity in VRS**

The FCC aims to have a transparent interpreter. Interpreters are supposed to provide access without influencing the outcome of the situation. This ignores the fact that adding a person, even one who attempts to stay neutral, changes the dynamics of the interaction. At times, I have felt that

compliance with the FCC's drive to have interpreters remain "non-people" has been more disruptive than helpful.

People are uncomfortable when they are unable to get a name from someone they are talking to. In America, at least, it is a cultural norm to introduce yourself when you first meet someone. This is also a norm within Deaf culture. On more than one occasion, I have been asked by both the deaf caller and the non-deaf person for my name. For the most part, deaf people are aware that we are unable to give them any part of our names. However, there is other information that they ask for that we are asked not to provide. Karen, an interpreter, explains why she believes we should not give our names or other identifying information:

We could get stalked. We don't want the deaf person to show up at the center and want to talk with the interpreter. You know how sometimes deaf people get attached to the interpreter and want to use them all the time for everything. If they knew we were in their city they may try to find us. Also, [our center is] open all night and that means that it could be dangerous for some people.

Karen states that there have been stalking situations, but she does not know any of the details. However, Margaret, who is a director of one of the centers, explains, "It is easier for you to not get involved if they don't have your name. If all they know is your number you don't have to engage them." Jake, however, says that this practice is a "hold over from the text relay." And it "doesn't have anything to do with stalking."

Even though interpreters have been told to refrain from providing specific information about ourselves to our callers, there are times when I feel it is a good idea to provide the information. In some cases, interpreters are interpreting in very private and personal situations. I would not want to divulge intimate details about myself (e.g., social security number, health status, financial problems) without knowing to whom I was talking. At times, however, providing personal information can tend to produce an "us versus them" alliance with the deaf caller. During my shift at Ease Communication in April of 2006 the following occurred:

The deaf caller is asking me what time it is where I am. Without thinking I tell her. She then asks where I am. I tell her I am in New York. She tells me not to worry that she will not tell anyone that I have told her where I am. She then winks at me.

This exchange occurred while the non-deaf person had placed us on hold. The breach of protocol on my part did not disrupt the rest of the call, in my opinion. Although Ease Communication was able to bill for the time in the example above, the practice of conversing with the deaf or non-deaf caller before or during the call about things personal in nature is prohibited. Furthermore, any discussion after one of the callers has disconnected is also prohibited.

Deaf people use VRS on a much more frequent basis than non-deaf persons. As such, non-deaf persons are often uncomfortable when they ask us our names and we give them a number. On the same day that I told the deaf caller that I was in New York, a non-deaf person called and asked me my name:

A non-deaf person asks my name. I tell him that I am interpreter number 9999. He asks me again. I explain that I am not allowed to give him my name but that he can use my number, 9999, to identify me if there is a need to.

Often this explanation suffices and the call proceeds. However, occasionally the deaf caller is conducting business with a bank or a social security office and the non-deaf person wants more information because he does not trust that I am actually interpreting for a deaf patron. In such a case, the prescription for neutrality seems to produce obstacles to accomplishing the goals of all parties involved.

Sign language interpreters convey the communications of the people for whom they are interpreting in first person. That is, when a deaf person signs, "HELLO MY NAME MARCOS. ME WANT TALK DANIEL," the interpreter will say, "Hello, my name is Marcos. I want to talk to Daniel." In VRS, it is customary for interpreters to identify the process but not themselves. Therefore, even though we are talking in first person, the non-deaf person has been told that it is not actually the deaf person calling. When the non-deaf person answers the phone, we read the following script:<sup>16</sup>

Hello. This is interpreter number \_\_\_\_\_ with Ease Communication, Inc. I have a video relay call (from a customer, patient, etc.) for you. Have you received a video relay call before?

16. These scripts are not the exact scripts used by Ease Communication. Furthermore, each VRS provider has its own scripts, and each one that I have seen gives basically the same information.

If the non-deaf caller says, “Yes, I have had a video relay call before,” the interpreter will say, “I will connect you with the caller,” and the call continues. If, on the other hand, they have not, there is another script we read. That script says:

I will briefly explain. I have a person on the line who uses sign language to communicate. We can see each other on TV screens. I will be interpreting the call between the two of you. You don’t need to say “GA” or “go ahead.” I will connect the caller.

The interpreter can, and does, in certain situations elaborate on the script. For example, we do not always include the phrase about “GA” or “go ahead,” which relates to the turn-taking practices used in text relay service. It is only when the non-deaf caller is familiar with text relay but not video relay that interpreters typically include this reference. The interpreter can change the words used to convey the other parts of the scripts.

However, there is one place where we are told not to elaborate: with the line that states, “I have a person on the line who uses sign language to communicate.” Because the issue of identity is touchy, we are told not to replace “sign language” with “American Sign Language” or say that the person on the line is “deaf.” Both of these imply a cultural affinity. Therefore, we are told to state only that the caller uses sign language, something we can see, and not to make a judgment as to whether they consider themselves to be deaf or that their version of sign language is ASL.

Once the scripts are read, the call will proceed. It is the use of these scripts that can cause some problems with certain institutions, such as banks. Typically they are not willing to discuss financial information through a third party. I have, on several occasions, been asked to put the deaf person on the phone so he can give the bank personnel permission to talk with me about his finances because of confidentiality reasons. When I explain that I am providing a service and that the deaf person is not in the same room with me, bank personnel often refuse to cooperate. This is easily rectified by us calling back and not identifying the process. That is, I do not explain that there is a deaf person calling through an interpreter. I, and several of my colleagues, simply tell the deaf person that they should call back and not tell the person about VRS. Sometimes the deaf caller already knows that this is the way around the inflexible bank official. Either way, access and “functional equivalency” is achieved by breaking the rules.

## Return to Queue

Although the scheduling and other technologies make VRS convenient for some interpreters, working for VRS means relinquishing the ability to assess interpreting assignments and choose the ones for which they are best suited. However, the technology used by Ease Communication does permit interpreters to return a call to the queue if, for example, they know the deaf person and feel they are unable to provide effective and unbiased interpretation for the caller. When a call drops into the queue and shows up on an interpreter's screen, the interpreter can see the name of the caller, the phone number the caller is calling from, and the number she wishes to call. At this point, there is no visual of the deaf person, and she has not seen the interpreter. With a simple click of the mouse, the interpreter can drop the call back in the queue for the next available interpreter. Even though this capability is there, the practice seems to be frowned upon by management (and the FCC). Here Kathryn talks about how she uses the return-to-queue option:

One of the reasons that I wanted to work at Ease Communication is because I didn't want to interpret for people locally anymore. I had interpreted for a lot of them. I knew most of them because of my parents [who are deaf]. But now that my husband is deaf too, I just feel like everybody is afraid that anything I interpret I am going to tell my husband. I just don't want to deal with it. That is why I return to queue. When I see a deaf person who I know drop into my station, I return it to queue so that I don't have to interpret for them.

Kathryn was eventually called into the manager's office and warned that she was abusing the return-to-queue option. The manager was not persuaded by Kathryn's argument. Kathryn told me that she thinks using this option for two or three calls per shift would be acceptable, but she was not sure. When I asked other interpreters about the practice of returning to queue, the answers varied. Tyler, an interpreter who is currently in graduate school, told me he too worked at Ease Communication so he would not have to interpret for local people anymore. "I am trying to distance myself from the local Deaf community because I am hoping to become a therapist in this community. I want them to see me as a therapist, not an interpreter." However, when I asked Tyler whether he had been talked to about using the return-to-queue option, he stated,



I try not to use it too much. Most of the time, I get calls from people in other states so it doesn't really matter. There have been a few times, like last week, I was working the graveyard shift and every other call was from someone I knew. I had to return to queue. Nobody has mentioned it to me, yet. Maybe they haven't gotten the report. (giggles)

Tyler continues by saying, "But I have heard of others who have used the return-to-queue a lot. Also during meetings [management] has said that we should not abuse the return-to-queue function."

I followed up with Jake, who is a manager at one of the centers. He said, "The return-to-queue function is not to be used all the time. We know that there are going to be times when an interpreter doesn't want to interpret for a particular person for whatever reason or that they just need a break." When I asked him how many times is acceptable to return a call to queue he said, "If you are returning more than ten calls to queue per week that is too many. I think that ten would be ok." Jake told me that there was not a "hard-and-fast rule," though.

As Jake said, most people stated they used the return-to-queue option when they finished a call they found particularly difficult and needed a break before taking another call and had not logged off before the next call dropped into their station. This is the intended use for the return-to-queue function.

## **ENDING A SHIFT**

One of the regulations established by the FCC is that calls cannot be transferred to another interpreter within the first ten minutes after connecting (47 C.F.R. § 64.604[v]). This is to prevent the unnecessary transferring of a caller. This means that once a call is accepted by an interpreter, he must stay with the call until it is complete or ten minutes has passed. This only becomes a problem at the end of a shift. Interpreters do not want to take a call at 3:53 P.M. if they are scheduled to leave at 4:00 P.M. To avoid this, and stay in compliance with the FCC's regulations, interpreters log out ten minutes before their shift is scheduled to end. These ten minutes are used to clean up their stations and turn in their Logs (which I discuss further in chapter 5).

In addition to filing paperwork and cleaning their stations, interpreters are often assigned specific chores to be responsible for during these ten

minutes. These chores include cleaning the microwave, wiping down the refrigerator, rinsing out the coffee maker, or straightening up the magazines. Each interpreter is assigned a specific duty and must initial next to her or his name on the Duty Roster once the task is complete. Some interpreters, like Theodore, a freelance interpreter, refuse to clean up after their colleagues; Theodore sees this practice as arising from the manager's needs rather than those of the center:

The contract that I signed says that I will come here and interpret calls. I don't clean up. I will clean up after myself. I don't clean up the microwave. If I were to use the microwave, ever, I would clean up my mess. If I drank the coffee I would clean up after myself but since I don't, I am not going to clean out the coffee maker, the refrigerator, or the microwave. Those duties are a result of the call center manager who is a neat freak and really irritated by messes. Which is the situation for a lot of the "policies" (air quotes) that we have here. They really aren't policies as much as they are personal preferences by management.

Most of the people I asked about the assigned duties laughed and said they typically just signed their initials. There were a few people who saw this as a part of working for Ease Communication and did it without complaint.

## **CONCLUSION**

Here, I have laid out the environment in which VRS interpreting occurs, provided an overview of personnel in the center and their responsibilities, and described some of the work interpreters perform during an ordinary shift. Although each provider may choose to set up its offices a little differently, the underlying theme is that the call centers are designed to produce billable minutes and to be a space where people perform work. This is done by providing enough information in the cubicles so interpreters do not have to leave the cubicles and can continue to process calls. Additionally, the centers are set up in such a way that deaf callers can rest assured that their confidentiality is being maintained, although, occasionally interpreters circumvent the confidentiality procedures established by the FCC. Despite the isolating design of the centers, interpreters find ways to connect to one another; they use Instant Messaging, the technology that is intended to track them, to promote a sense of community in the center.

There are a lot of different people who occupy space in VRS centers. Each person has a function that, when done correctly, produces a service that deaf and non-deaf people can access. However, this also means that interpreters have to learn each person's role and function so that they can get the support they need, when they need it. Furthermore, scheduling that is intended to cover the unexpected call volume so that the center is in compliance with the regulations set by the FCC sometimes leads to interpreters stepping on one another, which can lead to tension. The Floater Station represents the recognition that there are going to be more interpreters than needed for a given shift. As in any community, there are territorial conflicts, which are exacerbated when population density is high.

All interpreters multitask. They are receiving a message in one language and producing its equivalent in another language in real time. They now find themselves having to master one more thing, technology. For some interpreters this can be a rather simple task, and for others it can be daunting. In this new method of service delivery, interpreters are regulated in such a way to produce a non-person who acts as a go-between for the deaf and non-deaf person. They find themselves without control over for whom and when they interpret. The call distribution program used by Ease Communication (and other VRS providers) does not take into account that interpreters are not interchangeable. There are times when an interpreter should not accept a call even if she is the next one scheduled to receive it.

With the advent of VRS, my colleague's statement about "interpreting everything from birth to death" is now more accurate. However, what was once thought of as a relationship between two people who do not share a language, and thus use the services of a third person (see Baker-Shenk 1991; Humphrey and Alcorn 1994; Hilder 1995; Stewart et al. 1998), must now be understood as a web of relationships that spans multiple locations and involves multiple actors who are not immediately present. In the chapters that follow, I continue to explore the roles and experiences of these multiple actors, as well as the regulatory policies and texts that coordinate their activities. In the next chapter, I report on deaf people's experiences with VRS.