

## Deaf Entrepreneurship: What Enterprises Can Learn from Deaf Businesses About Accessibility and Innovation



Deaf-owned businesses have been at the forefront of implementing communication technologies and inclusive practices, often out of necessity. These adaptations have not only allowed them to thrive as successful business owners but they have also created accessibility models that can benefit other enterprises.

In this article, we'll share valuable insights from deaf businesses that enterprises can use to replicate accessible and inclusive environments:

- Why so many deaf people start their own businesses
- Accessible communication technologies for business
- How to implement communication technologies for enterprise
- How communication accessibility affects work culture

### A deaf entrepreneur's journey

When Robert Dunn, the Deaf owner of Dunn Rite Optical in St. Augustine, FL, graduated from RIT, he said he knew he wanted to become a business owner.

"I loved the idea of setting up my own business," Dunn says, "and not having to work for somebody else. This was in 1992, when I started thinking about how I could make this happen."

After an optical trade show, he researched the costs of building the machines to manufacture the frames and lenses. But he needed to complete a 4,500-hour apprenticeship to take the state exam for an optician license.

Optical stores turned him down because opticians feared their businesses would suffer if customers couldn't communicate with Dunn. So he was relegated to the back room of an optical store.

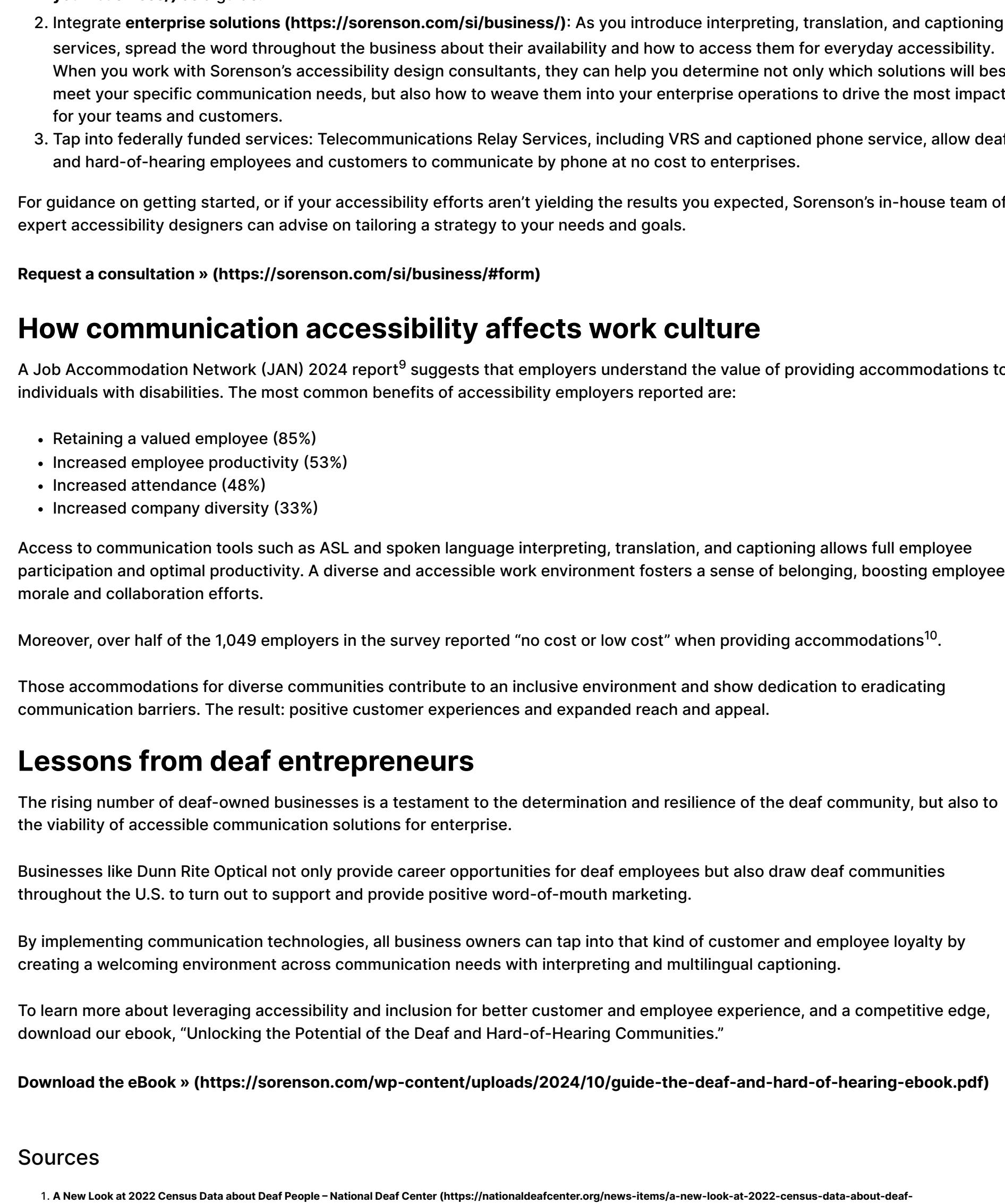
Altogether, the journey took 30 years for Dunn to become a licensed optician.

Today, Dunn Rite Optical serves Deaf and hearing customers on the East Coast and Florida.

### Why so many deaf people start their own businesses

Deaf people often face barriers in the job market, including discrimination and lack of accommodation. Even with a slight increase in deaf employment (53.5% in 2021 to 55.8% in 2022)<sup>1</sup>, unemployment remains a chronic problem in deaf communities.

## U.S. Employment and Self-Employment Rates



The chart illustrates the contrast in employment rates between deaf and hearing individuals (55.8% and 72.9%, respectively) along with another notable statistic: the rate at which deaf people take employment into their own hands.

Challenges finding jobs led many to start up their own businesses where they can control the work environment and ensure inclusivity and accessibility. An estimated 10.8% of deaf people are self-employed, compared to 9.2% for hearing people, taking on freelance or contracting work. Deaf people also edge out hearing people in business ownership (4.1% and 3.8%, respectively)<sup>2</sup>.

### Accessibility paved the way for deaf entrepreneurs

Several developments made going into business a viable option for ambitious deaf individuals:

- In 2015, in a bid to become more accessible, the Small Business Administration (SBA) created a videophone service to enable ASL users to connect with an ASL SBA representative for resources and business support<sup>3</sup>.
- The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) launched a resource hub<sup>4</sup> with information for aspiring Deaf business owners to start a business or become a government contractor.
- Communication Service for the Deaf's Social Venture Fund (CSD SVF) became the first social investment fund focusing on supporting deaf-owned businesses<sup>5</sup>.
- The availability of Video Relay Service (VRS) provided significant support for the surge in deaf business ownership<sup>6</sup>. This federally funded service has made Deaf and hearing communication by phone seamless for individuals and enterprises. Sorenson has provided major improvements — from the initial video compression technology to the highest quality videophones for the deaf.

With the right resources, deaf business owners are achieving success on their own terms and giving deaf employees the same opportunities with accessible workplaces. Many deaf-owned businesses, including Dunn Rite Optical, employ deaf people, thus creating a "deaf economy"<sup>7</sup> that provides inclusive employee and customer experiences that mainstream enterprises can learn from and imitate.

### Serving diverse customers

Deaf-owned businesses don't just cater to deaf communities. Many serve both deaf and hearing customers.

By implementing communication technologies — including on-demand real-time interpreting (like Sorenson Express), Video Relay Service (VRS), and captioned phone service — deaf business owners bridge the communication gap with hearing customers. These solutions make the business accessible across languages and create a positive customer experience with seamless communication while expanding their customer base.

### Communication technologies

The same tools deaf business owners use to welcome hearing customers can work for all enterprises to be more accessible to diverse customers. The advantage deaf entrepreneurs have is:

- familiarity with industry leaders like Sorenson because they use language technology every day in their personal lives
- a finger on the pulse of the latest innovations, like on-demand spoken and sign language interpreting
- insight into the communication needs and preferences of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, based on their own experience and others in those communities

Enterprise leaders can tap into that knowledge and learn valuable lessons from deaf entrepreneurs on how to use communication technologies.

- **Scheduled interpreting:** This option is available for on-site and Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) services (<https://sorenson.com/si/video-remote-interpreting/>). Scheduled on-site interpreting, translation, and captioning services, spread the word throughout the business about their availability and how to access them for everyday business. When you work with Sorenson's accessibility design consultants, they can help you determine not only which solutions will best meet your specific communication needs, but also how to weave them into your enterprise operations to drive the most impact for your teams and customers.

- **On-demand ASL interpreting:** Sorenson Express (<https://sorenson.com/si/sorenson-express/>) ASL provides real-time ASL interpreting without scheduling for effective deaf and hearing communication during impromptu meetings or conversations with colleagues and customers.

- **Captioned captioning:** Businesses can provide captioning for any video, audio, or TV, on the premises or online. Captioning improves access for deaf and hard-of-hearing customers to multimedia content, and people of all abilities now prefer and expect captions.

- **Video Relay Service (VRS):** Businesses can handle phone calls between deaf and hearing callers through an ASL interpreter (<https://sorenson.com/vrs/>) at no cost if the deaf individual is registered for this federally funded service.

- **Captioned telephone service:** Businesses can provide federally funded Internet Protocol Captioned Telephone Services (<https://sorenson.com/captioned-calls/>) (IIP CTS) for hard-of-hearing employees who speak but need captions to understand phone conversations.



Enterprises prioritizing accessibility are more likely to attract a broader customer base, especially those that value inclusivity and accessibility.

And it's not only customer relations that improve when an enterprise leans into becoming accessible and inclusive. A U.S. Department of Defense report<sup>8</sup>, based on data from Gallup Workplace Studies, notes that these businesses have:

- 22% lower employee turnover
- 22% higher productivity
- 39% higher customer satisfaction
- 27% higher profitability

Now let's look at how to implement inclusive solutions to achieve those results.

### Implementing communication technologies for enterprises

To create an accessible environment for employees and customers, enterprises can follow these steps to get started:

1. Engage with employees and customers: Run an audit of current communication practices and identify areas that need improvement.

- Use our **Communication Accessibility Checklist** (<https://sorenson.com/blog/si/communication-accessibility-checklist-for-your-business/>) as a guide.

2. Integrate enterprise solutions (<https://sorenson.com/si/business/>): As you introduce interpreting, translation, and captioning services, spread the word throughout the business about their availability and how to access them for everyday business. When you work with Sorenson's accessibility design consultants, they can help you determine not only which solutions will best meet your specific communication needs, but also how to weave them into your enterprise operations to drive the most impact for your teams and customers.

3. Tap into federally funded services: Telecommunications Relay Services, including VRS and captioned phone service, allow deaf and hard-of-hearing employees and customers to communicate by phone at no cost to enterprises.

For guidance on getting started, or if your accessibility efforts aren't yielding the results you expected, Sorenson's in-house team of expert accessibility designers can advise on tailoring a strategy to your needs and goals.

Request a consultation » (<https://sorenson.com/si/business/#form>)

### How communication accessibility affects work culture

A Job Accommodation Network (JAN) 2020 report<sup>9</sup> suggests that employers understand the value of providing accommodations to individuals with disabilities. The most notable benefits of accessibility employers reported are:

- Increasing a employee productivity (85%)
- Increased attendance (48%)

Access to communication tools such as ASL and spoken language interpreting, translation, and captioning allows full employee participation and optimal productivity. A diverse and accessible work environment fosters a sense of belonging, boosting employee morale and collaboration efforts.

Moreover, over half of the 1,049 employers in the survey reported "no cost or low cost" when providing accommodations<sup>10</sup>.

Communication barriers for diverse customers contribute to inclusivity and expanded reach and appeal, dedication to eradicating communication barriers. The result: positive customer experiences and expanded reach and appeal.

### Lessons from deaf entrepreneurs

The rising number of deaf-owned businesses is a testament to the determination and resilience of the deaf community, but also to the viability of accessible communication solutions for enterprise.

Businesses like Dunn Rite Optical not only provide career opportunities for deaf employees but also draw deaf communities throughout the U.S. to their business.

By implementing communication technologies, all business owners can tap into that kind of customer loyalty by creating a welcoming environment across communication needs with interpreting and multilingual captioning.

To learn more about "Unlocking accessibility and the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Community, and a competitive edge," download the eBook » (<https://sorenson.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/guide-the-deaf-and-hard-of-hearing-ebook.pdf>)

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