Executive health

Dyslexia an opportunity – not a disability

Niko Kiceton

Companies can achieve great results from taking simple steps to address issues around dyslexia in the workplace but employees must also take some responsibility, according to the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand.

Founder Gaye Pope-Mayall has a foot in both camps – as well as being an advocate for dyslexics she is also a business woman and is the co-owner of food company Cookie Time.

His interest in dyslexia is a personal one; he has two boys and a wife with the condition (dyslexia often runs in families).

What Mr Kiceton says dyslexics offer special attributes that companies can use to great advantage provided their talents can be fully recognized and their weaknesses aren’t made into a burden.

While dyslexia can manifest itself in a variety of ways, it is one of the most under-diagnosed of modern workplace, where documents thinner than the Lord of the Rings trilogy are sometimes „sacked out” to be read before meetings.

This is why the Dyslexia Foundation is trying to make workplaces as well as the education system for improving outcomes for dyslexics.

As part of this drive to improve dyslexia awareness and outcomes in the workplace the foundation will be hosting a free workshop that deals with the subject next month.

“Worker – cultivating difference, discovering the creative edge will be part of the 4D seminar series run by UK dyslexic expert Neil MacKay, which was sold out when he visited New Zealand last year.

Mr Pope-Mayall said he expects keen interest and is hoping “that the people coming to the workshop will set the agenda” for how New Zealand deals with dyslexia in the workplace.

One thing he is not keen for New Zealand’s dyslexia advocates to do is open the same road as the UK, which has officially classified dyslexia as a disability subject to all the laws that the definition is captured by.

The New Zealand’s dyslexia advocates had taken a more “enlightened” view and added that classifying dyslexia as a disability could make it harder for dyslexics to find work if all the responsibilities for managing the issues of dyslexia were humped on the employer.

“If you create the burden, not only are you asking my desk and doing it’s not but you also going to create an obligation that is going to limit opportunity for dyslexics in the workplace,” he told the National Business Review.

“It’s also a reason many dyslexic employees may not be willing to disclose their condition.

Instead, he said businesses had a financial incentive to identify dyslexic employees and to work with them to help them reach their full potential.

POOR AWARENESS: Dyslexia is not well understood around the workplace and often there is a stigma attached to it. The fact that dyslexics can be gifted in other ways is also unknown to most people.

For from being a burden, dyslexics offer unique skills and abilities, usually in the visual and creative areas, that could more than make up for any reading difficulties.

Putting steps in place to address business was cheap and relatively easy and the return on investment for businesses was “phenomenal”, Mr Pope-Mayall said.

He pointed out that with an estimated 15% of the population being dyslexic, the level of dyslexia the productivity gains that could be made across the country were significant.

He offered some simple tips that could help both dyslexics and their bosses.

“Rather than handing out notes and asking everyone to read them in five minutes, hand them out an hour before or even the night before so they can read them in a stress-free environment.”

For some dyslexics following instructions could be a problem, he said. Instead of telling them five things you give them two things to do and tell them to come back to you when they’re done.

“This is a good management technique even for linear (non-dyslexic) thinkers.”

He said eating up on the standards of spelling and grammar required for basic emails and the like could also help the self-esteem of dyslexic workers.

“Nearly every office you get one or two people who are the apostrophe police – this can extraordinarily affect a dyslexic employee.”

Other techniques include asking for an oral report rather than a written one, asking for images rather than words on PowerPoint presentations and getting employees to knock on your door with an idea rather than having to email it through.

Many of these strategies are simply good business sense and the point of whether there are any dyslexic workers at the company, Mr Pope-Mayall said.

“Hints and tips, you are inviting your desk and doing it’s not about doing less email rather than getting out and talking to people is a bad thing for the business.”

Dyslexic bosses no dummies

If the statistics are anything to go by there’s a 10% chance your boss is dyslexic and the same is true for women, according to New Zealand Dyslexia chief executive Paul Reid.

He knows what it’s like to make it to the top of the business world while dealing with the symptoms of dyslexia. However, while he has struggled with some aspects of reading and writing (spelling being the particular bugbear) for all of his life, Mr Reid was only disorder with dyslexia a year ago.

“I found out after seeing advertising for the dyslexic foundation’s website. I started reading the descriptions of it and I thought ‘Holy sh*t, this is me.”

‘I’d always thought I was at a bit of a disadvantage, and I would always wonder why.”

And he said he was not alone – there are other chief executives who are dyslexic but the majority would never disclose they are dyslexic because they don’t want people thinking they are dummies, eftetere.

Frustration with corporate style

He said managing these dyslexic executives and managers probably work for small to medium enterprises having started their own businesses after getting frustrated working for big corporations where the management style was “chi-chi-chic.”

Mr Reid said that dyslexia comes in a spectrum, from serious severe reading and learning difficulties to relatively mild, describing dyslexia as being in the mild to low range in terms of severity.

But looking on the positive side, being dyslexic means “there are certain things you are off the charts for” which in his case are problem-solving and mathematical ability, “key things in business.”

He said these special abilities would go to waste if there are too many obstacles put in front of dyslexics.

“A good example is a worker on a factory floor who has a great idea and with the floor manager who says to him ‘put that down as a written proposal’ and as a result of that he doesn’t do it.”

But Mr Reid said that the evolution of technology is proving to be dyslexics’ advantages.

“It is going to become easier and easier for dyslexics – these days websites all tend to contain a lot of video content.”

Despite this he said old attitudes about dyslexia are still ingrained in many people where it is still a relatively new concept.

“You can tell when they are looking at you and are thinking ‘How are we so successful when you are a dummy?”

Pesticides raise risk of ADHD

Being exposed to larger-than-normal amounts of a common class of pesticides called organochlorines may increase the risk of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children, according to a new study appearing in the June issue of Pediatrics. The big headline for parents is that exposure to these chemicals comes from fruits and vegetables, of which we are supposed to eat at least five servings a day. The researchers suggested buying organic, going to farmers’ markets and washing fruits and vegetables before eating.

C-sections linked to celiac disease

Children who develop the rare gluten intolerance condition celiac disease are more likely to have been born by caesarean section, research from Germany suggests. Celiac disease is estimated to affect between 300 and 400 in 100,000 people in a number of different countries. The study compared children with celiac disease with children who suffered from other intestinal conditions (cysts disease and slow-function colitis) and found that celiac children had a much higher rate of C-section births – 29% compared to no more than 19% in their other group. Researchers encouraged women with celiac disease may force mothers to have a C-section.

Cell phone study inconclusive

A major study on the effects of cell phone use has been unable to show a connection between cell phones and brain cancer but it hasn’t been able to rule out a link either.

The study was conducted by the World Health Organization’s International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and it was the largest ever study on the topic of cell phones and brain cancer, studying nearly 10,000 cell phone users over 10 years. Researchers called for further study, saying there were problems such as the relatively low levels of cell phone use early on in the study launched in 2000 and the possible unreliability of people having to remember their amount of cell phone use. Now, a new and much bigger study will track nearly 200,000 people for up to 30 years.

Cougars beware

Women who many significantly younger men may increase their risk of dying sooner but men who many younger women may have the opposite effect, a new German study suggests. Women choosing younger partners are a ‘lot tougher’ now with TV shows such as ‘Cougars’ on CNN and the infamous Air New Zealand ad campaign that featured “cougars” hunting for “fresh meat” in the form of young male flyers. The study, released in the May 12 issue of Demography, found that marrying a man seven to nine years younger increases a woman’s death risk by 26%. Women were also found to be at greater death risk when marrying a man much older. However, these researchers noted that regardless of age, married people live longer on average than unmarried people.

50-plus really is the golden age

There are plenty of drawbacks to being over 50, such as the slow decline of your body and having that Quin advert life insurance products to you like despite these problems it seems the over-50s are the least stressed people around and if you are the more likely you are to be chocked out. Researchers examined a 2008 Gallup phone survey of more than 540,000 people in the US and found that people who were happy in their younger and older years, with a dip during middle age. They also found that people were most anxious and angry in their 20s, with stress and anger slipped until they reached their 60s. Women were flat from ages 20 to 50 before declining through to the 90s.