

Dealing with dyslexia

Dealing with paperwork is part of our working lives, yet for people with dyslexia it can be fraught with anxiety. Lorna Timms explains how employers can support staff.

IN THE LAST COUPLE OF YEARS we have seen great change in the way dyslexia has been presented to the public. The Ministry of Education is now looking at ways to better address the issue and has created a working definition to help people understand more about dyslexia.

It describes dyslexia as a spectrum of specific learning difficulties that is evident when accurate and/or fluent reading and writing skills develop incompletely or with great difficulty.

Schools are now being coached on how best to assist dyslexic students in the classroom, and parents are becoming more aware and are demanding assistance for their children. But what is happening in the workplace? Are we stepping up and saying "Hey, I am dyslexic so I may need help." I would suggest the answer is no.

Many dyslexic individuals, such as myself, did not have any assistance or recognition in school and managed to survive the school years by adopting various creative solutions and disguises. These old solutions often stay with us for life. Dyslexic individuals have to work very hard to communicate with the written word, which is often taken for granted by so many. Dyslexics also work very hard to hide their difficulties from employers and colleagues alike for fear of ridicule or being perceived as less intelligent.

There will be at least 7-10 percent of your workplace who are challenged by their dyslexia;

some US studies would suggest the rate is nearer to 20 percent.

Many gifts and talents accompany dyslexia and provide a skill set that is an asset to any workplace. People with dyslexia are often creative, imaginative, innovative, lateral thinkers who are excellent at problem solving, and generating new and alternative ideas, when asked! They are resourceful and often determined to succeed when given a chance. Dyslexic individuals are intuitive, with great interpersonal skills. They have strong spatial skills and often demonstrate talents in hands-on tasks and knowing how almost anything works!

Some of the areas in which dyslexia can affect performance are:

- Combined listening and writing—this includes difficulty taking notes and phone messages;
- Spelling;
- Reading aloud;
- Organising thoughts on paper;
- Needing to redraft a document more than once;
- Memory difficulties;
- Focus and concentration problems;
- Interpreting and relaying information;
- Directional issues;
- Problems with sequencing and organisation;
- Needing to read written material many times;
- Poor sense of time.

There are a number of things employers can do to make the workplace dyslexia-friendly:

Adult dyslexic checklist

1. Do you find difficulty telling left from right?
2. Is map reading or finding your way to a strange place confusing?
3. Do you dislike reading aloud?
4. Do you take longer than you should to read a page of a book?
5. Do you find it difficult to remember the sense of what you have read?
6. Do you dislike reading long books?
7. Is your spelling poor?
8. Is your writing difficult to read?
9. Do you get confused if you have to speak in public?
10. Do you find it difficult to take messages on the telephone and pass them on correctly?
11. When you say a long word, do you sometimes find it difficult to get all the sounds in the right order?
12. Do you find it difficult to do sums in your head without using your fingers or paper?
13. When using the telephone, do you tend to get the numbers mixed up when you dial?
14. Do you find it difficult to say the months of the year forwards in a fluent manner?
15. Do you find it difficult to say the months of the year backwards?
16. Do you mix up dates and times and miss appointments?
17. When writing cheques do you often find yourself making mistakes?
18. Do you find forms difficult and confusing?
19. Do you mix up bus numbers like 95 and 59?
20. Did you find it hard to learn your multiplication tables at school?

Nine or more 'Yes' answers is an indicator of a difficulty. This checklist is taken from British Dyslexia Association. See www.dfnz.org.nz for more details.

- Talk freely about dyslexic issues;
 - View dyslexia not as a disability but as an alternative way of thinking;
 - Supply written instructions for new tasks and accompany them with diagrams charts;
 - Have a format for written reports and job lists;
 - Always give an overview—state the 'big picture' outcome;
 - Ask for ideas verbally—either individually or in small groups;
 - Colour code items;
 - Attach an alphabet strip to filing cabinets;
 - Create checklists to help with organisation and sequence;
 - Use visual symbols or pictures as cues and reminders;
 - Encourage relaxation techniques;
 - Keep operating instructions near fax or copier;
 - Offer a quiet workspace for written tasks;
 - Create daily/weekly/monthly work plans and schedules;
 - Invite an expert to talk to staff to increase awareness.
- Remember, even small changes are better than no change at all!

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