

Adult Dyslexia

Awareness & Good Practice for Employers



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DYSLEXIA CONSULTANCY MALVERN www.dyslexia-malvern.co.uk

Dyslexic people are often intelligent and creative but their potential may not be realised if conditions are unfavourable.

By giving support and encouragement along the lines listed below, you can release the abilities of an employee with dyslexia.

Learn how dyslexia can affect people

- Do not try to second guess what would make life easier for your dyslexic employees – ask them!
- Because dyslexia implies a different way of processing information, allow employees some flexibility in how they work.
- People with dyslexia often feel vulnerable and embarrassed about their difficulties.
- Encourage dyslexic staff to talk to you and others about any workplace difficulties, rather than hide it like a guilty secret. Be discreet and respect confidentiality at all times.
- Remember that dyslexic people generally find written work/report writing and aspects of organisation harder than most people, and that this will entail extra effort on their behalf.
- Find out about dyslexia and let dyslexic staff know (discreetly) that you are willing to support them.
- Bear in mind that behaviours such as absenteeism or lateness may result from stress, anxiety or overload; talk this through with staff with a view to resolving any difficulties.
- Realise that reluctance to apply for promotion or training courses may be linked to fears of tackling more extensive paperwork and the embarrassing exposure of weaknesses during training (rather than lack of ability). Help dyslexic staff move forward in these respects by ironing out any problems.
- Employees with dyslexia can be a valuable resource - more about this later.....

Try to minimise stressful situations at work

- Because people with dyslexia are often fully stretched coping with the demands of everyday life, they are more susceptible to stress.
- Give advance notice of tasks whenever possible. Avoid dropping sudden deadlines on dyslexic staff.
- Do not expect them to take notes or jot down rushed instructions.
- Circulate information well in advance of meetings so there is time for it to be studied. It will be easier to understand if you highlight important sections.
- Do not ask people with dyslexia to take minutes at meetings.
- Try not to put pressure on dyslexic staff, by 'hovering', for instance, or by showing impatience.
- Offer staff discreet guidance and support on challenging tasks, as appropriate, without giving the appearance of doubting their abilities. Encourage them to ask for advice as necessary.



Statistically, in a group of 25 people, one will be severely dyslexic and one show fewer dyslexic traits. Your workforce probably includes people with unidentified dyslexia.

Case study 1

"I started work at the age of 19. My step-father filled in the application form for me.

The first two weeks were a very worrying time for me, having to learn new skills and trying desperately to avoid any written work, often spending the whole shift being anxious about completing the end-of-shift time form. At this time I was unaware of my Dyslexia, having always been told by my teachers at school that I was "thick" and that I didn't concentrate or work hard enough. I began to write down in a notebook some of the most commonly used words and words specific to my work, always phoning home first to find out the correct spellings.



There were jobs in the company which I would have liked to try for, but was put off by the amount of paperwork involved, and spelling names is a great problem. However I was promoted quite soon and within a month I was asked by my supervisor if I would like to become a supervisor myself and attend the necessary courses. It was something I had wanted to do very much, but had to decline the offer because I was terrified at the thought of attending courses. I was repeatedly asked by my supervisor and then by his boss but again I had to give excuses saying I was content with the job I had not long been doing.

As the years went by, people who worked under me were overtaking me with promotion, all this time I knew I was as good as or in some cases better than them at doing their job (with the exception of the written work). This was quite a depressing situation to be in. I decided to do something about this difficulty and somehow summoned up enough courage to go to the adult literacy classes at the college which I attended for several months. I found it difficult to cope and the learning process was very slow as it was still not known that I was dyslexic.

Five years on I was asked if I would be interested in a supervisory role and again I felt that I had to turn it down. Some time later a television programme about Dyslexia started me thinking that this was the main cause of my difficulties with words.

Then I phoned the local Dyslexia Association and this led to an assessment. Now I am back at college, dyslexia having been confirmed, and I am taught by specially trained teachers. I am slowly improving and have recently been nominated by several members of staff at work for a new position in the office. When it was offered to me I thought "this is it, I may never have another opportunity like this". It was something I had dreamt of. Very nervously I explained my problem to the personnel manager and the department manager. He took it well and I moved into management.

With support from a secretary, my letters are checked and I am free to do what I am best at – working out and implementing new systems and managing the staff under me."

Case Study 2

"I find my job (as a youth worker) stressful. The work with clients is good, I know I am very capable at this work.



The part of the job I find hard is the (written) planning, evaluations, reports, timesheets etc and the endless administration which is spoiling the parts of the job that I enjoy, like giving talks, brainstorming for ideas and working with young people. I find it a real strain when extra last minute things come in on top of existing work. Reading takes me ages cos I keep losing my place. Sometimes I get the feeling of being a rabbit caught in headlights – unable to move.

I have to work in an open office where people are talking on the phone, having conversations, photocopying etc. It is really hard to do the work in this environment".

Dyslexia and Visual Stress / Meares-Irlen Syndrome.

The two interchangeable terms above refer to the following symptoms, commonly experienced by people with dyslexia when reading:

Losing the place, print blurring or appearing to move, a 'glare' from white paper, headaches, sore eyes.

Individuals often benefit from treatment by an optician specialising in this area.

Sometimes photocopying documents on to tinted paper or changing the background and foreground colours on the employee's computer can make a considerable difference.

Further information at <http://www.dyslexia-malvern.co.uk/visualstress>

With this in mind, it is good practice to look again at your own in-house literature and training materials – maybe they can be improved by taking account of the advice below.

INCORPORATE, where possible:	AVOID:
• adequate spacing	• small fonts (below size 12)
• justify left (leave a ragged right margin)	• printing whole words or phrases in capitals
• selective use of bold and bullet points	• bright white or shiny paper
• diagrams, charts	• 'fancy' or unusual fonts and italics
• pictograms and graphics	• printing in either red or green
Aim for a clear uncluttered appearance	Avoid a busy, over-crowded page

Read Regular is created without copying or mirroring shapes. Therefore the frequency of repeated shapes in a text is decreased. This results in a minimum chance of visual distortions (swirl-effect). The aim is to create interesting typography that will maintain the readers' interest and will prevent them from getting bored or frustrated. Diversity in text knows many variations. We must understand the fact that typography for a novel is different from a magazine or a publication for education. Even so a novel has the potential to be clear and interesting. This can be achieved in any level of creativity, thinking on type size, leading, the amount of words on a sentence and the character/paper combination.

Example of Visual Stress

Aim to reduce possible confusion and aid concentration.

- Give full clear instructions, and take time to explain things properly.
- Give written instructions to back up oral ones as necessary. Present written documentation using a clear layout and taking account of suggestions on minimising Visual Stress. Diagrams or flow chart are quicker to assimilate. Highlight key points.
- Encourage employees with dyslexia to subdivide large tasks or projects into stages. This will reduce feelings of overload when facing a large task by turning it into a series of smaller ones, to be completed one by one. Motivation will also be increased as this series of small goals is achieved.
- Offer help with planning, prioritising the workload and scheduling daily work tasks, if this appears to be a particular area of difficulty.
- If attention span is short, encourage employees with dyslexia to take brief breaks; this will improve concentration and effectively increase the overall output for the day.
- If possible, provide a quiet, undisturbed work station. Dyslexic staff may need to negotiate particular times when they are not to be distracted by phone calls and other interruptions. Facilities such as voice mail may also be helpful.
- **Remember – ask individuals what works best for them.**

The following people are dyslexic:

Lord Richard Rogers, Richard Branson, Eddie Izzard, Anita Roddick, Jackie Stewart, Tom Cruise, Lynda La Plante, Jamie Oliver and members of the Swedish royal family

Dyslexic people are an asset to the workplace!

Certain abilities associated with dyslexia are a valuable asset in the workplace. 'Dyslexic skills' are often attributed to a 'right brained' approach to information processing and are typified by unusual creativity and innovation. Areas of strength include creative thinking and trouble shooting, the ability to visualise problem areas and resolve them and an intuitive (often untaught) understanding of systems - whether these be mechanical, electrical or sociological – together with good spatial skills and entrepreneurship.

Dyslexia has been described as a different way of thinking, and a different way of operating. Dyslexic employees will be more successful and contented if they are allowed and even encouraged to achieve workplace goals in their own way rather than having to conform to established ways of doing things. Be aware that dyslexic staff will be particularly vulnerable in times of reorganisation or restructuring, when the coping strategies they have evolved will need to be rethought.

Case Study 3

When I face an obstacle at work, I always see it as a challenge and start working out creative ways of getting round the situation. My previous boss thought I was being awkward and had no understanding of why I sometimes had to do things differently from my workmates. My new boss appreciates my efforts and often asks me to come up with new angles in project work.

There are wide variations in the effects of dyslexia and in the individual's ability to compensate. Stress debilitates coping strategies and exacerbates areas of difficulty.

Legal obligations of employers with regard to dyslexia

The Equality Act, 2010, points out the need to ensure that discrimination is not taking place. The Act requires an employer to try to accommodate the disabled employee – this covers those whose dyslexia is assessed as having *a substantial and long-term adverse effect*. Areas to review are: *recruitment, work practices, promotion, transfers, training, professional development* and the *dismissal process*. Many companies have revised their procedures in accordance with the Act.

It is the employer's duty to accommodate disability-related difficulties in so far as this is *reasonable*. These arrangements are referred to as *reasonable adjustments*. In the case of dyslexia, appropriate technology is often helpful along with the *reasonable adjustments* outlined throughout this document. Access to Work should be considered (next section).

Access to Work www.gov.uk/access-to-work/overview

Reasonable adjustments often include items of technology. These may be ascertained and provided through a government programme Access to Work depending on an appraisal of workplace needs. It is paid for by a partnership between the employer and Access to Work, but may be wholly financed by Access to Work for new employees.

In the case of dyslexia, the aids could include:

- voice recognition software to convert speech into text and vice versa
- a mini digital recorder to record meetings and discussions
- the recorder can also be used for 'jotting down' reminders and capturing ideas as they occur
- creative software packages that facilitate planning and the production of flow charts, etc., such as 'Inspiration'



The package should always include training in the use of the above.

In most instances *reasonable adjustments* of the types outlined in this document will minimise difficulties and enable an individual with dyslexia to be a competent employee.

The steps below should also help.

- Try to bolster the confidence of dyslexic staff.
- Recognise and acknowledge their talents and strengths, for example problem solving and lateral thinking skills, which are invaluable on committees.
- Demonstrate confidence in their abilities.
- Establish that 'dyslexia jokes' are unacceptable in the office.
- Offer to pay for, or contribute towards, specialist treatment for visual stress and/or a comprehensive workplace assessment. Please note that Access to Work 'workplace needs assessments' are rarely carried out by dyslexia specialists. However the association called Patoss has a nation-wide list of assessors at www.patoss-dyslexia.org. Another option is Dyslexia Assessment & Consultancy: www.workingwithdyslexia.com

"It is fortunate that technology has now developed ways of facilitating lower level literacy and computation tasks, liberating those with particular talents to focus on higher level skills." Tom West, dyslexic author and conference speaker

This is what an adult dyslexic group said about the advantages of employing adults with dyslexia:

- ❑ We are highly motivated to gain employment and success in life.
- ❑ A dyslexic can look at a task and come up with a solution in an entirely different way.
- ❑ We are good at grasping an overview of the situation and not getting bogged down in detail.
- ❑ Dyslexic employees tend to be highly aware of their strengths and weaknesses.
- ❑ Some of the most successful people in the world are dyslexic

Case Study 4

"I don't just use technology to help me over my dyslexic difficulties, for me technology is how I express myself. My spelling may not be brilliant but I can see which is the right word out of the list the spellchecker produces. I also find predictive software helpful, especially now my specialist vocab has been entered in.

Since I tend to see what I think is on the page, I always check reports with a readback program, using headphones so I don't disturb everyone. When it comes to planning a project I use mindmapping software called Inspiration which allows me to be creative. Access to Work paid for most of my stuff. Having an understanding and supportive boss, I don't really regard my dyslexia as holding me back at all".

RESOURCES

Dyslexia in the Workplace Bartlett & Moody (2nd edition 2010) Whurr Publishers

Dyslexia & Employment edited Sylvia Moody (2009) Wiley-Blackwell

Dyslexia – How to Survive and Succeed at Work Moody (2006) Vermilion

Making Dyslexia Work for You: a self-help guide Goodwin & Thomson (2004) Fulton

Working with Dyspraxia – a Hidden Asset: Dyspraxia Foundation Guide for Employers (2012) Dyspraxia Foundation

How to Succeed in Employment with Specific Learning Difficulties Amanda Kirby (2013) Souvenir Press Ltd

Strategies for Success Melanie Jameson, Dyslexia Consultancy Malvern

[www.dyslexia-malvern.co.uk/docs/resources/Strategies for success.pdf](http://www.dyslexia-malvern.co.uk/docs/resources/Strategies%20for%20success.pdf)

iANSYST sells a range of hardware / software products appropriate to people with dyslexia (including 'Inspiration') www.dyslexic.com

Visual Stress specialists: www.ceriumoptical.com/vistech.aspx and www.s4clp.org/

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