

# Dyslexia and Basic Skills in the Workplace

Robert Nurden outlines approaches to tackling Dyslexia

As many as 2.9 million workers in Britain – or 10% of the workforce – exhibit some form of dyslexia, according to the TUC, and it says not enough is being done by employers to tackle the condition.

The link between this 'hidden disability' and performance at work is not usually appreciated by managers, and consequently dyslexics are judged unfairly, its report, *Dyslexia in the Workplace*, claims. In addition, many people with dyslexia are unaware of their condition and are likely to be anxious and frustrated, and suffer from low self-esteem at work.

Given the widespread nature of this complex condition, it is no surprise then that the language, literacy and numeracy community has seen it as an important component in the basic skills agenda. Difficulty with either reading, writing or oral communication is at the centre of a dyslexic's working world, so it is natural that this condition is part of the Skills for Life debate.

## Understanding the problem

So how can the issue of dyslexia in the workplace be addressed? The first step, according to the British Dyslexia Association, is for those with the condition to be honest with themselves about it, rather than trying to hide it. Once that has been achieved the next step is for them to be up-front with employers. Being specific about what they find difficult should make a positive impression on management. And the advice is to follow that up by explaining the strategies they have adopted to cope. For example, saying something like 'my spelling is poor, but I use a spell-checker and for an important document I ask a colleague to proofread' is vital.

It is important, too, for bosses and basic skills tutors to understand that dyslexic people hear and see normally, but have difficulty remembering what they hear and see. Their problem is in processing information. A diagnostic assessment by a specialist dyslexia teacher can also be used to identify individual strengths and weaknesses, and from that specific work needs can be identified.

Some dyslexic learners may experience problems with auditory processing – that is they cannot match sounds to words, revealed by the fact that words may have bits missing or letters become confused.

Others struggle with visual processing so that they find it hard to remember what a word looks like and may, for example, confuse b, d, p, and q. A third group may grapple with kinaesthetic (motor processing) skills, so that the writing process itself presents problems and work is badly formed, messy and hard to read.

An employer, in partnership with a basic skills tutor, can make adjustments in such a way that, for example, a person who struggles with reading can be given verbal instructions, voicemail can be used instead of written memos, speech rather than text software and information supplied on coloured paper. In more extreme cases, government funding is available to buy a specialist reading machine. With someone who finds verbal communication difficult, on the other hand, similar relevant strategies can also be adopted.

The tutor's three-way, multi-sensory approach – auditory, visual and kinaesthetic – invariably gives an insight into students' ability to follow oral instructions and meet deadlines; to take notes, skim-read, write emails and reports; and to organise work, keep appointments, copy lists and file.

## Key factors

There are five important factors for basic skills tutors to remember:

- 1 Develop learner's awareness of how they learn and their processing strengths and weaknesses.
- 2 Enable learners to learn how to learn.
- 3 Use a multi-sensory approach that enables each learner to learn using their preferred learning style.
- 4 The learning needs to be in the context of its use e.g. workplace – using workplace documents.
- 5 The learner needs to be actively engaged in identifying and evaluating learning strategies.

Positive benefits can also accrue from dyslexia. Those with the condition often have a particularly good view of the 'bigger picture', and they also display original problem-solving skills with the ability to 'think outside the box'.

'Dyslexia is really just a different approach to learning,' said Fiona Wells, coordinator of the dyslexia awareness course created and taught by the Workplace Basic Skills Network. 'It is still a common mis-

conception in some quarters that dyslexia is basically a problem with reading, but it is far more complicated than that, and any training programme must take into account a whole set of issues to do with confidence. Workers may well be in fear of losing their job because of assumed incompetence and the ridicule of their colleagues.'

A useful mnemonic when working with dyslexic learners is MOVES. This stands for Multi-sensory teaching strategies; Over-learning and reinforcement; Variety of activities, with an avoidance of too much chalk and talk; Explicit – make them aware of learning process and the reason for learning something; Structured sessions – it is important to outline the whole session and the 'successes' within it.

## Adjustments

As the BDA points out, it is adjustments rather than wholesale changes that organisations have to make. 'As the severity of dyslexia varies so do the strategies that help people overcome problems in employment,' said a spokesperson. 'The majority of these are inexpensive and uncomplicated. It is quite possible that, with the right kind of adjustment by management, a dyslexic employee can operate at the same level as a non-dyslexic employee.'

On the more practical side, employers should be taking a more enlightened view of the issue, following the passing of the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act, which requires them to make various changes in the workplace. The Access to Work scheme – managed by Jobcentre Plus – also provides a range of practical assistance for disabled people to find work.

Intriguingly, it has also been found that an organisation that does in fact create a workplace in which all staff are fully aware of dyslexic issues manages also to foster an exceptionally good and supportive working environment.

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