



Dyslexia Assessment and Consultancy

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DYSLEXIA: AN EMPLOYER'S GUIDE

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Dyslexia

Dyslexia is often regarded simply as a difficulty with reading and writing, but in fact these literacy difficulties are 'surface symptoms' of weaknesses in more fundamental cognitive abilities, i.e. short-term memory, perception, and phonology. The literacy (and numeracy) difficulties associated with these weaknesses may be severe and obvious; or they may be more subtle, manifesting themselves in general slowness rather than inaccuracy in performing workplace tasks.

Among the difficulties most often reported are:

- reading quickly with good comprehension;
- writing memos, emails, letters and reports;
- being accurate with numbers;
- following and remembering written and spoken instructions;
- remembering telephone numbers and messages;
- formulating thoughts rapidly enough to take part in discussions;
- note-taking
- filing and looking up entries in directories or dictionaries;
- organising a work schedule.

Dyslexia is often associated with one or more of the following:

Dyspraxia

The term 'dyspraxia' denotes difficulties with co-ordinating movement and judging distance, space and time. General organisational skills and social skills are often also affected.

Workplace difficulties include:

- presenting written work in a neat manner;
- using office equipment, e.g., calculator, date stamp, photocopier;
- analysing tables of figures or diagrams;
- getting lost even in familiar surroundings.

Attention deficit disorder (ADD)

Attention deficit disorder is characterised by poor concentration, distractibility and impulsivity. People with ADD will find it hard to work in a noisy or busy environment, e.g., an open-plan office. They may talk in an unfocused way and be inclined to interrupt people, sometimes blurting out irrelevant or inappropriate remarks.

Visual stress / binocular instability

People with these visual conditions have difficulty focusing on print, especially black print on white paper. They see lines of print 'moving about' or blurring, and find it hard to keep their place on the page. They may develop headaches or sore eyes when reading for a lengthy period. They find bright lights, particularly fluorescent lighting, stressful.

Difficult emotions

By the time dyslexic people reach adulthood they may have been struggling for many years with difficulties which have never been recognised or understood. In such cases the original difficulties are likely to be bound up with a constellation of unpleasant, and perhaps debilitating, emotions: anger, confusion, embarrassment, anxiety, depression. Confidence and self-esteem will also be low.

Social interactions

People with undiagnosed dyslexic difficulties are a mystery not only to themselves, but also to those for whom, and with whom, they work. They may be withdrawn and seem unwilling to pull their weight, or they may be oversensitive and aggressive. In general such employees are often difficult to 'place': they seem ambitious to progress in their career but are constantly hindered by inefficiency and a baffling inertia.

Positive aspects of dyslexic difficulties

Dyslexic people who are motivated to succeed in their work despite their difficulties know the meaning of hard work, long hours and determination. They may excel in lateral thinking, and be creative and innovative. They often have good powers of visualisation, excellent practical skills, and an untaught intuitive understanding of how systems work.

Diagnostic assessment

A diagnostic assessment should be arranged through one of the main dyslexia organisations or with a private practitioner who is an adult dyslexia specialist. A referral to an NHS psychology department is **not** recommended.

An assessment should include the following components:

- Review of educational and occupational history.
- Comprehensive assessment of cognitive abilities, e.g., verbal skills, memory.
- Assessment and detailed analysis of literacy and phonological skills, including *timed* tests of reading comprehension and of writing.
- Consideration of emotional problems related to the dyslexic difficulties.
- Analysis of the way in which all of the above relate to the employee's difficulties at work.
- Recommendations, as appropriate, for further assessment, help and support.

Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)

If a dyslexic person's difficulties are severe enough to impede his/her efficiency in everyday activities, then s/he may be covered by the Act. The employer would then be obliged to make 'reasonable adjustments' to reduce or remove any substantial disadvantage caused to that person by any of the employment arrangements in force. For example, care would need to be taken that the employee was not unfairly disadvantaged in such things as: making a job application, interviews, proficiency tests, terms of employment, promotion, benefits, transfer or training opportunities, and dismissal or redundancy procedures. It is also usually appropriate to commission a workplace needs assessment to identify the type and level of support (in the form of skills training and IT) that would be specifically useful to the employee in his/her particular job.

Workplace needs assessment

This can be arranged either through the government's *Access to Work* scheme or with a private practitioner. Please note that Access to Work assessors may be IT experts rather than dyslexia experts and so may not do a comprehensive assessment.

The assessment report should include *all* of the following:

- A detailed workplace skills training programme.
- IT recommendations.
- Detailed recommendations to the employer about reasonable adjustments and legal obligations.

If the report you receive does not include *all* of the above sections, you should take up the matter with the assessor, or with the organisation that has provided the assessor, and request relevant additions to the recommendations, and even a further assessment, if necessary. Whichever route you go on for the *assessment*, you can still apply to Access to Work for the *funding for the training or equipment* your employee requires.

Reasonable adjustments

Job applications

Application forms:

- Send by email or disc if possible, so that the applicant can use a spell checker and easily revise what he/she has written.
- If sending the form as hard copy, use a pastel-coloured paper to reduce visual stress.

Interviews:

- Provide a copy of questions either during or before the interview; otherwise bear in mind that the applicant may need to have some questions repeated.
- Be aware that the applicant may be somewhat slow in formulating answers to questions.
- Be aware that his/her usual coping strategies may break down under the stress of an interview situation.
- If the applicant becomes flustered or distressed, allow him/her a few minutes' break.

Assessment tests:

- Read the test instructions out loud to the applicant, or present them on tape/CD.

- Allow the applicant to give his/her answers orally.
- Allow more time than usual for the test to be completed.
- If the requirements of the test do not reflect the requirements of the job, consider waiving the test.

Dyslexia awareness

Become informed about dyslexia and its effects, both practical and emotional.

- Become informed about the related syndromes of dyspraxia, ADD, and visual stress.
- Remember that dyslexic employees will find written work and aspects of organisation much harder than most people, and will need to apply extra effort in many areas. This may make them prone to fatigue.
- Encourage employees to talk to you and others about workplace difficulties, rather than conceal them.
- Allow absence from work for dyslexia-specific training.

Verbal communication

- Give full, clear instructions, and take time to explain things properly.
- Repeat things, if necessary. Check back understanding.
- Give written or taped instructions as well as oral ones, as necessary.

Written communication

Reading:

- Present written instructions in a clear format, if necessary in a flow chart.
- Present information on audio or videotape as well as in writing.
- Use voice mail rather than written memos.
- Provide text-to-speech software.
- Allow extra time for reading tasks.

Writing:

- Provide speech-to-text software.
- Allow extra time for writing tasks.
- Do not expect the employee to take notes or dictation at speed.

Work organisation

- Give advance notice of tasks whenever possible rather than setting sudden deadlines.
- Offer help on planning and prioritising the workload and scheduling daily work tasks.
- Encourage the employee to break down large tasks or projects into subsections and stages.
- Offer guidance and support with new or difficult tasks.
- Provide a wall planner that visually highlights appointments and deadlines.

Reducing stress and anxiety

- Try not to put pressure on the employee by showing impatience or irritation.
- Try not to interrupt the employee in mid-task.
- Arrange particular times when the employee can work free from interruptions.
- Provide non-stressful lighting (fluorescent lighting in particular can be troublesome for people who suffer from visual stress).
- If possible, provide a quiet, undisturbed workplace; alternatively, provide the employee with ear defenders.
- Encourage the employee to take brief breaks, as this will increase overall output for the day.

Training courses

Be aware that reluctance to apply for promotion or training courses may be linked to fears of excessive paperwork and the possible exposure of weaknesses during training. Ensure that in-house training courses have a *Good Practice* policy in relation to dyslexic trainees. For example, trainers should:

- Provide a clear outline of their talks and relevant course material beforehand.
- Repeat things, if necessary.
- Leave a few minutes at the end of a session to check that dyslexic trainees have understood the main points made in the session.
- Be aware that whiteboard can cause visual stress.

FURTHER READING

For employers and dyslexia professionals:

Dyslexia and Employment: a Guide for Assessors, Trainers and Managers.
Edited by Sylvia Moody. Wiley-Blackwell.

This jargon-free guide to good practice in dyslexia workplace consultancy, and related legal issues, provides comprehensive coverage in four clearly distinguished areas:

- **Professional dilemma** chapters discuss tricky issues which have arisen in practice.
- **General perspective** chapters take the viewpoint of professionals such as HR managers or trades-union representatives.
- **How to do it right** chapters offer advice on how to carry out diagnostic, workplace needs and legal assessments, and how to devise training programmes.
- **Information Point** chapters provide brief information on general topics such as dyslexic difficulties in the workplace, disclosure of difficulties, and the application of the Disability Discrimination Act.

Endorsement from Jenny Lee, National Adult Dyslexia Coordinator, Dyslexia Action:

This is a comprehensive, invaluable and extremely readable book giving in-depth information and guidance on a wide range of issues affecting professionals who work with dyslexic employees. For me, it is a rare find; the authors do not shy away from the most controversial issues, indeed they confront them head-on, revealing their (and our) dilemmas. They share their internal debates and in doing so both reassure us and give practical advice born out of real experience. This excellent book is a must for workplace consultants and indeed anyone working with dyslexic people. I strongly recommend it.

For a general introduction:

Dyslexia in the Workplace: an Introductory Guide. Diana Bartlett and Sylvia Moody.
Wiley Blackwell.

For employees:

Dyslexia: How to Survive and Succeed at Work. Sylvia Moody. Random House (Vermilion).
Living with Dyspraxia. Mary Colley. Jessica Kingsley.

Comprehensive information sheets on dyslexia in the workplace:

www.workingwithdyslexia.com

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