

PART A

Identifying Dyslexia

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Part A explains how dyslexic difficulties manifest themselves in the workplace, and how dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties, such as dyspraxia and attention deficit disorder, can be identified and assessed. Emotional issues are also discussed.

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CHAPTER 1

Dyslexia in the Workplace

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Dyslexic difficulties can make a day at the office an ordeal, if not a nightmare. One reason is that the difficulties are various and not always easy to define or pinpoint. The term ‘dyslexia’ has borne a number of meanings over the years. Originally, it was used to mean difficulty with reading, and in a medical context it still means precisely this. In the educational world, however, it is used more loosely to cover difficulty not only with reading, but also with spelling, writing and mathematics (or general number work); it also denotes difficulties with:

- phonological skills (using the sounds of the language)
- short-term memory
- visuo-spatial skills (including visual tracking)
- sequencing.

A dyslexic person, therefore, may have difficulty not just with reading and writing, but also with saying long words, remembering instructions and appointments, copying letters or numbers accurately, and filing things in the correct order. He may operate generally in a state of muddle and confusion, but, unlike the true incompetent, he is likely to feel that somewhere in the midst of this chaos there is an able person trying to get out. (Throughout this chapter *he* stands for *he/she*.)

An economical way of describing the diverse difficulties of a dyslexic person is to say that he takes a long time to process information. Thus, he can easily feel overwhelmed by incoming information, whether this reaches him in the form of the written or the spoken word. He balks at having to digest long reports and tends to lose the thread of discussions. He has difficulty, too, in transmitting information clearly and succinctly to the outside world in speech or writing; he knows what he wants to say, but easily gets muddled, especially if he has to speak impromptu or write to a tight deadline.

A concrete analogy would be a clerk sitting at his desk trying to concentrate on his work – work that he is quite competent to do. However, he is continually distracted by a succession of colleagues, who approach his desk every few minutes hurling piles of urgent files into his in-tray and demanding he attend to them immediately. He feels so overwhelmed by the volume of information constantly ‘coming at him’ that he loses his capacity to work calmly and efficiently to such an extent that he may appear to his colleagues to be totally incompetent.

In fact, dyslexic people are often extremely competent in many areas of life and work. Not only do they have innate talents, but they have often also developed imaginative and creative ways of doing things in response to the challenges of their various difficulties. They may excel, for instance, in lateral thinking; they may be innovative and aware of links and associations that may escape more linear thinkers; they often have good powers of observation, excellent spatial, practical, IT and interpersonal skills, and an untaught intuitive understanding of how systems work.

When asked how they feel about their difficulties, dyslexic employees often report anxiety, frustration and anger. They feel anxious about whether they will be able to manage their workload; they feel frustrated that they cannot always show their true abilities; and they feel anger that they are seen by others as being ‘stupid’ or ‘slackers’ – two particularly inapt descriptions, given that dyslexic people are often highly motivated and intelligent, and are prepared to work extra hours in order to complete their work tasks satisfactorily.

In order for dyslexic difficulties to be properly managed and accommodated in the workplace, the first essential step is that they are

recognised for what they are. One reason that they may go unrecognised is that dyslexia is often mistakenly regarded as being simply a problem with reading. In fact, many dyslexic adults have, by dint of hard work and determination, learned to read with reasonable competence; it is the writing, memory and organisational skills that remain a major handicap.

In the next section, I consider in more detail the four main underlying areas of weakness in dyslexia, and then go on to look at the various ways in which these affect efficiency in the workplace.

UNDERLYING AREAS OF WEAKNESS IN DYSLEXIA

Weaknesses in the following four areas underlie nearly all the difficulties which dyslexic people experience with literacy and general workplace tasks.

Phonological skills

These include the ability to recognise, pronounce and sequence letters in a word, and the ability to split words up into sound-segments (syllables). Weaknesses in these areas cause difficulty in pronouncing, reading and spelling long words, and also result in a slow reading speed.

Short-term memory

This is the memory used to store information that we need to keep in our minds for a brief time, for example, a telephone number that we have just been given. If, rather than passively storing information, we want to use this information in some way, then our short-term memory becomes a 'working memory'. We use working memory for tasks such as doing mental arithmetic. Poor short-term memory combined with poor phonological skills not only slows reading speed, but also affects the ability to read with good comprehension.

Visuo-spatial skills (including visual tracking)

We use these skills when we track a series of numbers or letters, or when we analyse a complex visual array, such as a map or table of figures.

Sequencing skills

Sequencing is a skill that is involved in many life and work tasks, but it is particularly crucial in reading and writing: at a basic level we need to read or write letters in the correct sequence; and at a higher level we need to be able to sequence words in a sentence, sentences in a paragraph and paragraphs in a longer text. Poor sequencing skills also weaken general organisational skills, as any sort of work planning or time management requires tasks to be put in an orderly and logical sequence.

SPECIFIC WORKPLACE DIFFICULTIES

It may be noted that many of the difficulties described in this section will also be experienced by dyspraxic people (see Chapter 5).

Reading

A dyslexic person who has achieved reasonable competence in reading may manage perfectly well with everyday reading activities, such as reading newspapers, magazines or letters. However, he may find work tasks more taxing. Problems arise when he has to deal with large amounts of written material, such as digesting a written report or the contents of a thick file of information. When engaged on such tasks, the dyslexic person tires much more quickly than his non-dyslexic counterpart; tiredness quickly compounds his basic difficulties and further reduces his efficiency.

He may also encounter difficulty even with a relatively short text if he has to extract a detailed and precise meaning. Thus, he might find it hard to follow detailed written instructions (e.g., technical

manuals or protocols about work procedures). He will also have difficulty in reading out loud and so may feel uneasy if he has to read out reports at a meeting or give a paper at a conference.

Writing

A dyslexic person may have difficulty with everyday writing tasks, such as writing e-mails, and get in a muddle even with short written communications, such as memos, notes to colleagues or reports of telephone messages. He may have trouble filling in forms or work-sheets; and he will certainly be daunted when confronted with tasks in which a great volume of writing is required (e.g., preparing reports). He will have difficulty not just with the 'nuts and bolts' of writing (spelling, punctuation, grammar, sentence structure), but will also find it hard to organise his ideas and express himself in a clear, logical and succinct way. He may write in a style that is an awkward mixture of jargon and colloquialisms (e.g., 'Consideration is currently being given to representations submitted by the operatives that they want more time for their tea breaks').

Short-term memory

Short-term memory is an indispensable tool in most everyday tasks, indeed in most human activities. Some examples of it in use in working life are: a car mechanic reading a section of a technical manual and then applying what he has just read to the repair task he has in hand; an artist observing a model and then proceeding to draw what he has seen; a secretary taking down a telephone number; a lecturer listening to a question from his audience and formulating his answer to it; a waitress remembering an order long enough to write it down.

Inefficiencies caused by poor short-term memory are many and varied. Among those most commonly reported by working people are difficulty with:

- remembering telephone numbers
- remembering messages, instructions and directions

- following conversations, discussions or seminars
- recalling what was said at meetings
- note-taking
- multitasking (e.g., listening to what someone is saying and formulating a reply)
- concentration and attention.

If attention difficulties are particularly marked, they may be described as ‘attention deficit disorder’ (see Chapter 5).

Sequencing abilities

Poor sequencing ability makes it hard for a dyslexic person to file documents in the correct sequence, to look up entries in dictionaries or directories, to carry out instructions in the correct order and to follow work protocols.

Organisational skills

Weaknesses in memory and sequencing ability are linked to poor organisational skills. Dyslexic people are often poorly organised in all areas of their life; at work they are notorious for missing appointments, getting the times and places of meetings wrong, and failing to meet deadlines. They often live and work in a muddled, or even chaotic, fashion – their desks are always in a mess, they constantly lose things and never have the right papers with them.

Visuo-spatial skills

A dyslexic person may misread words or numbers, find it hard to analyse complex visual material and, more generally, to orient himself in space. He may find it difficult to digest information presented in the form of graphs, charts or columns of figures. He may easily get lost in unfamiliar surroundings and may lose his bearings even in a familiar place, such as a large office complex. If his job involves driving, he may struggle to read maps and be hampered by a poor sense of direction.

Hand-eye co-ordination

Poor hand-eye co-ordination can result in slow and untidy handwriting, poor presentation of written work or figures and inaccurate keying on a word processor, calculator or telephone. In manual work it can manifest itself in general clumsiness or slowness in performing tasks. It can also cause difficulty in using common office equipment, such as a guillotine or photocopier. When writing or typing, a dyslexic person has to make a trade-off between speed and accuracy, with the result that he is often in trouble either for not finishing his work or for making careless errors. (Poor hand-eye co-ordination is also a marked feature of a dyspraxic syndrome – see Chapter 5.)

Speech

Perhaps because they feel largely ‘locked out’ of the world of the written word and cannot easily ‘discharge’ their thoughts in writing, many dyslexic people become voluble talkers – though they often feel that they talk in an over-elaborate and disorganised way, especially when they are under pressure. By contrast, other dyslexic people feel so self-conscious about what they perceive as their inability to express themselves clearly that they become hesitant and withdrawn, perhaps tending to respond briefly to what is said to them rather than holding forth. If they are able to overcome their nervousness about speaking in public, they may have little difficulty in presenting material they have previously prepared (e.g., a paper at a seminar), but they will be less able to make spontaneous contributions in seminars or meetings, and may feel great frustration about this.

Specific maths difficulties

Typical maths or number difficulties reported by dyslexic people are: doing mental arithmetic; remembering calculation procedures; saying, reading, writing and copying numbers accurately; keeping their place in columns or tables of figures; or making accurate measurements.

Such difficulties are often termed 'dyscalculia', but this can be misleading. Dyscalculia means a general difficulty with understanding numbers and the relations between them. So, for example, a dyscalculic person may be unsure whether 8×2 will give an answer greater or less than 8×3 . Fortunately, few jobs require this ability.

In fact, all the difficulties described in the first paragraph above are probably more usefully seen as resulting from typical dyslexic problems, i.e. weaknesses in memory and visual tracking.

Emotional reactions

A dyslexic person often has to deal not only with his own frustration about his various inefficiencies, but also with other people's lack of understanding of, and respect for, his difficulties. As a result, he may be prey to a mixture of unpleasant emotions – despondency, anger, embarrassment, anxiety, lack of confidence – and may sometimes behave in an aloof, defensive or aggressive way. (For further discussion of emotional aspects of dyslexia, see Chapters 7 and 16.)

MANAGING DYSLEXIA IN THE WORKPLACE

If a dyslexic person has been fortunate enough to have his difficulties recognised at an early age, then he may well have grown up with the confidence and assertiveness to explain his problems clearly to managers and colleagues at work and to request the help he needs to do his job efficiently. However, many dyslexic people are not in this fortunate position: they may have little or no understanding of the true nature of their difficulties and so will be in no position to make a case for themselves as being in need of support in the workplace.

To an employer a person with these unrecognised difficulties will often be seen as inefficient, lazy and unmotivated. Misunderstandings and recriminations arise, and an employee who is struggling to overcome his difficulties and complete his work to a proper standard may find himself at the wrong end of a capability procedure, following which he may be demoted or even lose his job.

Fortunately, there is more awareness now among employers of dyslexic difficulties and their effects in the workplace. A variety of

books and information sheets – written specifically for both employers and employees – are available, and any person who suspects that they may have dyslexic difficulties should be able to approach their line manager or Human Resources department and, in an informed and confident way, request appropriate help.

The first stage of any support package would be a diagnostic assessment to determine whether the person has dyslexic and/or other related difficulties. This would then be followed by a workplace needs assessment to identify the employee's specific needs and how these could be most effectively met. Detailed information about these assessments is given in, respectively, Chapter 2 and Chapter 4.

FURTHER READING

Dyslexia and Employment: A Guide for Assessors, Trainers and Managers.

Edited by Sylvia Moody. Wiley-Blackwell.

Chapter 1: Dyslexia: a case of mistaken identity?

Chapter 5: Dyspraxia: problems and solutions.

Information point A: Dyslexic difficulties in the workplace.

Information point D: Neurodiversity.

Dyslexia: How to Survive and Succeed at Work. A self-help guide for dyslexic employees.

Sylvia Moody. Random House (Vermilion).

Chapter 1: What is dyslexia?

Chapter 2: Dyslexia at work.