

Becoming a dyslexia-wise employer

A framework for action



Introduction.

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How important is innovation and creativity to your organisation?

10% of your colleagues are dyslexic, some of them severely dyslexic; that is a large part of your team. Dyslexic people think, learn and work differently. They can be highly creative and bring many benefits, as well as some challenges to your organisation.

The aim of this guide is to give you an insight into dyslexia. A framework is outlined to help you develop an action plan which will bring out the best in your team. What is good for dyslexic people can be good for everyone.

Five central principles to guide your approach are summarised in the centre pages. We suggest that you read these first and then reference each section for more detail on each principle.

These principles can be used to develop an action plan to support your dyslexic colleagues and unleash their potential. Your whole business, not just your employees, will benefit from this approach.

'I struggled at university and often could not cope with the amount of reading we had to do. From the practical side of the job I have found being dyslexic an advantage as I am better with my hands.'

*Dr Toby Baring, Senior House Officer,
Ealing Hospital.*



What is dyslexia?

Dyslexia is best described as a combination of abilities and difficulties that may affect learning, literacy and numeracy. Dyslexia also relates to difficulties with organisation, sequencing and memory.

Dyslexic people often demonstrate an ability to think and work differently; this enables them to produce innovative and creative solutions to problems.

What does this mean in the workplace?

For any organisation that is truly committed to staff development, an understanding of the right support for dyslexic employees is critical.

The best employers recognise that everybody is different, and that putting in the right support will bring out the best performance. In many workplaces there is potential in dyslexic people that is untapped.

Why focus on dyslexia?

Focus on dyslexia

- Leading employers are using every means possible to develop their workforce to meet targets and increase competitive advantage.
- Research has established that 10% of the population are dyslexic. This is a significant part of your workforce and client base.
- By supporting your dyslexic colleagues you will benefit all staff in your organisation.
- The motivation, morale and efficiency of your workforce will be greatly enhanced by dyslexia-wise initiatives.
- Dyslexic people may be more susceptible than many to workplace stress; better support will make your organisation a healthier place for all, especially dyslexics.
- Becoming a dyslexia-wise employer will help you to make 'reasonable adjustments' and meet the requirements of disability law.

First Principle.

Understand what dyslexia is.

Develop and implement a programme of awareness raising, so that staff can understand the depth and breadth of dyslexia. There are dyslexic people in all walks of life and at every level in the commercial world.

Explain to people throughout the organisation the abilities and difficulties that accompany dyslexia, and the compensating strategies that dyslexic people develop. Use a variety of communication tools to get your message across.

Dyslexia in some cases may affect reading, writing, parts of the memory, and time management. Dyslexia may also lead to low self-esteem and stress.

Dyslexic people have unique abilities, allowing them to be lateral thinkers with highly developed skills in problem solving and creativity. Dyslexic employees will make a valuable contribution to a company.

'My role could be described as "design a solution and write it up". Dyslexia gives me a notable advantage in problem solving, and a disadvantage in writing it up.'

*Adam Clement-Jones,
Technical Consultant, global
telecommunications company.*



Second Principle.

Second principle

Ensure access to information.

For all written communication:

- Use plain English, be concise and check the readability.
- Use titles, bullet points, short paragraphs, Arial font size 12, and cream paper.

When possible, use other methods of communicating written information such as websites and Powerpoint, but keep them uncluttered.

In meetings, supply vital information verbally and visually as well as in writing. Wherever possible, enable dyslexic people to communicate verbally rather than in writing if they prefer to do so.

Offer tools, such as text readers, to dyslexic employees to improve their effectiveness.

See Appendix 2 for more information.

Third Principle.

Identify the issues in your workplace.

Assess the balance between written and non-written communication and look to create a balance which accommodates the needs of the entire team.

Review key documents, for example health and safety policy and job descriptions, and present them in a dyslexia-wise style.

Use your Information Technology to present information in a variety of ways, such as video or CD ROM, to make it more accessible.

Consider the physical aspects of your office environment. For example, lighting and desk layout can be critical factors for dyslexic people.

Promote and support verbal communication to complement written communication.

Becoming a dyslexic

A framework

10% of the population are dyslexic. Forward-looking organisations recognise that the right support will enable staff to produce their best work.

To benefit business as a whole we recommend that workplace support should be based on these five fundamental principles:

- 1. Understand what dyslexia is** – Dyslexia is widespread across your workforce. Issues with reading are just one of the many challenges which face dyslexic people at work.
- 2. Ensure access to information** – Use a variety of communication tools to disseminate information to your workforce.
- 3. Identify the issues in your workplace** – Assess situations which may place dyslexic employees at a disadvantage, impede their performance or limit their potential. Carry out an audit to ensure there is a balance between written and non-written communication. Consider how to improve alternative ways of communicating in your organisation; for example, meetings not memos.

Dyslexia-wise employer

Work for action

- 4. Develop specialist knowledge and support** – Offer access to dyslexia screening, assessment and ongoing support for those who request it. Make sure that everyone knows this provision is available.
- 5. Create a culture of confidence** – Provide mechanisms so that dyslexics can be open about their dyslexia. Work with Unions and other employee organisations to enable them to enhance their performance.

The British Dyslexia Association is working with employers like you. We can help you develop an action plan, based on these principles, and provide training to empower dyslexic people and their colleagues to deliver their best performance.

Contact us at:

British Dyslexia Association
98 London Road,
Reading, RG1 5AU

Tel. Office: 0118 966 2677

Tel. Helpline: 0118 966 8271

Website: www.bda-dyslexia.org.uk



Fourth Principle.

Develop specialist knowledge and support.

Encourage management, HR and training staff to develop a greater knowledge and awareness of dyslexia, and different learning styles so that they can support staff directly.

Recognise that there are many dyslexic people who cope reasonably well with literacy, but may be underemployed.

For staff who come forward offer access to dyslexia screening, assessment and a package of support.

Integrate dyslexia awareness into the essential management processes of recruitment, induction and appraisal.

Seek out opportunities from government that are designed to promote staff development and corporate efficiency.

Finally, consider dyslexia in the broader context of different learning styles and look for greater productivity by accommodating different learning styles.

'London Fire Brigade is an excellent employer and follows guidelines developed through onsite training with the British Dyslexia Association.'

*Malcolm Parker, Inspection Officer,
London Fire Brigade.*



Fifth Principle.

Create a culture of confidence.

Work with employee organisations to encourage dyslexics to overcome their fear of embarrassment and come forward.

Provide a mechanism for dyslexic members of the team to disclose their dyslexia and feel supported in doing so, rather than threatened.

See the whole person and work to develop strengths, whilst supporting any weaknesses with effective strategies.

Recognise the benefits that different learning and working styles can bring to a team.

'I would never write a business letter that was not later read by somebody else. I read incredibly slowly and I can't do without my personal assistant. I'll miss words out and misspell everything.'

Mike Norris – Head of Computacenter, the largest business PC supplier in the UK and the fastest growing private company with a turnover of £803m.

Conclusion

Conclusion

In such a short document it is only possible to give a brief insight into the benefits and challenges of working with dyslexic people.

This guide offers a framework of five principles from which actions can be developed to support dyslexic people, enabling all employees, especially those who are dyslexic, to maximise their potential.

The British Dyslexia Association, which has over 90 local dyslexia associations across the country, would welcome the opportunity to work with your organisation to produce such an action and training plan.

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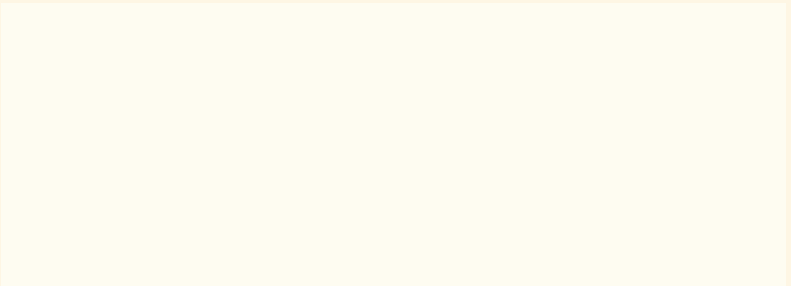
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Contact your Local Dyslexia Association at:



Appendix 1 – The Law.

Appendix 1

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 defines disability as:

‘A physical or mental impairment, which has a substantial and long term adverse effect on a person’s ability to carry out normal day to day activities.’

With specific reference to dyslexia the guidance to the act states:

‘In some cases, people have ‘coping strategies’ which cease to work in certain circumstances (for example where someone who ... has dyslexia is placed under stress). If it is possible that the person’s ability to manage the effects of the impairment will break down so that these effects will sometimes occur, this possibility must be taken into account when assessing the effects of the impairment’

Employers, therefore must make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to ensure that they do not discriminate against dyslexic people in terms of:

- recruitment and retention of employees;
- promotion and transfers;
- training and development;
- the dismissal process.

The law is due to be reviewed by Parliament in the autumn of 2002.

Appendix 2 - Dyslexia-wise style guide.

Appendix 2

Write in plain English.

- Stop and think before you start writing. Be clear what it is you want to say.
- Write in short simple sentences.
- Be conscious of where sentences begin. Starting a new sentence at the end of a line makes it harder to follow.
- Try to call the reader 'you'. Imagine they are sitting opposite you and you are talking to them directly.
- Give instructions clearly.
- Use short words where possible.
- Keep your sentence length down to an average of 15 – 20 words.
- Lists of 'do's and 'don'ts' are more useful than continuous text to highlight aspects of good practice.
- Use bullets or numbers rather than continuous prose.
- Use active verbs as much as possible. Say 'we will do it' rather than 'it will be done by us'.
- Flow charts are ideal for explaining procedures.
- Establish readability score requirements for key documents.

Select the best font.

- Select sans serif fonts such as Arial or Comic Sans.
- Use a minimum size of 12pt.

Think about paper.

- Use coloured paper instead of white to reduce contrast. Cream or off-white provides a good alternative.
- Matt paper is preferable to glossy paper, as this reduces glare.
- Ensure the paper is heavy enough to prevent text glaring through from the back.

Consider presentation.

- Limit lines to 60 – 70 characters. Lines that are too long or short can put strain on eyes.
- Use line spacing between paragraphs to break up text.
- Use wide margins and headings.
- Avoid dense blocks of text by using short paragraphs.
- Use bold to highlight. Italics, or underlining can make the words run together.
- Keep lines left justified with a ragged right edge.

Accommodate text-reading software.

- Use full stops after headings to make the voice pause and drop in tone.
- Use semi-colons, commas, or full stops after bullet points in order to separate each point.
- Number menu items to aid navigation.
- Don't write words purely in capital letters, as they may be read as single letters.
- Include as few 'signs' as are absolutely necessary, e.g. asterisks or slashes, as those words will be spoken.
- Punctuate abbreviations, e.g. BBC should be B.B.C.



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