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Health SocietyDyslexia an opportunity  
– not a disability

Niko Kloeten

Companies can achieve great results from taking simple steps to address issues around dyslexia in the workplace but employees must also take some responsibility, according to the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand.

Founder Guy Pope-Mayal has a foot in both camps – as well as being an advocate for dyslexics he is also a businessman and is the co-owner of food company Cookie Time.

His interest in dyslexia is a personal one – he has two boys and a wife with the condition (dyslexia often runs in families).

And he says dyslexics offer special attributes that companies can use to great advantage provided their talents can be properly harnessed and their weaknesses aren't made into a burden.

While dyslexia can manifest itself in a variety of ways with different levels of severity it generally shows up in difficulty with reading comprehension, reading decoding and/or reading fluency.

**Dyslexia and the workplace**

Not surprisingly, this can present dyslexic employees with huge challenges in the email and PowerPoint-dominated modern workplace, where documents thicker than the Lord of the Rings trilogy are routinely handed out to be read before meetings.

This is why the Dyslexia Foundation is putting a major focus on workplaces as well as the education system for improving outcomes for dyslexics.

As part of this drive to improve dyslexia awareness and outcomes in the workplace the foundation will be hosting a free workshop that deals with the subject next month.

*Workplace – celebrating difference, discovering the creative edge* will be part of the 4D seminar series run by UK dyslexia expert Neil McKay, which was sold out when he visited New Zealand last year.

Mr Pope-Mayal said he expects keen interest and is hoping “that the people coming to the workshop will set the agenda” for how New Zealand deals with dyslexia in the workplace.

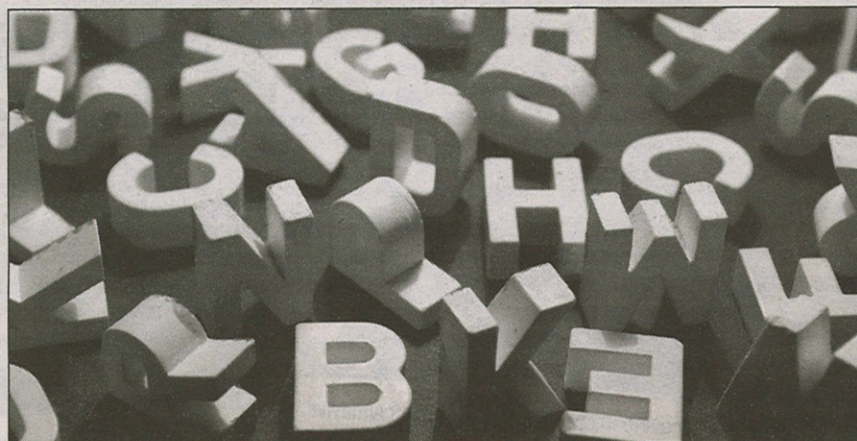
One thing he is not keen for New Zealand to do is to go down the same road as the UK, which has officially classified dyslexia as a disability subject to all the laws that the definition is captured by.

He said New Zealand's dyslexia advocates had taken a more “enlightened” view and added that classifying dyslexia as a disability could make it harder for dyslexics to find work if all the responsibility for managing the issues around dyslexia were lumped on the employer.

“If you create the burden, not only are you making it out to be something it's not but you're also going to create an obligation that is going to limit opportunities for dyslexics in the workplace,” he told the *National Business Review*.

“It's also a reason many dyslexic employees may not be willing to disclose their dyslexia.”

Instead, he said businesses had a financial incentive to identify dyslexic employees and work with them to help them reach their full potential.



**POOR AWARENESS:** Dyslexia is not well understood around the workplace and often there is a stigma attached to it. The fact that dyslexics can be gifted in other ways is also unknown to most people

Far from being a burden, dyslexics offered unique skills and abilities, usually in the visual and creative areas, that could more than make up for any reading difficulties.

Putting steps in place to address dyslexia was cheap and relatively easy and the return on investment for businesses was “phenomenal” Mr Pope-Mayal said.

He pointed out that with an estimated 10% of the population affected by some level of dyslexia the productivity gains that could be made across the country were enormous.

He offered some simple tips that could help both dyslexics and their bosses.

“Rather than handing out notes and asking everyone to read them in five minutes, hand them out an hour before or even the night before so they can read them in a stress-free environment.”

For some dyslexics following instructions could be a problem, he said.

“Instead of telling them five things you give them two things to do and tell them to come back to you when they're done.

“This is a good management technique even for linear (non-dyslexic) thinkers.”

He said easing up on the standards of spelling and grammar required for basic emails and the like could also help the self-esteem of dyslexic workers.

“In nearly every office you get one or two people who are the apostrophe police – this can extraordinarily affect a dyslexic employee.”

Other techniques include asking for an oral report rather than a written one, asking for images rather than words on PowerPoint presentations and getting employees to knock on your door with an idea rather than having to email it through.

Many of these strategies are simply good business sense regardless of whether there are any dyslexic workers at the company, Mr Pope-Mayal said.

“Sitting behind your desk and doing too much email rather than getting out and talking to people is a bad thing for business.”

**Dyslexic bosses no dummies**

If the statistics are anything to go by there's a 10% chance your boss is dyslexic but the chance of him or her admitting it is very slim, according to New Zealand Metservice chief executive Paul Reid.

He knows what it's like to make it to the top of the business world while

dealing with the symptoms of dyslexia.

However, while he has struggled with some aspects of reading and writing (spelling being the particular bugbear) for all of his life, Mr Reid was only diagnosed with dyslexia a year ago.

“I found out after seeing advertising for the dyslexic foundation's website. I started reading the description of it and I thought “holy s\*\*\*, this is me.”

“I'd always thought I was a bit dumb at some things and I would always wonder why.”

And he said he was not alone – there are other dyslexic chief executives out there who have faced similar challenges, although few are so open about the condition.

“I know of several chief executives who are dyslexic but the majority would never disclose they are dyslexic because they don't want people thinking they are dummies, etcetera.”

**Frustration with corporate style**

He said many of these dyslexic executives and managers probably work for small to medium enterprises having started their own businesses after getting frustrated working for big corporations where the management style didn't suit them.

Mr Reid said that dyslexia comes in a spectrum ranging from severe reading and learning difficulties to relatively mild, describing his dyslexia as being in the mid to low range in terms of severity.

But looking on the positive side, being dyslexic means “there are certain things you are off the charts for,” which in his case are problem-solving and mathematical ability, “key things in business.”

He said these special abilities would go to waste if there are too many obstacles put in front of dyslexics.

“A good example is a worker on a factory floor who has a great idea and tells the floor manager who says to him ‘put that down as a written proposal’ and as a result of that he doesn't do it.”

But Mr Reid said that the evolution of technology is proving to be to dyslexics' advantage.

“It's going to become easier and easier for dyslexics – these days websites all tend to contain a lot of video content.”

Despite this he said old attitudes about dyslexia are still ingrained in many people, particularly the elderly for whom it is still a relatively new concept.

“You can tell when they are looking at you they are thinking ‘how are you so successful when you are a dummy?’”

**Pesticides raise risk of ADHD**

Being exposed to larger-than-normal amounts of a commonly used class of pesticides called organophosphates may increase the risk of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children, according to a new study appearing in the June issue of *Pediatrics*. The big headache for parents is that most exposure to these chemicals comes from fruits and vegetables, of which we are supposed to eat at least five servings a day. The researchers suggested buying organic, going to farmers' markets and washing fruits and vegetables before eating.

**C-sections linked to celiac disease**

Children who develop the rare gluten intolerance condition celiac disease are more likely to have been born by caesarean section, new research from Germany suggests. Celiac disease is estimated to affect fewer than one in 100 people and it causes the body's immune system to attack the small intestine when its sufferers eat gluten, a protein found in a number of different grains. The study compared children with celiac disease with children who suffered from other irritable bowel conditions (Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis) and found that celiac children had a much higher rate of C-section births – 28% compared to no more than 19% in the other groups. Researchers noted that undiagnosed celiac disease may force mothers to have a C-section.

**Cell phone study inconclusive**

A major study on the effects of cell phone use has been unable to show a connection between cell phones and brain cancer but it hasn't been able to rule out a link either. The study was conducted by the World Health Organisation's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and it was the largest ever study on the topic of cell phones and brain cancer, studying nearly 13,000 cell phone users over 10 years. Researchers called for further study, saying there were problems such as the relatively low levels of cell phone use early on in the study launched in 2000 and the possible unreliability of people having to remember their amount of cell phone use. Now, a new and much bigger study will track nearly 250,000 people for up to 30 years.

**Cougars beware**

Women who marry significantly younger men may increase their risk of dying sooner but men who marry younger women may have the opposite effect, a new German study suggests. Women choosing younger partners are a hot topic right now with TV shows such as *Cougar Town* and the infamous Air New Zealand ad campaign that featured “cougars” hunting for “fresh meat” in the form of young male bar-goers. The study, reported in the May 12 issue of *Demography*, found that marrying a man seven to nine years younger increases a woman's death risk by 20%. Women were also found to be at greater death risk when marrying a man much older. However, the researchers noted that regardless of age, married people live longer on average than unmarried people.

**50-plus really is the golden age**

There are plenty of drawbacks to being over 50, such as the slow decline of your body and having Keith Quinn advertise life insurance products to you. But despite these problems it seems the over-50s are the least stressed people around and the older you are the more likely you are to be chilled out. Researchers examined a 2008 Gallup phone survey of more than 340,000 people living in the US and found that people were happiest in their younger and older years, with a dip during middle age. They also found that people were most stressed and angry in their 20s, with stress and anger slowly dropping until they reached their 80s. Worries were flat from age 20 to 50 before declining through to the 80s.

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