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spelling it out



People with dyslexia have other skills that can be harnessed to create an invaluable asset to an organisation.

Shame is a powerful emotion, and so is fear. You may think they are uncommon feelings in the workplace but right now there is a one-in-10 chance that a colleague is experiencing these disabling emotions.

And the reason? Their dyslexia has been misunderstood, particularly at school, resulting in life experiences that have challenged their self-esteem and identity.

To those of us who might take for granted our ability to peruse a report or express our ideas in an email or document, it is hard to imagine how these seemingly simple tasks can produce such an emotive reaction from so many dyslexic people. But for those whose dyslexia has been misunderstood either at school or elsewhere in their life, the feelings are very real and understandable.

Sian Jaquet is a TV3 presenter, host for Radio Live and life coach, supporting people in designing and living the lives they want. She explains first hand the challenges of being dyslexic in a work environment.

"Dyslexics find themselves judged by

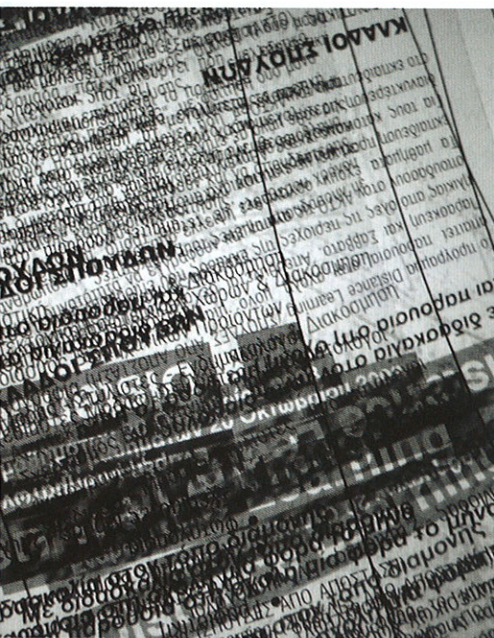
people whose traditional views of intellect depend on being able to write a report without spelling mistakes. It's also just as frustrating not being recognised for your skills and unique talents within an organisation because people write you off as stupid.

"More often than not it results in a lack of confidence in your own ability and self-esteem suffers significantly."

Her sentiments are echoed by other high-profile New Zealand women who experience dyslexia. Kirsteen Britten is a former international model, patron of the Cookie Time Charitable Trust, facilitator for the Davis Dyslexia Correction Programme and a company director. Like her late husband, the celebrated designer and inventor John Britten, she struggled with traditional academic learning and kept her dyslexia a secret most of her life.

"Before I understood how my mind works, I was mortified and embarrassed about my dyslexia. I thought I was dumb or slow and spent considerable time and energy covering it up.

"I limited myself in the work



environment, avoiding anything that involved spelling and reading so my dyslexia wasn't exposed."

Fortunately for young New Zealanders and dyslexics already in the workforce, a global step-change in thinking is underway. Instead of pigeonholing dyslexia as a disability, the new thinking focuses on increasing understanding which helps employers to notice the difficulties (or preferences) a staff member has and adjust their actions in response.

This simple 'notice and adjust' approach empowers employees to achieve their potential and demonstrates an employer's willingness to support genuine needs. This leads to increased job fulfilment for dyslexic employees and, for the employer, an enhanced bottom line.

Understanding dyslexia

At its essence, dyslexia is the disparity between thinking skills (which are usually strong) and basic skills such as reading and writing (which can often be weak in comparison). This is a consequence of how the brain is wired, and a strong preference as to where it processes information.

In fact, leading dyslexia researcher Sally Shaywitz, founder of the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity, has shown that dyslexics tend to have strengths in higher-level thinking processes, learning capacity, creative problem-solving, thinking 'outside the square' and empathy. She also found that dyslexics excel when focused on highly specialised areas, ranging from medicine and law to science and architecture.

Dyslexics also have great skills in entrepreneurialism. Research from the United Kingdom shows that 35 percent of US entrepreneurs and 20 percent of UK entrepreneurs are dyslexic.

With such strengths to offer, the challenge for New Zealand employers is to find the right way to harness the potential benefits. For Kirsteen Britten, the onus is on both the employer and the employee to successfully manage dyslexia in the workplace.

"For people with dyslexia, it's about recognising that we have a choice. That we can actively learn about our gifts and challenges and educate our employers to understand that we 'process' differently,

but often have advanced perceptual abilities, creativity and big picture thinking.

"For employers, it's about realising there's nothing wrong with our intellect, and a small amount of support is enough to make the employee feel valued and empowered. It may be as simple as adjusting the way you share information or helping them find a programme to understand their dyslexia and manage it successfully at work."

Sian Jaquet agrees.

"Dyslexic employees need to be assertive about their strengths and acknowledge their weaknesses at work," she says.

"I was once asked by my CEO to write a report for 300 senior government officers within 24 hours. I stood tall and said I wasn't confident in my ability to deliver a report, but if I was given 15 minutes of the conference time I could guarantee every delegate would have a clear understanding of the issue.

"It's about acknowledging your professional responsibilities and delivering the best result. In my case, writing the report equated to blind terror, but my oral communication and public speaking were

very strong."


Jaquet believes business owners or employers need to rethink traditional principles and rules to help dyslexic employees and to allow them to help themselves.

"Dyslexics often work well as the junction box of communication; listening, speaking and sharing ideas and solutions. If policies and procedures are seen to be inclusive and adaptable for individuals, the workplace becomes safe and dynamic.

"One of the most significant strengths dyslexics bring to the workplace is the ability to think outside the box. Dyslexic employees have had to develop their own sense of intuition to fill in the spaces that traditional learning didn't fill in their education.

"It's great to see a new model emerging that encourages an understanding of strengths and weaknesses in the workplace, empowering dyslexic employees to meet their full potential," she says.

Where to learn more

For more information about dyslexia in the workplace, visit www.4d.org.nz 
Guy Pope-Mayell

Tips for harnessing the benefits of dyslexia

Attitude is everything, and it counts from top to bottom. Make an effort to understand the benefits dyslexia can offer and do not confuse weakness in basic skills with a lack of intelligence, ability or commitment.

- Accept the challenge to review your company style guides and fine tune them to suit the needs of dyslexic staff. It's not only them who benefit, everyone gains when things are communicated in a way that is clear, concise, well-planned and combines a mixture of words and visuals.
- Focus on communication. Deliver information and instructions orally or visually wherever possible, rather than writing things down. Encourage others to do the same because it is often quicker, more efficient and engages people more effectively in the business at hand.
- Value visual as well as written information and include diagrams and pictures in presentations and reports.
- Always give an overview and explain the big picture.
- Ask for ideas verbally in meetings instead of always seeking written responses.
- Ensure support structures are in place for dyslexic staff if you expect them to deliver work in a traditional, linear fashion.