

DYSLEXIA AND THE WORKPLACE

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Adding value in the workplace

Neurodiverse individuals bring extraordinary potential for business breakthroughs to the workplace. For radical, revolutionary, pioneering, cutting edge and trailblazing advances, look to the neurodiverse.

If we want to solve social, environmental, scientific, political and business issues we need to embrace diverse thinking. From Leonardo de Vinci to Galileo Galilei, Alexander Graham Bell to Albert Einstein, Agatha Christie to Cher, Eleanor Roosevelt to Erin Brockovich, Walt Disney to Stephen Spielberg, and Whoopi Goldberg to Alyssa Milano, neurodiverse individuals have challenged the status quo, pushed the boundaries and changed the world over and over, in all spheres of human endeavour.

Perhaps nobody said it better than Steve Jobs (Apple CEO and Chairman, American inventor, designer and entrepreneur) when he narrated the famous Apple Think Different commercial in 1997.

"Here's to the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes ... the ones who see things differently -- they're not fond of

rules, and they have no respect for the status quo. ... You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them, but the only thing you can't do is ignore them because they change things. ... They push the human race forward, and while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius, because the people who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world, are the ones who do." – Steve Jobs, 1997

Dyslexia is a neurodiversity, where the brain is wired differently. Other neurodiversities include dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, autism spectrum and attention deficit hyperactivity. Emotionally and psychologically safe workplace environments allow those with different ways of thinking to be themselves and bring their talents to the table. Emotional safety is the bullseye for business. It's not about considering hiring neurodiverse employees, you already have them; it's about recognising, understanding, and making positive changes.

The competitive edge

Responding appropriately to neurodiversity is both a need – in terms of employment rights and inclusive workplaces – and an opportunity – in channelling neurodiverse thinking to deliver increased productivity and extraordinary results. Creativity is the new business currency. Businesses are looking for the next competitive edge; this is it.

At a macro level, neurodiversity is also critical for ongoing business success. One of the key indicators of any healthy environment is the amount of biodiversity within that ecosystem. As a general rule of thumb, the greater the amount of diversity within plant and animal communities the more stable the ecosystem. Think of the workplace as an eco-system – with a narrow vision of employee strengths, we will miss the ability to have a competitive edge. Never has this been more relevant, as the future of work transforms in ways that are so different from traditional work practices.

35%
of US entrepreneurs
20%
of UK entrepreneurs
are
dyslexic

The competitive edge

Dyslexic Thinking was added to the Oxford dictionary in 2022, and recognised as a valuable skill on LinkedIn. According to the dictionary, this new noun is defined as:

“an approach to problem solving, assessing information, and learning, often used by people with dyslexia, that involves pattern recognition, spatial reasoning, lateral thinking, and interpersonal communication.”

While many people are aware of the challenges that dyslexia can bring in basic skills like reading, writing, and spelling there is often less awareness about the strengths embodied in this learning difference, or preference.

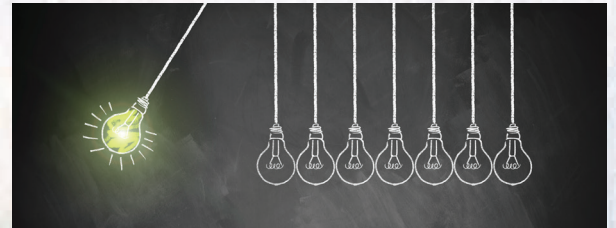
This concept of preference is fundamentally important, as it recognises that dyslexic individuals think differently, so naturally prefer to receive, process and present information in ways that make more sense to them. As dyslexics tend to think in pictures rather than words – receiving and retrieving information in a different part of the brain to neurotypical, word-based thinkers – they often prefer to receive and present orally or visually rather than via the written word.

Anecdotally, links between entrepreneurship and dyslexia have long been known. And in 2008, pioneering research from a London business school showed that 35% of US entrepreneurs and 20% of UK entrepreneurs are dyslexic – with Sir Richard Branson a famous example.



Yale scientist **Dr Sally Shaywitz**, also has some fascinating insights into dyslexic thinking, noting that dyslexics are often conceptualizers who manifest “out-of-the-box thinking” and provide new insights.

<https://dyslexia.yale.edu/the-center/our-mission/>



Challenges in the workplace

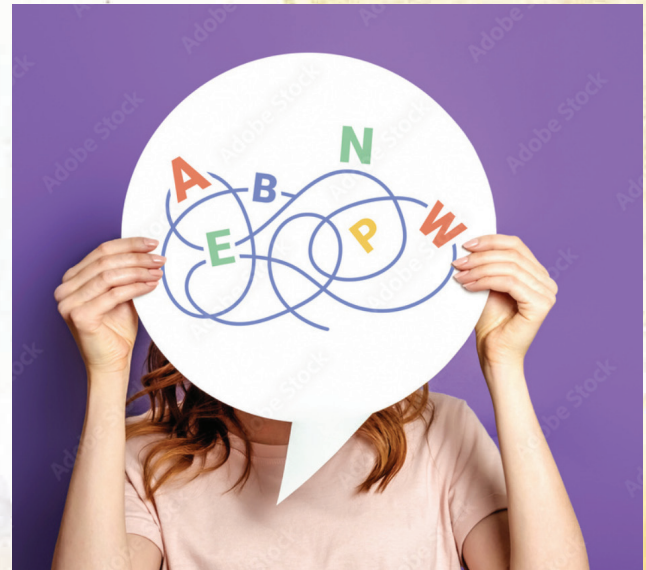
Conservative estimates are that one in ten New Zealanders is dyslexic, which means dyslexia is both widespread and an important issue to address in the working environment.

You probably know from your time at school the ways in which dyslexia can impact your learning and work. Having to learn in environments not suited to your thinking style has probably made you extremely resourceful, hardworking and determined – just the sort of qualities that employers' value.

There is an old saying that knowledge is power, and this is true both in understanding your thinking style and appreciating the creative strengths it can bring, and in being equipped to deal with other people's preconceptions and attitudes about dyslexia.

Dyslexia often impacts much more than literacy and numeracy. The most immediate attribute is a problem decoding words and their meanings, but this is just one aspect of a broader spectrum of issues which may include auditory and information processing, planning and

organising, motor skills, short-term memory and information processing. However, dyslexia's greatest difficulty is self-esteem – it only becomes a disability if not appropriately addressed.



Challenges in the workplace

The upside of dyslexia is the ability to perceive the world from many perspectives, allowing visual-spatial thinking and special talents and skills to flourish in fields such as the arts, design, leadership, entrepreneurship, engineering, sciences, business and technology. On the other hand, it can create the following challenges:

- Reluctance, embarrassment or avoidance around reading out loud
- A preference for face-to-face meetings/phone calls rather than email correspondence, and for charts/graphs over text
- Frequent misspelling of words and mixing up words which sound similar (recession/reception), in speech or written work
- Poor handwriting, punctuation and grammar
- Misunderstanding or misinterpretation of managers' instructions
- Problems meeting deadlines, despite working hard

A more detailed checklist, courtesy of the British Dyslexia Association, can be downloaded below:

<https://cdn.bdadyslexia.org.uk/uploads/documents/Dyslexia/Adult-Checklist-1.pdf?v=1554931003>

If any of these challenges sound familiar to you, it's important for you to know that there are strategies you can employ to deal with them. The British Dyslexia Association also has some useful information on adults and employment, albeit from the UK perspective, visit below to view:

<https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/advice/adults>



Taking charge and driving workplace change

The key to making your dyslexia work for you lies in understanding how it affects your working life, and working with your employer to give yourself the best chance of success. If you've been having consistent problems with your work, then chances are your employer will welcome an initiative from you to address this.

Schedule a meeting to discuss your work, or if convenient, use an annual review as a forum for bringing some ideas to the table. At the meeting, let your employer know that you recognise where issues are occurring, and that you'd like them to consider a plan you have for addressing them.

If your employer doesn't know much about dyslexia, this booklet and the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand website can be a good place for them to start. It's important when you discuss your dyslexia to be clear that you are looking for support in providing solutions.

The following phrases might be helpful:

- "I have dyslexia – you might have heard about the problems it can cause with reading and writing, but it

also provides some other challenges at work which I'm hoping we can look at addressing ..."

- "I have dyslexia – it means my brain works a bit differently to other peoples, making me better at some things and slower at others ..."
- "I have dyslexia – I'm keen that it doesn't affect my performance any longer so I've come up with a few ideas for improving the work that I do ..."
- "It can sometimes be a bit embarrassing talking about having dyslexia, so I've written down a couple of websites which have some information for employers. I'm hoping you could have a look at them and then we can work together on a way for me to deliver my best at work ..."



Taking charge and driving workplace change

Here are some simple accommodations that can be made – but don't be afraid to suggest something else that you know will help you.

Deadlines

Dyslexic individuals may have issues reading, writing and processing language as quickly as their colleagues. Securing extra time 'up front' for reading necessary material, and organising/requesting deadlines to provide extra time before or after work to catch up if necessary, can take pressure off the most challenging aspect of working life. And provide more time and breathing space for contributing to analysis, conceptualisation and problem solving

Proof-reading

A workplace focus on spelling and grammar accuracy can mean you spend too much time on writing and proofing. Suggest to your employer that you 'buddy up' with a colleague to help proof-read your work; or request that reduced accuracy is permitted in early versions of your work. Hopefully, this will free you up to focus on the 'big picture', and not get bogged down with spelling.

Giving instructions

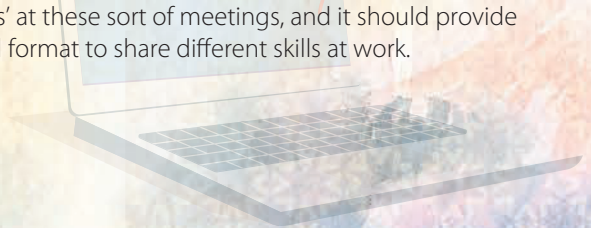
If you have trouble remembering large lists of instructions or information, you may need to agree with your employer to a new format for receiving them. Let them know that you may need them to pause, slow down, or repeat instructions and try to agree to system where they're happy for you to request this.

Constructive feedback

Let your employer know that while you want to know what you've done wrong, it's also good to know what you're doing right! The more specific they are with good feedback, the better you'll be able to do it next time.

Encouraging creativity

Look for opportunities to become involved in creative pursuits at work – even if this isn't naturally part of your job. Volunteer to attend events like brainstorming and 'blue sky' meetings to give you an opportunity to contribute out-of-the-box thinking. There are often 'no wrong answers' at these sort of meetings, and it should provide an ideal format to share different skills at work.



Taking charge and driving workplace change

Look for areas in your own job where you can have a little more freedom to use your creative strengths. Volunteer to head up a social committee, provide first response to IT queries for your department, redesign the office layout, maintain the company social media pages or lay out the office newsletter - these are all small ways in which you may get an opportunity to contribute creatively.

Distractions

While dyslexic employees can be excellent multi-taskers, you may find yourself easily distracted or hypersensitive to many standard features of working life. You may benefit from moving away from a fluorescent light source and into natural light, or away from ringing phones, voices and excessive movement.

While you might not be able to remove these distractions entirely, your manager may agree that meetings or periods of crucial work would be best held in a quiet conference room or behind a closed office door. Phone diversion and message taking can also be useful from time to time as a means of minimising distractions.

KPIs – Key Performance Indicators

Standard KPIs can be particularly unfriendly to dyslexic employees, and you may wish to talk to your employer to suggest re-drafting them to take your individual strengths and limitations into account, particularly around deadlines and accuracy. Added responsibilities around areas of creativity as outlined above may well provide opportunities to add alternative KPIs to an employment contract or performance review.

Notetaking and mind maps

It can be worth experimenting to develop notetaking techniques which suit you the best. For example, many dyslexics respond well to mind maps: you may find details of a meeting easier to recall if you create a box in the centre of the page with the topic of a meeting or a specific task and the date. Each employee is represented by his or her own box. Agreed items and responsibilities are marked with lines connecting them with the right person. Combining various colour codes, the mind map makes it easier to prioritise and monitor tasks. For example, those marked in green might require immediate action, whereas those in red need immediate attention.

Taking charge and driving workplace change

Internal documents

Many dyslexic individuals have difficulty reading black ink on white paper – particularly the organically whitened paper used in many modern printers and photocopiers. You may well find reading easier by using coloured or off-white paper for notes and printouts. Alternatively, try experimenting with tinted colour overlays placed over white paper to see if it helps.

Many dyslexics prefer sans serif fonts such as Arial, Sassoon and Comic Sans – where possible, convert internal documents into these fonts at 14 point size for your own personal reading.

Assistive technology

There are a range of software and hardware resources, such as calendars, reminder services, text readers and spelling assistance software, which can all be, freeing you up to focus on your strengths. Grammarly, Speechify, and the dictation software built in to Microsoft and smartphones are also some helpful tools available.

Mentoring

Many neurodiverse-friendly workplaces have found that mentoring yields positive results for both employees and their mentors. Suggest to your employer that they consider providing a senior staff member to provide regular 'check-ins', and who can give encouragement, support and inspiration to help you reach your goals.

Arrange to meet with your employer after, say, one month to review how the changes are going for both of you, and whether further adjustments are necessary. Appropriate ongoing adjustments, combined with personal responsibility and high work standards, can be all you need to lift your performance at work and discover areas in which you can grow and contribute to the business's success.

There are a number of general adjustments an employer can make around the office to make it more dyslexia friendly. These are outlined in the next section of this booklet.

The workplace environment

Given conservative estimates are that one in ten New Zealanders is dyslexic, you'll almost likely have one or more dyslexic employees if yours is a medium to large size business. Many people with a dyslexic learning difference may not have been formally diagnosed, and often potential employees are unlikely to bring it up in a job interview, fearing it will be misunderstood or seen as a barrier to employment.

In fact, international research shows that dyslexic employees can provide just the sort of out-of-the box thinking that businesses need. While reading and writing can be challenging for dyslexic individuals, big picture skills like problem solving, creativity, high level conceptualisation and original insights can be much higher than in the general population.

US psychologist Dr Linda Silverman-Kreger, author of *Upside-Down Brilliance*, has identified the following as basic abilities that characterise dyslexic or visual-spatial thinking:

- Able to utilise the brain's ability to alter and create perceptions
- Think more often in pictures than in words

- Think and perceive multi-dimensionally, using all the senses
- Highly intuitive and insightful
- Great at hands-on tasks and finding out how things work
- Highly aware of the surrounding environment, great at multi-tasking

As well as this, a lifetime of having to learn in environments not suited to their thinking style means that dyslexic employees often develop compensatory characteristics, such as becoming extremely resourceful, hardworking and determined – just the sort of qualities needed in the workplace! It might also explain why dyslexic entrepreneurs like Richard Branson, Charles Schwab, John Chambers and William Hewlett have all managed to succeed, despite problems with basic reading and writing skills. Here in New Zealand, innovators like Weta Workshop's Richard Taylor and maverick motorcycle designer, the late John Britten have made their mark internationally. You can find out more about these and other successful New Zealanders with dyslexia here.

The workplace environment

Leading-edge US researcher Tom West (author of bestselling books: *In the Mind's Eye*, *Thinking Like Einstein*, and *Seeing What Others Cannot See*), contends that humanity is now at the beginning of a major transition, moving from an old world based mainly on words and numbers to a new world where high-level work in all fields will eventually involve insights based on the display and manipulation of complex information using moving computer images. Properly harnessed, he says dyslexic individuals will thrive in this environment, acting as “engines of economic development”. West, himself diagnosed as dyslexic at the age of 41, has been involved in developing computer graphic and visualization tools to assess these talents, and also looked at patterns of talents seen over generations of families that show dyslexia mixed with high degrees of success in the arts and sciences. He believes that it is time to learn from the distinctive strengths of dyslexics, rather than just focusing on their weaknesses and failures.

If you're lucky enough to have dyslexic people working for you, this booklet provides more information on how you can help them manifest their full potential and add value to your business.

'Notice and adjust' strategies

Dyslexia is an alternative or atypical way of thinking which can also be characterised as a learning preference, meaning that dyslexics naturally prefer to receive, process and present information in the way that makes more sense to them. Ongoing brain research, including studies from Yale and Auckland universities, has shown that while most people use the 'verbal' left side of our brain to understand words, dyslexic people use the 'pictorial' right side – making them slower to process and understand language, but stronger in creative areas like problem solving, empathy and lateral thinking.



The workplace environment



With adjustments in the expectations and management style of employers, dyslexic employees can thrive and excel. Key to this is a fundamental principle of 'Notice and Adjust'. This approach, which underlines Dyslexia Foundation initiatives, is all about constructive action in the here and now.

Adopting this mantra in the workplace is as simple as noticing which employees might benefit from a dyslexia-friendly management approach, and adjusting instructions and expectations accordingly.

Notice – Recognising Dyslexia

Dyslexia wasn't officially recognised by the New Zealand Government until 2007, so unfortunately the school experience for many dyslexic New Zealanders was (and often continues to be) one of frustration, helplessness and failure. By the time they reach the workforce, many dyslexics have developed highly evolved methods for ignoring, hiding or 'working around' their dyslexia, meaning that their workmates and employers may not be aware of this.

In some cases, the dyslexic employee may not even know themselves – a history of academic failure and frustration may have led them to mistakenly believe that they are 'stupid' or 'beyond help'.

Dyslexia often impacts much more than literacy and numeracy. The most immediate attribute is a problem decoding words and their meanings, but this is just one aspect of a broader spectrum of issues which may include auditory and information processing, planning and organising, motor skills, short-term memory and information processing. However, dyslexia's greatest difficulty is self-esteem – it only becomes a disability if not appropriately addressed.

The workplace environment

Signs that one of your employees may have dyslexia, and therefore benefit from an adjusted management style include:

- Reluctance, embarrassment or avoidance around reading out loud
- A preference for face-to-face meetings/phone calls rather than email correspondence, and for charts/graphs over text
- Frequent misspelling of words and mixing up words which sound similar (recession/reception), in speech or written work
- Poor handwriting, punctuation and grammar
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A common strategy for working around dyslexic-like learning differences is repetition and memorisation/rote

learning of key words and sentences. At work, this might manifest in unusually long working hours, extreme fatigue brought on by reading or intense private work sessions ahead of key presentations and meetings.

Mistakes, work avoidance and a perceived lack of attention to detail can be frustrating for both employer and employee – and can mistakenly create an impression that a dyslexic worker is unmotivated or even lazy. In fact, the opposite is often the case – with some simple adjustments in the workplace, employers can help dyslexic employees to fully contribute to overall business success.

Adjust – Making Dyslexia Work

If you suspect that one of your employees may have dyslexia, it is generally useful to begin by having an informal chat. This may involve asking whether they have ever considered that some of the issues they face at work may be related to dyslexia – and letting them know that you're keen to understand how you can help.

The workplace environment

In larger organisations, this conversation may be something a manager and human resources representative can both attend – or you may elect to have one senior member of the organisation responsible for your corporate dyslexia policy, and identifying individuals to whom it may apply.

If the individual considers themselves dyslexic, this initial chat can be a very positive experience – learning that their manager or employer is dyslexia aware and open to working with their learning preference can immediately dispel any feelings of lingering embarrassment or shame they might be experiencing.

If the employee hasn't identified as dyslexic before, this initial discussion can also be very beneficial. Many adult dyslexics report that identifying and naming their dyslexia for the first time was extremely liberating – suddenly a lifelong feeling of fearing or suspecting that they were different is replaced with understanding that their brain simply works differently. This moment of discovery can feel like the beginning of a whole new life.

The Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand website has a wealth of information for dyslexics, including inspiring stories from New Zealanders – such as Weta Workshop founder Richard Taylor – who have overcome learning issues to achieve great success. Please visit below:
<https://dfnz.org.nz/inspiring-new-zealanders/>



Simple changes that make a big difference

While all employees have different needs the following adjustments can have an immediate and positive impact on quality of work and job satisfaction:

- Leave some dyslexia booklets, such as this one, in the staffroom or break area for staff members to read– if the topic isn't relevant to them, it may well be for someone they know
- Encourage short breaks and have water easily available to staff
- Try including diagrams or pictures in written and oral presentations – they'll make your ideas more concrete, not just for picture thinkers, but for everyone listening
- Supply written instructions for new tasks and have a format for written reports and job lists
- Always give an overview – state the 'big picture' outcome
- Ask for ideas verbally – either individually or in small groups
- Colour code items
- Create checklists to help with organisation and sequence
- Keep operating instructions in large lettering near copiers etc, and for important details like computer logins for presentations
- Create daily/weekly/monthly work plans and schedules
- Invite an expert to talk to staff to increase awareness about dyslexia






Dyslexia Foundation
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Recognition • Understanding • Action

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