

Dyslexia: When words are not enough

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This article first appeared in Training and Coaching Today..

Employers are obliged to deal with dyslexia. So what does this mean for learning and development and HR?

While interested bodies such as the British Dyslexia Association claim that two to three million adults in the working population are dyslexic, the condition continues to be widely overlooked by employers, who may only give it chance consideration.

Despite its place within the Disability Discrimination Act as well as the Disability Equality Duty for companies operating in the public sector, dyslexia often remains off the HR and L&D agendas until senior managers have cause to encounter it.

Disclosure of dyslexia is not obligatory for employees, and although some choose to keep the condition to themselves for fear of discrimination, the reality is that in most employees the condition remains unidentified. According to Rachel Davies, dyslexia development officer at the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), dyslexia in the workplace only tends to come to the fore during change, transition, the appointment of a new line manager or a change of job description.

Screening

Though she adds that often dyslexia is not considered until things reach a disciplinary level. "Companies should always have it in mind," she says. "That way, they can discuss it with an employee, tender the possibility, and look at the options of screening and an assessment, which would really benefit affected staff."

Dyslexia screening is a relatively straightforward procedure – and one that can be integrated into any HR diversity strategy.

According to Dr Andi Sanderson, dyslexia specialist and lead dyslexia consultant at specialist company Iansyst, screening can be conducted on paper – by a qualified individual – or computer. Dyslexia screening tools such as Lucid LADS can be operated by any employee, but even so, Sanderson says that any follow-on assessment should be conducted by an expert who can identify strengths and weaknesses and prepare an individual coping strategy.

While any corporate attention that dyslexia receives usually focuses on the negative aspects of the condition, such as information processing speed, Margaret Malpas, chair of the British Dyslexia Association (BDA), insists that employers should be giving the positives equal attention. These include creativity, lateral thinking, problem solving and determination.

"They are almost a complete match to entrepreneurial skills," she says.

Strengths

Heather Hardie, a director at the Adult Dyslexia Consultancy, agrees: "Sometimes dyslexia is seen as a trouble and a bother and a problem with the individual, which is to overlook the considerable strengths dyslexic staff can offer. This includes often taking a different approach, complementing that of others, and making for a great all-round team – not to mention the benefits of a culture that accepts and welcomes differences."

Once dyslexia has been identified, employers will find a wide range of procedural and technological options open to them. The latter includes speech recognition packages, recording and note-taking equipment, spelling software and devices and organisational software.

"Assisted technology has made a huge difference in this area and there is grant provision available for this so it doesn't even cost employers significant amounts," says Malpas. "We offer a national helpline for employers, as well as one-day training courses, covering everything from awareness to how to make reasonable adjustments."

Solutions

In spite of the significant number of products available, Davies insists the important message for employers is that dyslexia solutions can be very low-tech and inexpensive. NIACE has produced a guide entitled *Supporting learners with dyslexia in work-based learning*, which offers advice on some of the issues that may come up and recommended approaches. The organisation also runs one-day dyslexia awareness courses for employers.

Hardie says that companies which are keen to adopt a systematic, as opposed to piecemeal, approach to dyslexia should be integrating dyslexia into policies that can be linked to, or be part of, equal opportunities and disability policies. They should also have an action plan, with designated individuals taking responsibilities.

Malpas says the ideal way to raise dyslexia would be to include it as a specific question after the disability checklist, with further assessment the norm as part of the induction process.

Top tips

Write and speak in plain English.

Make instructions and procedures available in spoken and written forms.

Use charts and diagrams to present information.

Use a dyslexia-friendly house style for all written material.

Construct simple, clear, colour-coded filing systems.

Have appropriately-trained managers and colleagues.

Ensure forward planning and thinking, resulting in adequate time to perform tasks, minimising pressure.

Make available quiet places to work, with natural light.

Ask individuals about their own styles and preferences in performing tasks.

Use wall charts to plan and monitor tasks.

Allow regular breaks, especially from computer screens.

Cultivate a non-judgmental atmosphere.

Source: Adult Dyslexia Consultancy

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Thursday, 02 April 2009