

Dyslexia

is a different way of processing information,
a different way of thinking.

This means that dyslexic employees may need to take a different approach to tasks. There are many situations where this is advantageous, where the strengths associated with dyslexia can shine:

- approaching tasks in different or creative ways
- problem-solving
- seeing connections or the bigger picture
- communication or interpersonal skills
- dexterity or manual skills
- visual and spatial skills

This list is not exhaustive, and each person with dyslexia has their own pattern of strengths.

There are some situations where dyslexia presents a challenge; the most important thing that you can do to support your dyslexic colleague is develop an open mind, and take steps to maximise the benefits that they can bring to the team.

You can make a difference by being open to new ideas, introducing reasonable adjustments, and discovering different ways of managing and working with your colleague.

Sometimes the simplest changes can make the greatest difference

Your colleague relies on strategies to compensate for their dyslexic difficulties. Change can undermine these strategies, and it can take time to find new ways to work effectively within the new system. The impact may not be obvious immediately, for some it can take months before the situation becomes challenging. Even if you don't notice a drop in performance, it can be very stressful for your colleague.

It is common for dyslexic difficulties to surface after a significant change in role.

Challenges:

- Changes in work duties such as new procedures or technology
- Changes in job role through promotion or restructuring of departments
- Operational changes, such as a new line manager or co-workers
- Changes to the physical environment

Change, and dyslexia, effects everyone differently:

- Some people don't need any help
- Some don't like to ask for help, or don't know there is help available
- Many just get on with it and find their own solutions
- Others just get on with it but at great personal cost, working long hours or experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety, which has an effect on their health and wellbeing.

Areas where you may notice your colleague experiencing difficulty:

- Organisational skills—being in the right place, at the right time, with the right things
- Planning, project management, time-management
- Writing—especially organising ideas, synthesising information, spelling and grammar
- Learning new procedures—it may take more repetitions to stick
- Doing two things at once—such as taking notes and fully participating in a meeting
- Communication—it may take longer to process information or find the right words
- Reading for understanding
- Adapting to change

Managing and working with your dyslexic colleagues:

- Can be straight-forward
- Can be demanding
- The manager and employee may have different ways of thinking and working, which can sometimes cause misunderstandings
- The ability to think differently can result in a different interpretation of a task
- There may be a reluctance to start a task: strengths such as being able to see things differently may cause confusion. It might look like your colleague does not know what to do; in reality they may be able to see several options and not know which you meant

Range of solutions:

- Reasonable adjustments
- Environment
- Changes in the way that you work with your colleague
- Technology—software and hardware
- Skills and strategy development
- Mentoring

Environment:

There is evidence that a well-managed working environment can reduce stress and improve performance for your colleague with dyslexia. Difficulties maintaining focus and concentration can be minimised by:

- Allocating desk space in an area where there is least traffic, noise, and visual disturbance—away from printers, busy aisles, or other hotspots of activity
- Providing noise-cancelling headphones
- The option to work in a quiet area, or from home, when increased focus is required
- Using DND options on phones, turning off Outlook alerts to prevent interruptions

Different ways of working:

- Give advance notice of tasks whenever possible rather than setting sudden deadlines
- Instructions and tasks should also be provided in a written format
- Circulate information well in advance of meetings so your colleague has time to collect their thoughts and come prepared to contribute
- Provide hand-outs or an alternative to note-taking in meetings
- Your dyslexic colleague needs to see the bigger picture when being tasked, so they can find the best way to approach the work. Give them opportunities to discuss and clarify what's being asked, to find the approach that works for everyone
- Try not to interrupt your colleague mid-task; use e-mail or scheduled catch-ups to allow your colleague to prioritise their time
- With written output: provide explicit feedback, using track changes where possible. Take care when and how you provide feedback; this should not be done in public

Dyslexia friendly documents and forms:

- Provide electronic copy for use with screen-readers
- Use clear English. See Casagrande's excellent guide: <http://amzn.eu/hpnU6je>
- Use sans serif fonts e.g. Arial, Calibri, Helvetica, Verdana, minimum 12pt, spacing 1.5
- Use whitespace to separate distinct ideas with paragraphing or bullet points
- Ensure forms have the spell checker facility enabled, avoid the use of 'fields'

Technology is a great resource, especially when combined with skills and strategy development, but it is **not** a quick fix on its own.

Software:

- Screen-readers e.g. Microsoft Learning Tools, NaturalReader, Siri, Alexa
- Dictation software e.g. Dragon Naturally Speaking, Siri, Alexa
- Organisational software e.g. Scrivener for managing writing tasks
- Apps for tablets and smart phones

Hardware:

- Audio recording e.g. LiveScribe, dictation devices
- Noise-cancelling headphones
- Larger or additional monitors

Skills and strategy development:

- Tailored specifically to your colleague's needs within their role
- Delivered by a dyslexia specialist that is experienced working with adults in the workplace
- The aim is independence, not reliance on continuing support; your colleague will learn how to play to their strengths and take the most efficient approach to new tasks

Mentoring

- This often happens alongside skills development. It may be something that the dyslexia specialist can provide, or it may be peer-support from colleagues
- On some occasions there may be a need to involve another professional to provide support that falls outside the expertise of the dyslexia specialist. Advice can usually be provided by HR and Occupational Health, or a medical practitioner.

Further help and advice can be found at:

www.patoss-dyslexia.org/SupportAdvice/TutorAssessorIndex

PATOSS is the professional body for dyslexia support specialists. Their webpages provides a gateway to information, resources, advice, diagnosis, training, and consultancy services.
