

Resources at Work for Dyslexia:

Surely, we can do more?

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Dr Nancy Doyle (Founder and CRO of Genius Within CIC) asks:

“what are the best ways to provide ongoing, effective and sustainable support for Dyslexic people at work?” [1]

‘Best’ being the operative word.

We’re not talking clichéd adjustments helping Dyslexic people to read, write or communicate better. No, not really. However, if we believe these are the only adjustments Dyslexic people need or want; then we’re pretty much mistaken or just scraping the surface of a pool of resources.

What I believe Dr Doyle has captured in her research featured in Occupational Health at Work [1], is what many of us have questioned, but failed to action. Or, simply missed noticing. For instance, how appropriate and effective are the adjustments currently being made in the workplace, and are these truly reasonable?



Start with the facts

Roughly **8%** of working adults are dyslexic thinkers. They have a strong ability in verbal comprehension and in many cases visual-spatial reasoning. In other words, they:

- Are amazing at detecting relationships between objects, ideas, and events.
- Make great narrators with their ability to easily connect a sequence of mental scenes and make a story flow with ease.
- Are dynamic in their ability to link previous knowledge with present day or new knowledge, use this to come up with new solutions, and then explain it to others beautifully and clearly.

However, this comes at a cost. Compared to their peers, dyslexic thinkers struggle with processing sounds and holding lots of incoming information all at once in the mind. Of course, these underlying mental processes can have quite an impact on day-to-day activities.

Do not be disheartened though. Many dyslexic thinkers have learnt to use their alternate thinking powers to make up for some of their sensory processing challenges. The real difficulty lies in the environmental conditions that add another layer of barriers, which frankly, tend to be out of an employee’s control. This is when the disability shows.

Why should you care?

Dyslexia (like many other neurodiverse conditions) is ordinarily a protected characteristic in the UK under the Equality Act 2010. The Equality Act clearly safeguards Dyslexic people and other neurominority groups (e.g., Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, Autism, ADHD, Tourette's, SPLD etc.). It extends the duty of care for employers to make reasonable adjustments where the working environment can, will, or does prevent Dyslexic people from working to their potential.

As an employer, ensuring the right adjustments are provided to the right people, in the right place, at the right time; you do more than fulfil your duty of care. Your actions will likely result in the very thing you are looking for to drive your business growth strategy forward: loyalty, effort, creativity [3], entrepreneurialism [4], empathy, practical ability, and visual thinking [2].

Do adjustments in practice work?

According to Dr Doyle's PhD research: **Yes!**

Overall, 91% of people who had access to adjustments said these helped in their work performance.

Reasonable adjustments can be formal (need external or specialist involvement) or informal (easily put in place by HR or line managers). Interestingly, Dr Doyle's research found that many of the adjustments most valued by employees were the informal ones [1]. Particularly:

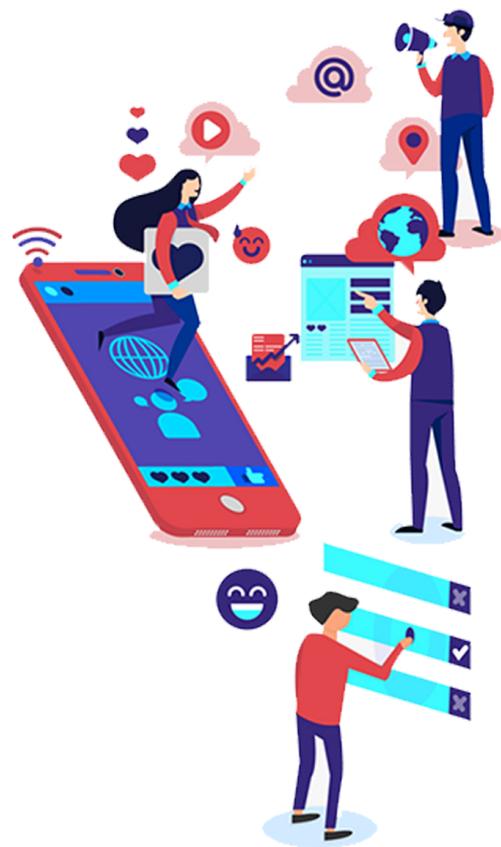
- Making physical changes to the arrangement of the workspace, for example enclosed spaces and baffle boards.
- Changing the noise levels (e.g., wearing noise cancelling headphones).
- Private office or dedicated quiet space enclosure for focused work.
- Peer-mentoring networks (e.g., other Dyslexic people).
- Changing intensity of lighting.
- Training adjusted to the person's learning pace.

However, interesting to note of all adjustments, Executive Functions Coaching (strategy coaching) with a neurodiversity specialist coach is by far the top-rated and most valued by employees. Of the formal adjustments, Assistive Technologies are also highly rated, but only when they come with the appropriate training in their use.

Let's be reasonable

It is all very well having admirable plans, or even starting a sensational drive for resources like text-to-speech (vice versa) software, digital voice recorders, and a few highlighters. Maybe even investing in a coaching program, speed read-and-write courses, or hiring an Occupational Health professional to solely help this group of employees. However, hoping this fulfils the requirements will only leave you wondering why the magic hasn't happened.

While all these adjustments are a great resource for employees with difficulties related to dyslexia, they are not wholesome answers to what is a much more complex issue.



Thankfully, getting to the answers is not as complicated as the issue itself. Research has found that executive functions coaching was as popular as environmental changes amongst Dyslexic people [1]. Hence, making coaching an ideal opportunity to encourage thinking, space to reflect and enable individuals, groups and leadership teams to develop skills and abilities. More importantly, it provides an ideal space to explore the right kind and level of adjustments. Organisations will only benefit from thriving work environments when key decision-makers start making time to:

Define what diversity, equity and being inclusive means to the organisation. Using this understanding to guide how reasonable adjustments can be integrated into practice.

Do the groundwork. Gather and understand information to identify the particular needs of your employees. What are they finding difficult because of dyslexia? How do these present in the workplace?

Carry out a workplace needs assessment (WPNA). Is there anything that you or your staff are doing that may be getting in the way of individuals working at their best? What is the value of a dyslexic thinker to you and your organisation? What do you believe needs to be strengthened in your organisation to support dyslexic thinkers? What is the cost of inaction? How long can you manage and stay with things as they are?

The bottom line

Reasonable adjustments are not a choice. They are a requirement by law. There is a fine line between what qualifies as a reasonable adjustment and what is a means to an end. Whether intentional or not, any inaction could come at a great cost to both the organisation and the employee: loss of rights, assets, as well as potential. So how can you take action in the best way?

Firstly, be clear that evidence-based practice is not just a trending term. It's the essence of what 'reasonable' truly means. It provides sound judgement, it ensures fairness, logic, prevents unnecessarily exceeding or worse, underproviding resources. Secondly, if you want to embrace dyslexic thinkers and maximise your company's assets, I suggest you adopt a dyslexic approach. Think divergently about your initial outlay using a bit of curiosity, ingenuity, and depth.

The real question here is, will you be satisfied with turning well-meaning intentions into hopeful props, or turning a genuine understanding of your people into a powerful network? For those interested, get in touch and we would love to continue this discussion.



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References:

- [1] Doyle, N. (2019). Reasonable Adjustments for Dyslexia: What works at work? *Occupational Health at Work*; 16(2): 28-31.
- [2] Eide B, Eide F. (2011). *The dyslexic advantage*. New York, NY: Plume.
- [3] Leather C, Hogh H et al. (2011). Cognitive functioning and work success in adults with dyslexia. *Dyslexia*; 17(4): 327–338.
- [4] Logan J. (2009). Dyslexic entrepreneurs: the incidence; their coping strategies and their business skills. *Dyslexia*; 15(4): 328–346.