

How to ensure a dyslexia-friendly workplace

As many as one in 10 people in the UK workforce have dyslexia, a neurological disorder affecting a person's reading, writing and spelling skills. However many companies are still unsure how best to recognise and support dyslexic employees. Dr Andi Sanderson, Dyslexia Specialist & Lead Consultant at iansyst Ltd, offers advice to HR and training professionals on how best to ensure a dyslexia-friendly workplace and staff.

Dyslexia is a learning disability recognised under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and is completely unlinked to intelligence. There are no visible physical signs and it can affect people in different ways. Signs to look out for include inconsistent spelling, poor time-keeping, disorganisation and weakness in short term memory. Dyslexia can be incredibly frustrating for a person, particularly as the skills it affects are so fundamental in the workplace.

For an HR department, developing an inclusive culture where dyslexic employees feel secure and supported is fundamental. It is unlawful for an employer to discriminate against a current or prospective employee on the basis of their dyslexia. Under the DDA, all public funded companies must have a three-year rolling programme in place to address and eliminate discrimination of disabilities. The expectation is that by 2009, private companies will also be required to do this.

Within the workplace, employers are required to make 'reasonable adjustments' to enable dyslexic employees to undertake their work effectively. These may include;

- Disseminating a written disability policy
- Publishing company wide information in alternative formats such as audio files or large print
- Enabling staff to have a choice of coloured backgrounds, overlays and fonts
- Creating the right work environment
- Implementing specialist one-to-one training for dyslexic employees in areas such as time management, organisational skills and concentration/memory improvement techniques
- Considering assistive technology and software such as voice recognition and predictive word software.

Further advice about making 'reasonable adjustments', practical steps to aid dyslexic employees, pointers to assistive technologies, advice on conforming to the DDA and grant information can all be found at www.re-adjust.co.uk. The site also introduces new consultancy and training services to help both employers and dyslexic employees.

Recruitment and selection procedures must also not discriminate against potential dyslexic employees. For example it would be reasonable to provide tape-recorded instructions to help candidates with short-term memory problems and to waive written tests if writing was not a significant part of the job applied for.

A simple way to identify dyslexia is to offer a short screening test via the company intranet. Once diagnosed, one-on-one diagnostic assessment is recommended to ascertain where the individual struggles in his/her job and how he/she can be better supported.

Dyslexia-awareness training for line managers is also vital to ensure they know how to get the best from their staff. It is important that potentially dyslexic employees are approached before aspects of their work result in performance management issues. Such an approach could be a sensitive suggestion that the kinds of errors in their work have some of the characteristics of dyslexia. Each individual will have a preference to how their dyslexia is referred to and it is imperative that employees are consulted about if, how and when others in the company should be notified of their disability.

Finally, there is funding available to help cover the cost of reasonable adjustments for dyslexic employees. *Access to Work* (AtW) is a government-funded grant operated through Job Centre Plus and may cover up to around 90% of the costs. Visit www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk for more details.



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