

Hidden Disabilities in the Workplace: The Example of Dyslexia

Does this text look unusual to you? Don't let that put you off.

This article uses [OpenDyslexic](#), a free, downloadable font created to increase readability for those with dyslexia.

Let's learn more about dyslexia and how we can help those with reading problems in the workplace.

There are many types of disabilities and not all affect a person's performance at work. There are often ways to get around the obstacles associated with disabilities. There are ingenious ways to make life and work easier for people with certain challenges.

Disabilities can prevent a person from doing certain tasks or functioning in the usual way that others do, but they can learn to work around that. A disability need not prevent a person taking up employment in most cases, provided they have job opportunities and discrimination does not occur.

There are less obvious or unseen types of disabilities which others can find difficult to understand because they may notice little, if any, evidence which convinces them of the existence of the problem. This includes **dyslexia (difficulty with reading)**, or one you may not have heard of called **dyscalculia (difficulty with arithmetic)**, as well as mental health disorders.

[Dyslexia affects 5% to 10% of people.](#) Because of embarrassment and ignorance about the problem, many people with dyslexia do not get help, especially if they are labelled 'poor students' or 'lazy', and dropout. Such judgements about people with dyslexia are far from the truth.

Many people who are highly successful struggle with dyslexia, including scientist **Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock** (who received a knighthood from the British Queen for her work), and South African engineer **Dr Hardy Johnson** who has two PhDs, one in Electrical Engineering and the other in Humanities.

It's very important to note that **it is not that a person with dyslexia can't read**, but that they require time and a quiet space to do so without interruptions. Reading under pressure is the real challenge. Allowing time to absorb information is necessary for everyone, and a person with dyslexia is equally entitled to time to allow them to absorb information as it pertains to their work without pressure being placed on them.

Sometimes the worst of a disability is happening when no one is around, in the personal struggle of the individual to overcome their hardships in order to face the world and pretend to be fine again. It is a frustrating struggle to manage and overcome what seems to come so naturally to others and which they take for granted.

Children with dyslexia are placed in a difficult position by teachers who expect them to read aloud in class, and cannot understand why they do not perform well in certain areas when they seem to be bright in everything else. **Exposing a person with a disability (PWD) to embarrassing situations should be avoided** as it does not help in building the person's self-esteem which is essential in managing their problem.

In the workplace, if people with dyslexia are not able to come forward and explain their problem without fear of being judged or being seen as unsuitable for their work, it can cause problems for the

individual and the organisation. Such problems are avoidable, and easily overcome with the right attitude.

There are practical ways to overcome problems related to dyslexia. As often as possible, we can communicate verbally with someone who has dyslexia or who seems to prefer other forms of communication to reading.

There are also tools to help and some are free. One tool is the [OpenDyslexic](#) font mentioned above. The font is continually being improved based on user input to make it the best possible font for its purpose. It works with Microsoft, Apple, Android and Linux apps.

This article is **left-aligned** because this format is better for people with reading difficulties. **A large typeface** is best, from size **12-point** and up. It's also good to break the text up into **many paragraphs** with **wider spacing** and to use bullet points where possible.

Getting to the point is always important these days. **Waffling** is now strongly discouraged in writing. **Be succinct**. Even in academic texts, people now expect to see plain language. **Pictures and diagrams** also aid learning and understanding, and they are interesting for all users, regardless of reading level.

Intuitiveness is critical when it comes to persons with disabilities in and outside the workplace. If a staff member doesn't read a document we have given them immediately, step back and give them a chance to do so in their own time. If it's urgent, tell them in person or by phone, and find out what their preferred communication method is. Also, establish with them an email response time they are comfortable with.

When working in a team, someone can be designated as the communications person who is there to help others, including those who may struggle with certain types of communication. The communications person can take dictation from those preferring this method.

Encourage the use of **mobile voice messaging** on platforms such as **WhatsApp**. Look for ways such as this to accommodate workers and place them in positions where they will excel rather than marginalising them.

People with dyslexia often have strengths in other areas, particularly a good memory, spatial (3D) intelligence and understanding of physics. They are also able to imagine possibilities and answers to practical problems in their mind without the aid of pen and paper or a computer. They may often recall images very clearly, while others rely on what they have converted from image to semantic (in words) or procedural (in phases) memory, which has its disadvantages in terms of creativity.

Some with dyslexia can work out solutions to complex problems, quickly running through various options, discarding those they see won't work until they come up with the best solution. Computer modelling was developed based on this way of thinking.

The creative in people mustn't be side-lined in today's complex society where multidisciplinary solutions are needed to solve big problems. A major advantage comes with hiring people who have certain types of disabilities but who, as a result, develop superior capabilities in other areas. PWDs also often have a wonderful never-give-up attitude.

In training our learners, ICHAF makes use of various approaches and types of materials to help individuals with different learning styles.

As dyslexia is common, it helps many learners when we use the right techniques. We keep our groups small to ensure individual attention, while the environment is always friendly, low pressure and conducive to learning.