

Disclosure of Dyslexia

As a person with dyslexia, I frequently think about disclosure in employment when I am job seeking. Why do I hesitate to disclose my dyslexia? There is no legal requirement to disclose your disability. However the employer does need knowledge of your dyslexia in order for a legal duty to exist to provide adjustments to the employee or jobseeker. Disclosure is supposed to "kick start" the process of getting reasonable adjustments at work to prevent you from being substantially disadvantaged and to put you as that worn out clichéd saying "on a level playing field." Disclosure can be done at the beginning stage of the recruitment pre application: at application stage whilst completing the form, at the interview itself and crucially when you have signed your contract of employment. However when I sit down with an application in front of me, and I see the words, "Do you consider yourself to have a disability?" I think, shall I say yes or no. Shall I tick that box? Why do I have to even think that way? Why does it cross my mind? Well in theory I shouldn't worry as there is duty to make reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010, although not every person that has been assessed as having a "cognitive profile in line with dyslexia" (that's what written on my assessment) will be deemed to be covered under the Act and one must prove how dyslexia affects your day to day life to ascertain legally whether it is severe enough to be covered by the Equality Act.

For everyone else who is not dyslexic or doesn't have a disability it would be unnecessary to say anything about their challenges at work on the application form, which is a crucial stage, therefore, on a purely psychological bases this may put the dyslexic person in a more vulnerable mindset. Personally the following happens. My thoughts immediately fly into negative patterns from past discriminatory work experiences and also earlier terrible experiences of education and exams.

So from outset there is a clearly conscious psychological issue surrounding disclosure. The main reason why we dyslexics hesitate about disclosure is that we fear discrimination namely we won't get short listed. This is a real fear, not an imagined one. Employees are not easily in a position to find out whether their disclosure of dyslexia prevented them from being shortlisted unless one seeks a Freedom of Information Act disclosure. You can do this if you believe that you had all the abilities, skills and qualifications and the only reason they are not short listing you is your dyslexia; that's highly difficult point to prove. If you are able establish this you can in theory under the Equality Act have a case for disability discrimination.

Disclosure also highlights the lack of basic awareness of dyslexia both from employers and HR. This lack of awareness sometimes manifests itself in the stupid, ignorant and lazy assumptions (sorry I know these are very strong words but I think it is justifiable to use them) comments which have irritated us at the best and at the worst eroded our dignity and lowered our self esteem. More importantly, it can sometimes lead to anxiety and depression. Here is one example of lack of awareness from an employer. When I worked for North London Local authority and disclosed my dyslexia, without asking me if I had any difficulties, my line manager took away all my Excel data work where I needed to log information regarding my targets. She made assumptions about my capabilities without any discussion and I was left with the inability to administer my own tasks. I am sure she thought she was supporting me but she didn't consult with me first. I am sure you have had worse than this as this was quite an innocuous example where someone was trying to support but didn't have the good grace to ask my opinion on something that was specific to my learning difference.

If you do not disclose you cannot get your reasonable adjustments via the "Access to Work" programme, so most employees do disclose. There was however an occasion whilst working in Housing regeneration, where I did not disclose my dyslexia. I was able to have access to a personal assistant who drafted my letters over the phone and would support me with most of the administrative work that I needed. At this time I worked with very reasonable and fair people, which does make a huge difference. A personal assistant would always be my preferred adjustment in the ideal world.

Some dyslexic employees will not want to disclose especially those in highly professional jobs such: GP's; medical researchers, lawyers and people working within the financial sector. I personally have been a peer advocate for the above professions during work place capabilities meetings and disciplinarys. My clients have all informed me that their senior management team refused to believe that someone with dyslexia should be working in such a high status profession. Further my clients believed HR and senior management believed their differences to be an intellectual disability rather than processing and memory issue and because of this erroneous belief that there were incapable of doing the job to the standard required. So although they had disclosed and received reasonable adjustments there were still a lot of problems because of incorrect and discriminatory belief from senior management ie (those who run the business). The dyslexic employees I have worked with felt in a very anxious and vulnerable position at work as they encountered micro managed daily and every small misdemeanour was related to their dyslexia and this often lead to long periods off work due

to stress related issues. No one should feel this way especially a person who has worked extremely hard to overcome barriers and reached such a high level in a in his or her chosen profession.

Leading on from people who work in high status jobs; I recently read an article written by a person who was working in the banking sector and was assessed as being dyslexic in his forties. He stated that his employers who where an international company supported him totally and he had no problems with getting reasonable adjustments. It was great to read of a good employer but he then went on to say was he was" lucky". This lead me to think that disclosing and getting our adjustments are arbitrary and based on: the ethos of the organisation; their public profile do they shout loud and clear about diversity? (i.e. will they get them bad publicity with the media if someone takes them to tribunal) the size of the organisation; whether HR and line managers and senior managers have had the appropriate training. Training is usually one day, not much to ask to take one day out of your work to get basic awareness of dyslexia, when it could potentially affect more than 10% of your employees.

This leads on to another argument with disclosure. When you are working for small business which has only a small HR or no HR department what happens then? Employees may be less willing to disclose and less awareness of "Access to Work" provisions. Further there is not much acknowledging that dyslexia does have a socio-economic and cultural aspect. Many, particularly those in the lower paid professions and employees from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, may not be aware of the Equality Act or where to get a dyslexia assessment or afford to pay for one.

What are the solutions to make disclosure a positive experience for the employee with dyslexia? It is time for the national charities to discuss and campaign for training for HR professionals, in the same way as there campaigning for the schools to have more teachers trained in recognising and dealing with dyslexia. What happens when children leave education and go into the world of work? Adults still need support and there no support other than "Access to Work" and that is limited. There is very little support if you are having problems with the work load even with your adjustments and many HR and senior management seem to be operating in the dark ages when it comes to dyslexia and other hidden disabilities.

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