

A quick guide for Employers

SPECIFIC LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Hidden Impairments

The Dyscovery Centre

www.dyscovery.org

00 44 1633 432330

What are Specific Learning Difficulties?

Around 10% of the population have Specific Learning Difficulties/differences (also known by some as developmental disorders, neuro-diverse conditions or hidden impairments).

Individuals with Specific Learning Difficulties have the same range of intelligence as seen in the general population. Until relatively recently children were thought to 'grow out' of these difficulties as they became adults. However, it is now recognised that these conditions are lifelong, presenting in a variety of ways depending on the environmental context and tasks the individual has to do. Individuals who have one difficulty may also have areas of difficulty that overlap. They

Knowing how difficulties present and what to do can help you to maximise the potential of your workforce and work towards compliance under the Disability Discrimination Act (1995).

Benefits to the employer

Individuals with Specific Learning Difficulties have a lot to offer in the workplace. They are often reliable, hard-working and motivated. Many individuals will be highly skilled. They may also have had to find ways to overcome challenges and so can be resourceful.

Some individuals may be better able to see the 'big picture' and how things are connected, other individuals may have excellent creative skills and can see 'outside the box', while others may have technical skills of a high order and a good knowledge of facts and figures.

Specific Learning Difficulties

They include the following conditions:

- **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)**
 - Sometimes referred to as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).
- **Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (DCD)**
 - Sometimes referred to as Dyspraxia.
- **Dyslexia**
 - Sometimes referred to as reading or literacy disorders/difficulties.
- **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)**
 - Sometimes referred to as Asperger Syndrome (AS) and Autism.

Other conditions that adults may report as having a diagnosis of include:

- **Specific Language Impairments (SLI)**
 - Sometimes referred to as non-verbal learning disorder (NVLD) and may include receptive language, expressive language and pragmatic language difficulties.
- **Dyscalculia**
 - Sometimes referred to as numeracy disorders/difficulties.
- **Dysgraphia**
 - A specific writing and recording difficulty.

What is Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (DCD)/Dyspraxia?

Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (DCD), also known as Dyspraxia in the UK, is a **motor co-ordination** disorder affecting about 2-3% of the adult population and impacting on everyday life skills. DCD/Dyspraxia is distinct from other motor disorders such as cerebral palsy and stroke.

Difficulties described by adults are as follows:

- May affect everyday life skills e.g. preparing a meal, ironing.
- Difficulties with handwriting.
- Skills requiring balance.
- Slower learning a new skill requiring speed and accuracy.
- Learning to drive a car.
- With organisation, time management and planning skills.
- With taking information down at speed.

What is Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)/Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)?

ADHD affects around 1-2% of the population. Individuals with ADHD may vary in how their symptoms present depending on the level of demand on them and characteristics of the environment they are working in (e.g. levels of noise etc.). It affects attention and concentration.

Difficulties described by adults are as follows:

- **Impulsivity** - could be demonstrated by speaking and acting without thinking, interrupting others, difficulty waiting turn, lack of awareness of the context in which the person is behaving.
- **Hyperactivity** - this is more obvious in childhood. In adults this may be observed by a difficulty sitting still, being restless and fidgety such as tapping feet, being over-talkative.
- **Inattention** - can result in being easily distracted, having poor concentration, difficulty organising themselves and their work without practising and automating procedures, starting but finding it hard to finish tasks, starting a task and missing steps in the instructions.

What is Dyslexia?

Dyslexia affects about 8-10% of the population. Individuals with Dyslexia may have **difficulties with reading and/or spelling** and may also have difficulties with recording, organisation and planning.

Difficulties described by adults are as follows:

- Taking longer to read documents.
- Making spelling errors, missing out key words.
- Difficulty with structuring a document.
- Telling others they have Dyslexia and may be reluctant to discuss their difficulties.
- Feeling confident to ask questions or for help and may appear anxious.
- Remembering their appointments, finding their way to or around unfamiliar premises and being on time.
- Remembering to bring necessary paperwork.
- Remembering instructions.
- Filling in forms, especially if handwritten.
- Task completion and learning new skills.
- Organisational skills may be poor.
- Taking down information accurately while on the phone

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) affects about 1% of the population. It is a spectrum of difficulties that affect how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. ASD includes Autism, Asperger Syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified. The 'spectrum' element of the disorder means that while all people with ASDs share certain difficulties, their condition will affect them in different ways and to varying degrees.

The three main areas of difficulty are:

- Difficulty with **social interaction**
- Difficulty with **social communication**
- Difficulty with **social imagination**

Difficulties described by adults are as follows:

- Telling others they have ASD; they may assume that you already know about their difficulties as people with ASDs.
- Finding it hard to see things from other people's perspective.
- Reluctance to discuss their difficulties.
- Feeling confident asking questions or for help and may appear anxious. A person with an ASD may be anxious when faced with unfamiliar situations, questions or dealing with new people.
- Waiting for something or somebody without explanation.
- May not come across in the way they intend.
- Appear very able yet face real difficulties in getting to appointments on their own, coping with a change to routine and performing well in interviews.
- Dressing/presenting themselves appropriately.
- Staying calm if they feel irritated or frustrated by other people or the environment. Some individuals may become confrontational.
- May require the job to be broken into tasks through the day to remember all the parts of the job (including the tasks that they are good at and not so good at).
- Some sensory difficulties e.g. sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light or colour. This may cause anxiety.

Ways for employers to provide support

Below are some tips for achieving best practice in supporting individuals with a 'hidden impairment' in the workplace. It is important to consider that not all individuals with Specific Learning Difficulties choose to disclose their difficulties in the workplace and so these tips may be used to support any employee struggling in a given area. The following suggestions are a guide and should be discussed with/tailored to the individual.

Job Applications

- Avoid handwritten applications or cover notes.
- Clearly worded adverts listing only the skills/qualifications that are absolutely essential for the job.
- Ensure that the job application forms and other written materials are in Arial, Comic Sans Serif – font size 12 +.
- Ensure with Web-based application forms that the form is 'stable' and does not move or lose its format when it is being completed.
- Offer telephone completion of application as an alternative.
- Check if form can be read out on a text-to-speech reader.

Pre- interview stage

- Give clear information about what will be expected at the interview and what needs to be brought along to the interview and email/post this information to the candidate. Send clear instructions on how to get to the interview using Google maps as well as a paper one.
- Tell the applicant how much time the interview will take.
- Describe any tasks that will be asked of the candidate and give some indication of the content/types of questions that may be asked.
- Consider that the tasks asked in the interview reflect what is expected of the individual in reality in the job regarding level of skill and time allowed.

Interview stage

- Additional time in a quiet room should be offered, especially if novel tasks are being asked of the candidate.
- Be patient and allow extra time for answering questions.
- Avoid ambiguous questions. If answers are brief then prompt with further questions to seek more information.
- Ask one question at a time, rather than multi-part questions.
- Be prepared to repeat questions if the candidate seems uncertain.
- Ask questions based on the candidate's real/past experiences.
- Consider a work trial as an alternative to an interview.

- Be aware that questions may be interpreted literally e.g. in answer to the question “how did you get to where you are now”.... The answer might be “on the bus”.
- Be aware that eye contact may vary and be difficult for some candidates.

Starting the job

- Pre-visit orientation for the job may reduce anxiety and allow the individual to understand the set-up of the organisation.
- Any information on the organisation should be sent out before the start of the job with clear expectations of the working day and breaks, holiday provision etc.
- Go through the job description in detail at a quiet time and describe what is expected of the individual on day-to-day basis and how these expectations will be measured.
- Be clear about time frames, dress code, social expectations as well.
- Allocate a mentor, where appropriate, to assist a new employee until they are settled in. Also consider a mentor if the workplace changes in layout or in the type of work the employee is being asked to complete.
- Discuss who their line manager is and how often they should report to them.
- If there are processes to be learnt, plan for someone to show the individual how to do these. Videoing the tasks required may also help the individual by replaying this if required. Encourage the individual to make notes as they go so they can recall later.
- Consider an assessment in the workplace to understand specific adaptations such as software to assist with proofing and spelling.
- Check what organisational techniques they use already, such as a diary system, to ensure this links with the job processes.
- Discuss with the individual reasonable adjustments and how these can be best achieved.
- Consider ways of applicants disclosing and how this will be relayed appropriately to the line manager and peers.
- Discuss skills gaps that may require additional training – e.g. answering phones, data entry.

Day-to-day in the job

- Consider the workplace setting; a workspace area that is away from general office traffic and visual distractions such as clutter may be beneficial to the employee.
- Make clear the rules of the work setting - appearance, break times etc.
- Explain acronyms and create a 'dictionary' of terms for all new starters.
- Break down new skills/tasks into parts and demonstrate as well as tell the person how to do it - allow sufficient practice time to master a new skill. Be patient.
- Define clear plans and outcomes expected of the individual. Check for understanding.
- Avoid ambiguous instructions such as -"you could do this".... "please do this" is better.
- Provide *regular* meetings for review and opportunity to seek clarification – these don't need to be long. Provide regular feedback to the individual.
- Consider how tasks can be broken into parts through the day in order to remember all the parts of the job (including the tasks that they are both good and not so good at).
- Be prepared to consider template reports for repeat work if in an office setting.
- Do not ask an individual to read information aloud, present in front of peers, write on a white board or take minutes in a meeting without prior agreement.

Further information:

The Dyscovery Centre, University of Wales, Newport :www.dyscovery.org

This is an internationally recognised centre providing resources, workplace assessments and training for organisations wanting to become more aware of how to adapt their workplace to meet the DDA requirements.

See also: www.boxofideas.org and www.spldtransitions.co.uk

The Centre can provide workplace assessments, training for staff and guidance and support for both the employer and employee.

Other useful organisations include:

JobCentrePlus Disability Employment Advisor www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/EmploymentSupport/LookingForWork/DG_4000324	Afasic www.afasicengland.org.uk
Nextstep www.nextstep.org.uk	National Autistic Society www.autism.org.uk
Adult Attention Deficit Disorder – UK (AADD-UK) www.aadd.org.uk	Disability Rights Commission (DRC) www.drc.gb.org
British Association for Supported Employment (BASE) www.base-uk.org	British Dyslexia Association www.bdadyslexia.org.uk
Disability Toolkits www.disabilitytoolkits.ac.uk	Dyslexia Action www.dyslexiaaction.org.uk
Developmental Adult Neuro-Diversity Association (DANDA) www.danda.org.uk	Information and Support Service (ADDISS) www.addiss.co.uk
The Dyspraxia Foundation www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk	Adult Attention Deficit Disorder – UK (AADD-UK) www.aadd.org.uk