

Recruitment practice for dyslexic and neurodiverse people; opening doors to employment

Submission by Prospect to the Westminster AchieveAbility Commission

April 2017

www.prospect.org.uk

Introduction

1. Prospect is an independent trade union that represents more than 140,000 professionals, managers and specialists in the public and private sectors. Our members work in a range of industries including: aviation, agriculture, defence, education, energy, entertainment, environment, heritage, industry, media, scientific research and telecommunications.

Other Relevant Information - Response to DWP Green Paper & Website

2. On 17 February 2017 Prospect responded to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), 'Improving Lives, The Work, Health and Disability' Green Paper. Prospect would like to refer the AchieveAbility Commission to this report which also includes much relevant material. In particular please note Chapter 1: Tackling the disability employment gap, with a section on Embracing Diversity, and Chapter 6: How can we bring about a shift in society's wider attitudes to make progress and achieve long-lasting change? This section includes a case study where a workplace-network provided awareness-raising sessions including one on dyslexia and another on autism at work.

3. Additionally the neurodiversity section of Prospect's website provides much relevant information and explains in more detail some of the issues covered in the following submission. Please see: <https://www.prospect.org.uk/at-work/neurodiversity/>

Valuing Talent & Diversity

4. Many managers, professionals and specialists represented by Prospect are dyslexic / neurodiverse and are often very successful. However, they also face many challenges, frequently because their organisations fail to fully understand their strengths and weaknesses and do not provide the working environment they need to succeed and flourish. One hurdle for them will have been the recruitment process which can bring particular challenges – see below.

High-Ability Profile - Differences & Issues

5. Many of Prospect's members are of high ability and carry out well-rewarded jobs. Those who are neurodiverse will have often learned to compensate for many of the difficulties they experienced when they were younger and in full-time education. For instance, high-ability dyslexics may have above-average reading and writing skills, (although perhaps still not be as fast as their neurotypical peers at drafting reports or obtaining the full meaning from complicated written text). It is likely that other differences that may not be immediately apparent, will be of equal or greater significance for them in the workplace. For instance they may have to work hard to put in place strategies to stay organised, develop fluency in verbal communication, and find ways to manage meetings while remembering everyone's names and the detail of what was said.

6. The needs of dyslexic young people who have difficulty learning to read, or adults who struggle with basic literacy can be obvious, however often not so apparent are the needs of the high-ability, literacy-competent, dyslexic graduates who are looking for their first job. Similarly, the very many able adults with dyslexia who appear to read and write normally but who may be struggling in a job, which with a few changes would allow them to succeed and flourish.

7. Terminology also impacts. We should avoid using 'specific learning disability' which is unlikely to be considered an appropriate or helpful label by someone who is dyslexic and in a professional or management role.

Proactive workplace adjustments that benefit everyone

8. Although many neurodiverse Prospect members may not regard themselves as having a hidden disability, it can be to their considerable advantage that the Equalities Act 2010 (and previous legislation) recognises differences such as these as disabilities where they have a substantial and long-term effect. So there is a legal responsibility for employers to take appropriate action.

9. Prospect's Equality Briefing on Neurodiversity and Discrimination includes information which is relevant to recruitment and also retention:

'Because neurodiverse conditions are "hidden disabilities" it is good practice for employers to make proactive adjustments to anticipate the needs of their workers. These are often straightforward changes that are likely to benefit everyone in the workplace. In particular, good practice should be embedded in procedures such as selection, recruitment and promotion, training and development and performance management'.

10. Examples of proactive adjustments include:

- Procedures that take account of diversity generally, and facilitate some flexibility so that employees' strengths can be recognised and as far as possible job roles tailored to make best use of these strengths.
- Assessment procedures that take account of the characteristics of people with different neurodiverse conditions and are designed to test for requirements which are actually essential for the job, rather than those that are not fundamental to it. (Often someone with a neurodiverse condition will be able to achieve their job objectives but use a different strategy from that which is expected).

11. Examples of other proactive measures are given, such as providing quieter workspaces to minimise distractions and ensuring that written and verbal communications are clear and concise. These are measures that are relevant to the overall recruitment process, since the overall process includes a new employee successfully completing their trial period, not just the initial selection and appointment.

Recruitment and Appointment

12. Many commonly used assessment and recruitment procedures can discriminate against dyslexic candidates because their methodology does not take account of the individual's cognitive differences. This can happen in several different ways. For instance the results of psychometric testing can be poorly understood by the non-specialist who, for instance has been briefed to select all-round higher performers. A dyslexic profile may show very high results in some subtests and low ones in others, for instance associated with working memory. A better briefed recruitment manager may realise that the individual with this atypical profile could be a great asset to his company if placed in the appropriate job role, particularly if other evidence is available to support this, such as a record of achievement or a specialist skill.

13. Dyslexic candidates are likely to have difficulty remembering the detail of a complicated spoken interview question. Selection exercises that entail reading a lot of information and writing answers in a short time are also likely to be problematic.

14. It should also be recognised that some competent dyslexic candidates may not always be able to explain something they understand well, as clearly and succinctly as might be expected by someone else of comparable ability who is not dyslexic.

15. A key issue is that recruitment managers should have a clear understanding of the abilities and skills that are actually required for a particular job role and devise tests and selection procedures that test for these and not for other attributes that are not relevant to the job in question.

16. This is a significant issue as some of the difficulties and barriers high-ability neurodiverse people face, for instance as they leave university and seek work, are likely to be different from those with more obvious literacy weaknesses. It is important that these more subtle and not always obvious differences are understood, so adjustments can be made to the selection and recruitment process that are appropriate to their needs and allows their often considerable talents to be recognised.

Remaining In Work – Retention

17. Prospect would like to take this opportunity to address the ways in which employers can assist people to stay in employment. As mentioned above, many neurodiverse people have developed coping mechanisms and our experience is that these break down at the time of reorganisations and under performance management regimes which are punitive unless there is perfection in all aspects.

18. Allowing movement between job roles can, for instance, ensure that the strengths of a neurodiverse employee are utilised in a role that suits them rather than focusing unduly on weaknesses and pursuing inappropriate performance management actions which become increasingly counter-productive.

19. More tailored reasonable adjustments can be implemented once a Workplace Needs Assessment has been carried out, including specialist one-to-one training for the individual, taking account of gaps identified by the diagnostic and workplace assessments, provision of appropriate software and recognition that overworking is a common compensatory strategy that in the longer-term can lead to stress and burnout. - So reasonable adjustments should be put in place promptly even if an individual's performance is good.

20. Coaching that helps dyslexic people develop compensating strategies to overcome their underlying inefficient short-term memories and other cognitive differences can be of crucial assistance. Sometimes the most effective adjustment will be changing job responsibilities or re-allocating certain tasks to colleagues, so the neurodiverse employee can spend the majority of their time working on what they excel at.

A Whole Employer Approach

21. Best outcomes are achieved when everyone in an organisation is aware of neurodiverse issues and there is a culture of recognising non-typical skills and talents.

22. As explained by the British Dyslexia Association, people with dyslexia often exhibit a range of skills. These include 'big picture' thinking, problem-solving and lateral thinking abilities, an instinctive understanding of how things work, originality, creativity and exceptional visual-spatial skills. According to Julie Logan (Professor of Entrepreneurship, Cass Business School, London) 10% of employees are dyslexic but 35% of entrepreneurs are dyslexic.

23. There is perhaps an increasing awareness that dyslexic and other neurodiverse people have many abilities that are of great value to employers. Roderick Nicolson, Professor of Psychology at Sheffield University, explains the positive dyslexic attributes and how these can lead to superior performance in many areas. Dyslexia and neurodiversity awareness training in the workplace can help to spread this understanding and develop a culture that facilitates the recruitment and retention of dyslexic people into the workforce.

Conclusion

24. Prospect welcomes the Westminster AchieveAbility Commission's inquiry and its focus on opening doors to employment. However to sustain improvements in workplace practice and to enable neurodiverse people to have fulfilling careers, equal attention needs to be given to retaining and progressing them in employment. It is in this context that unions such as Prospect have an important role to play.