

Dyslexia at Work

Dyslexia can affect working life even when a person is highly experienced, capable and knowledgeable. Modern jobs depend heavily on written information: emails, reports, instructions, forms, meeting notes, online systems, deadlines and documentation. A dyslexic employee may understand their role extremely well while needing more time, different technology or a clearer format for some literacy-heavy tasks. The aim of workplace support is not to lower standards, but to remove avoidable barriers so that ability can be seen.

What dyslexia can look like at work

An employee may read documents slowly, reread emails, spell inconsistently, transpose letters, struggle to take notes while listening, forget multi-step verbal instructions or need longer to organise a written response. They may find unfamiliar names and technical terms difficult to retrieve or pronounce. Some people are particularly affected when rushed. The pattern varies, and an individual may be very strong in some written tasks while finding others disproportionately demanding.

The hidden workload

Many adults have developed sophisticated compensatory strategies. They may arrive early to read information before meetings, stay late to check emails, rewrite messages several times or memorise common procedures to avoid reading them repeatedly. Because the final work may be accurate, colleagues can underestimate the effort involved. A useful workplace conversation considers not only whether the employee completes the task, but how much time and cognitive energy the task requires.

Emails and written communication

Email can create pressure because reading, interpreting tone, planning a response, spelling and proofreading all happen in one activity. Speech-to-text can help capture ideas quickly, while text-to-speech can make proofreading easier. Templates are useful for repeated messages. For important emails, separating drafting from checking can reduce overload. A spelling error should not automatically be treated as evidence that the employee lacks care or professionalism.

Reports and longer documents

Long documents can be difficult both to read and to produce. Clear headings, summaries, bullet points where appropriate and accessible spacing can help navigation. When writing, outlining the structure before drafting can prevent ideas becoming lost. Speech-to-text, document templates and proofreading tools can reduce the mechanical burden. If the role requires highly accurate written material, a standard checking process can support quality without relying on repeated self-correction under pressure.

Meetings

Listening, processing, contributing and taking notes simultaneously can overload working memory. Providing an agenda in advance allows preparation. Key actions can be confirmed in writing afterwards. Where appropriate, meeting transcription or recording tools can support recall, subject to workplace policies and confidentiality requirements. An employee who takes fewer notes may actually be concentrating more effectively on the discussion.

Verbal instructions

Long strings of spoken instructions can be difficult to retain. A short follow-up email, checklist or task-management entry can make the information persistent. Managers can give instructions in manageable stages and identify priorities clearly. Asking an employee to repeat the plan in their own words can confirm shared understanding, but it should be done respectfully rather than as a memory test.

Reading under pressure

Reading can become harder when someone is watched or expected to respond immediately. An employee may understand a report well when given time but struggle if asked to read a paragraph aloud in a meeting. Where immediate oral reading is not an essential job requirement, it is usually unnecessary as a test of competence. Providing material in advance allows the employee to process the content and contribute more meaningfully.

Forms, systems and administration

Workplace forms, expense systems, HR portals and online training can involve dense instructions and unfamiliar terminology. Reader modes, text-to-speech, zoom, saved templates and step-by-step guidance can help. For processes used infrequently, a personalised checklist can prevent the employee having to relearn the sequence each time. Simplifying an unnecessarily complicated process can benefit the whole team.

Organisation and deadlines

Some dyslexic people experience difficulty sequencing information or keeping track of written tasks, particularly when several demands compete at once. Digital calendars, task boards, labelled reminders and visible deadlines can reduce reliance on memory. Large projects can be divided into dated stages. A consistent system is usually more useful than several separate apps that each need to be checked.

Proofreading

Proofreading your own writing is difficult because the brain often reads what it expects to see. Changing the format, increasing the font size or using text-to-speech can make errors easier to notice. Reading from the end sentence by sentence can help when checking spelling because it reduces attention to meaning. For high-stakes documents, peer checking may be a sensible quality-control process rather than a special concession.

Assistive technology

Useful tools can include text-to-speech, speech-to-text, predictive text, spelling and grammar support, digital dictionaries, screen readers, document templates, task-management systems and meeting transcription where appropriate. The best tool depends on the barrier. Employees also need time to learn new software; technology that is introduced without training can create additional cognitive load rather than reducing it.

Reasonable adjustments in the UK

Dyslexia may amount to a disability under the Equality Act 2010 where its effects meet the legal definition. Where the duty applies, employers must consider reasonable adjustments to remove substantial disadvantage. Adjustments are individual and may include changes to how information is presented, assistive software, additional processing time, written follow-up to verbal instructions, appropriate training or changes to particular working practices. The conversation should focus on functional barriers rather than assuming one standard package suits everyone.

Access to Work

Access to Work is a UK government programme that may provide practical workplace support for eligible people whose disability or health condition affects their work. Depending on individual circumstances, support can include specialist equipment, software or other assistance. It does not replace an employer's responsibility to consider reasonable adjustments. Eligibility and provision can change, so current details should be checked directly through GOV.UK.

Disclosure

Some people are comfortable telling colleagues they are dyslexic; others are not. Disclosure is a personal decision, although an employer will generally need enough information about a disadvantage to consider appropriate support. An employee does not need to explain every aspect of their history to have a practical conversation about a barrier. It can be useful to describe the task, what happens, the impact and the adjustment that would help.

A workplace support conversation

Task: What part of the job is creating difficulty? **Barrier:** Is the problem reading speed, spelling, memory, note-taking, processing or organisation? **Impact:** What happens to accuracy, time, fatigue or confidence? **Current strategy:** What already works? **Adjustment:** What practical change could reduce the barrier? **Review:** Try the change and assess whether it improves access without creating another difficulty.

Confidence and masking

Adults who were criticised for literacy difficulties at school may bring that history into the workplace. A simple request to write on a shared screen or read aloud can trigger intense anxiety. Some employees hide dyslexia until the effort of compensating becomes unsustainable. A psychologically safer workplace allows someone to use tools openly and ask for information in an accessible format without being treated as less competent.

Strengths at work

People with dyslexia have diverse strengths, just like everyone else. Some may be particularly effective communicators, practical problem-solvers, strategic thinkers or creative contributors, but these should not be assumed to be universal 'dyslexic gifts'. Managers should identify the actual strengths of the individual employee and make sure literacy barriers do not prevent those strengths from being recognised.

Career progression

Dyslexia should not automatically limit progression. Employees may avoid promotion because they expect increased paperwork, presentations or administrative responsibility. Career planning can examine which tasks are genuinely essential, which can be supported with technology and which processes can be redesigned. Leadership, judgement and professional expertise are not measured by spelling speed.

For managers and colleagues

Provide key information clearly, allow reasonable processing time and avoid unnecessary public correction. If spelling matters, explain why and agree a checking process. If an employee asks for written instructions, do not interpret this as inattentiveness. Keep adjustment conversations private. Most importantly, evaluate the person's work against the real requirements of the role rather than against assumptions about how quickly a competent person should read or write.

A message to take away

You can be excellent at your job and dyslexic. Using speech-to-text, listening to a document, asking for written instructions, checking spelling or taking longer to read complex information does not reduce your professional value. Good support makes it easier for your knowledge, experience and judgement to be visible. The goal is not to hide dyslexia successfully; it is to work in a way that is accurate, sustainable and allows you to contribute fully.

Further support

For UK workplace information, current guidance can be sought from GOV.UK, Acas and specialist dyslexia organisations. Employees can also discuss support with a manager, HR, occupational health or an appropriate workplace-needs assessor where available. Keeping examples of difficult tasks and strategies that help can make adjustment conversations more specific and productive.

Space to Breathe Therapy