DYSCALCULIA AT WORK

The hidden numerical demands of working life

Dyscalculia affects number processing, not intelligence, commitment or professional ability.

Everyday working life can require rapid calculations, remembering number sequences, reading dates and times, interpreting charts or checking quantities. Someone may be excellent at the main responsibilities of their job while finding these particular tasks exhausting.

What difficulties can look like on an ordinary working day

START OF SHIFT

Reading a changing rota; confusing 08:30 with 08:50; working out when to leave home.

DURING THE DAY

Estimating how long a task will take; tracking breaks, deadlines and appointment times.

MONEY & FIGURES

Checking a till, invoice, mileage claim or expenses; transposing digits under pressure.

TOOLS & MEASURES

Reading scales, quantities, stock counts, dosage-like labels or dimensions accurately.

REPORTING

Interpreting spreadsheet totals, percentages, targets and numerical meeting updates.

The less visible challenge

Many workers have spent years hiding difficulties, double-checking everything, avoiding particular tasks or working unpaid extra time. Anxiety about being judged can increase the load. These experiences deserve practical support, not assumptions about competence.

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Time, rotas, deadlines and measurements

Make information visible, consistent and easy to check.

A rota can be hard to decode

Changing shifts, 12- and 24-hour clocks, dates that look alike, and calculating travel or break times can create uncertainty. A written weekly view and reminders can reduce the mental arithmetic.

Practical ways through

Use one calendar format, colour-code shifts, set alerts for leaving and starting, and provide changes in writing. Confirm exact start and finish times rather than saying “half an hour earlier”.

EXAMPLE: A CLEARER WEEKLY ROTA

DAY	START	FINISH	BREAK	NOTE
MON	09:00	17:00	13:00	Office
TUE	10:00	18:00	14:00	Remote
WED	09:30	16:30	12:30	Training

Deadlines and task estimates

Break work into visible steps with individual due dates. Use a countdown or visual timer if helpful, but do not assume everyone finds timers comfortable. Allow extra processing time when figures must be checked.

Measurements, quantities and practical tasks

Give reference charts, labelled measuring tools and worked examples. For safety-critical quantities, use a clearly agreed independent checking process. Do not rely on mental calculation or verbal instructions alone.

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Spreadsheets, money and checking figures

Separate the task from the pressure to calculate quickly.

Numerical information is often presented as though it should be instantly obvious. Clear layouts, formulas, labels and permission to check can make data much more accessible.

EXAMPLE: A SIMPLE EXPENSES SPREADSHEET

ITEM	QUANTITY	COST EACH	LINE TOTAL
Travel	2	£12.00	£24.00
Parking	1	£6.50	£6.50
Supplies	3	£4.00	£12.00

AUTOMATIC TOTAL **£42.50**

Make checking a normal part of the process

USE FORMULAS	Use protected spreadsheet formulas for totals; avoid repeated manual arithmetic.
LABEL CLEARLY	Keep units, dates, decimal places and currency symbols visible.
CHECK IN TWO WAYS	Compare totals with source documents and use a second checker where needed.
REDUCE PRESSURE	Allow time to review before submitting invoices, orders or reports.

Meetings and targets

Provide numerical data before meetings, explain what a percentage or target means in practical terms, and allow written follow-up questions. A worker should not have to calculate aloud to demonstrate their expertise.

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Adjustments, confidence and a workable plan

Identify the barrier, agree a reliable system and keep the person’s strengths visible.

Reasonable adjustments and assistive technology

Useful adjustments may include calculators, spreadsheet templates, visual schedules, written instructions, reminders, speech-to-text or text-to-speech tools, extra checking time, accessible training and a consistent process for numerical tasks. What helps will differ by person and role.

For the employee

Describe the task that causes difficulty, when it happens, what you currently do to manage it, and which change would make it more reliable.

For the manager

Ask what would help; agree practical adjustments without making assumptions about ability. Review whether the change actually works.

Access to Work and UK workplace support

In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 may require employers to make reasonable adjustments where its disability provisions apply. Access to Work may provide support beyond an employer’s reasonable adjustments, subject to eligibility and assessment. Applications and awards are individual; funding is not automatic.

A simple conversation starter

“I’m confident with the main parts of my role, but some numerical tasks take longer and are easier to get wrong when rushed. Could we look at a template, written steps or a checking system so I can complete them accurately?”

My workplace action plan

THE TASK I FIND DIFFICULT

e.g. interpreting rota changes

WHAT MAKES IT HARDER

e.g. last-minute verbal updates

WHAT COULD HELP

e.g. a shared written calendar

WHO I CAN DISCUSS IT WITH

e.g. manager or workplace support