

Accommodating the worker with learning disabilities

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People with learning disabilities (LD) are a diverse group: two people with LD labels are seldom alike. As an employer, you will probably develop a productive and collaborative relationship with measurable goals that need to be accomplished for your company. However, it is helpful to understand strategies that may help employees reach their goals. These strategies (or accommodations) can be developed over the course of the relationship, and the employee can also take these strategies into their personal and professional lives.

Some adults with LD live in isolation due to poorly developed social skills. In some cases, the language processing centres also make it difficult to process social data. According to academic Henry B. Reiff, “Someone who does not process spoken language well, either receptively or expressively or both, may be at risk for not understanding everything that is said or not being able to express what he or she really means.”

In Western culture, communication skills tend to be learned over a period of time, but are not specifically taught; for example, 70 per cent of communication is non-verbal, consisting of gestures, eye contact, posture and other non-verbal cues that emphasize engagement or suggest that it is time to end the conversation. Some people with LD may not have developed the skills to interpret these cues and may be unaware of their own social awkwardness. As an employer, it is important to facilitate goal-setting by remaining patient and looking for alternative strategies. Here are some LD-specific strategies which may help the employee with LD cope better in the workplace.

Receptive Language Problems

People with receptive language problems may have difficulty processing oral and written language, which could include difficulties with reading comprehension, following conversations, understanding humour and remembering complex, spoken information. Suggested strategies can include:

- Using short, simple sentences and words.**
- Allowing sufficient time to process information.**
- Maintaining eye contact.**
- Asking questions and having the information repeated back to you as it has been understood by the individual.**

Expressive Language Difficulties

People with expressive language difficulties may have issues using written and oral language to interact in meaningful ways. Some indicators of expressive language issues include having smaller vocabularies, speaking in short, clipped sentences, using a lot of “filler” words, being unable to recall words or using misplaced words in conversation. When confronted by these types of issues, try:

- **Modelling effective listening skills, including verbal prompts and encouragers, and using appropriate non-verbal contact.**
- **Encouraging simple responses if necessary.**
- **Reserving judgment and encouraging the employee to answer questions in his own words; use a simple statement to relieve his anxiety, such as, “Tell me the words floating around in your head.”**

Reading Challenges

Most people associate reading challenges with LD, usually applying the term “dyslexia” to the condition. Dyslexia is a somewhat dated term, and is often applied to written and oral expression. In Britain, the term is often applied generically to describe all forms of LD. Reading involves decoding words, as well as blending and distinguishing sounds, in order to process and comprehend written information. Decoding challenges may result in reading comprehension problems that could affect spelling, as well as understanding job applications, written policies and procedures, or other forms of written information. Deal with these types of issues by:

- **Discussing material prior to reading it.**
- **Keeping reading materials short or breaking longer passages into chunks.**
- **Allowing extra time to process information.**
- **Asking for feedback on what the individual has read and understood.**
- **Using tape recorders, books on tape, and supplementing written information with pictures.**

Dyscalculia (Mathematics Disorder)

Math problems involve difficulties with calculating or numeric reasoning that is far below the person’s intellectual capacity or age. The issue may be relevant to difficulties in language processing, reading, visual or visual-motor processing. The person may have difficulty understanding sequences of mathematical steps, copying figures, counting or understanding non-verbal concepts such as time, space and quantity. With this type of disorder, it may be effective to try the following:

- **Using calculators, talking calculators and other adaptive technologies.**
- **Breaking learning steps into small chunks.**
- **Allowing for extra processing time.**

Non-verbal Learning Disabilities

“Non-verbal LD” is a somewhat controversial term that describes a cluster of deficits that may be related to difficulties with some visual-spatial or conceptual tasks. Common issues may include poor mathematical or motor skills, social perception problems or difficulties with problem solving in new situations. However, people with this label often possess exceptional verbal skills, although bluntness and gullibility could be part of this issue. This LD cluster is not as well known as other types. Again, no two people with this label are alike, so the following strategies are guidelines only. LD Online (www.ldonline.org) is a good source of information. Suggested strategies include the following:

- **Breaking tasks into smaller, manageable tasks,**
- **Using positive self-talk to bolster self-esteem,**
- **Using the same technique to “walk through” tasks and committing routines to memory,**
- **Remaining patient and creating supportive environments.**
- **Dialoguing with the person to anticipate consequences and outcomes of new situations.**
- **Encouraging use of a keyboard as an alternative to handwriting.**
- **Modelling and verbalizing expected behaviours.**
- **Encouraging the employee to join small groups of people who share the same interests when he/she is ready to do so.**
- **Helping the person to understand other people’s feelings.**

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

ADHD is thought to affect two to four per cent of the population. It is actually a disorder of the frontal lobes, which are responsible for synthesizing information and blocking out distractions from the outside world. It frequently coexists with LD in up to 40 per cent of diagnosed cases, where LD is considered the primary barrier. There are typically three types of ADHD: Inattentive (dreamy, spacey behaviour), Impulsive (short attention spans, frequently and easily distracted), and Combined. Other issues include poor working memory, inability to regulate emotions, poor motor skills and poor self-regulation skills. Mentors may want to consider

- **Providing a non-distracting workspace (visual and auditory).**
- **Using video or audiotape instructions to assist with auditory memory problems.**
- **Creating checklists for the employee to follow.**
- **Providing written instructions and communications.**
- **Offering more structure and deadlines; two 15minute meetings each week can help the employee stay on track.**

- **Avoiding unstructured work that does not coincide with regular routine/work activities.**
- **Requesting remediation (i.e., tutoring, training, mentoring) to help with language, vision or speech therapy in areas of deficit, or promote workplace literacy training.**
- **Allowing frequent breaks.**

A common misperception many employers have about working with almost any kind of disability is the expense involved. In fact, learning disabilities are often among the cheapest of disabilities to accommodate, once the major problem areas have been pinpointed. Bear in mind, as job roles change, accommodations may need to be changed as well, but a job analysis conducted before roles change can do much to rectify this issue.

In the following case study, employers can see that learning disabilities can be easily accommodated once the key challenges have been made clear.

A worker with Attention Deficit Disorder and Central Auditory Processing issues had difficulty with time management, resulting in frequent lateness to work. The problem was chronic, and the employee was persistently burdened with feelings of guilt, fatigue and anxiety, which affected her work performance. Two alarm clocks were strategically placed around the house, so she was forced to get up on time. A third alarm clock indicated when it was time to leave the house. This helped her to arrive at work on time and improved her performance. Cost of accommodation: \$20 for an additional clock.

The counsellors at Project GOLD and ALDER work closely with clients to help them identify their accommodation needs. You will note how simple most of these are. With these simple tools and measures in place, employees become more confident, productive and creative collaborators in the workplace.

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