

Dyslexia in Hospitality

A review of strategies to minimise impact on dyslexic applicants and staff

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1. INTRODUCTION

The hotel and catering industry is based upon creativity and customer service - with people skills, dedication and hard work forming the main prerequisites for a strong career. Traditionally the industry has attracted many who have not performed well academically and, perhaps not surprisingly, the anecdotal evidence suggests that there are a high proportion of catering and hospitality employees with learning difficulties or dyslexia. This observation is supported by the fact that of all departments at Oxford Brookes University, Tourism and Hospitality has a disproportionate number of students who are registered as dyslexic.

Why does this matter?

Generally speaking, people with dyslexia have an issue with processing information. This is in no way connected to IQ or mental impairment and in fact, because people with dyslexia have to try harder than the average student or employee to carry out tasks related to reading, writing and/or arithmetic, they tend to be quite dedicated and committed and also often have compensating strengths around the areas of creativity and interpersonal skills. Ironically, these skills are 2 vital skills in our industry.

So how do we ensure that we do not unnecessarily screen out or create barriers for those with dyslexia and in doing so enable them to grow and thrive in our businesses? That's not an easy question to answer.

Dyslexic people vary in the severity of their difficulties and the ways in which they have trouble processing information. For example, some simply have difficulty spelling, others have trouble with reading and comprehension or sentence structure and many have trouble with numbers (known as Dyscalculia.) Because of this, there is no 'one size fits all' solution.

In order to explore this and establish ways in which organisations might become more 'dyslexia friendly' we have interviewed a number of people working in the industry who have found strategies for coping with being dyslexic in the workplace.

Section 2 tells you some of their stories and sections 3 and 4 set out some advice from our dyslexic interviewees.

2a. CASE STUDY 1 – MILD DYSLEXIA

Hotel Sales Manager

Difficulties:

- Reading – particularly out loud
- Spelling
- Sentence construction

Education:

Primary School

- Simply couldn't read 'it' despite coaxing from mother.
- Mother discussed with Headmaster and queried dyslexia, she was told that he didn't believe in such things and 'he is just slow' refused testing or additional help.
- Headmaster went so far as to warn his parents that they should get used to the fact right now that their child would never be able to go to Uni or get a degree – he did and he has.

University

- Had developed coping strategies, had a fellow student who had straight A's except in social sciences – lecturer pulled her aside and suggested this was unusual, tested and was Dyslexic.
- Upon hearing this story, he approached his own lecturer about dyslexia and was told he was coping fine and couldn't be tested – Tests cost £2k at the time.
- Simply took time, tried to think ahead and was very careful with spelling and handwriting.

Workplace:

- Generally ok, computers are a 'godsend'
 - Uses templates for longer documents and has someone else proof read
 - Uses the phone where possible and appropriate
 - Getting easier as it is more accepted and spoken about
 - Doesn't generally disclose in application but makes colleagues and managers aware as soon as possible once in the workplace, in order to explain ways of doing things and receive support such as proof reading.
 - Would find the use of a particular piece of software very beneficial – it reads the sentences back to you as you type them so that you are more likely to pick up mistakes from the aural review.

2b. CASE STUDY 2 – MEDIUM LEVEL OF DYSLEXIA

Customer Relationship Director– Industry Association

This individual's dyslexia was probably more severe, but the effects are limited due to early intervention and additional education.

Difficulties

- Spelling
- Used to mix up words entirely eg. Green bus, Red sky
- Grammar
- Numbers - Maths

Education

- Mother realised that there was an issue early on with understanding and mixing up of words
- Fought hard at the first primary school to have the issue recognised and to secure additional education and attention but no response from the school.
- Moved schools at 8, within first month had a supply teacher who was also involved in special education – recognised dyslexia immediately and additional classes/separate classes began around English and Maths.
- However, school had to pay to have the test for dyslexia and wouldn't/couldn't so he was never given special treatment in exams etc such as extra time or a reader.
- Knew from an early age that he had to work harder to achieve some things. Determined to do this and also to get involved in other areas – Duke of Edinburgh, food technology and cooking.

Workplace

- Wanted to join the police force but couldn't due to dyslexia.
- At 16 did a 2 week catering placement as work experience and loved it, treated like an adult decided to pursue as a career.
- Became a trainee manager at Forte, under 18 so needed to be away from alcohol so was placed in the kitchen.
- Head Chef interviewed him – the chef had a pronounced stutter and this immediately put him at ease – openly discussed his dyslexia and was immediately understood and supported – VERY IMPORTANT at the time.
- Excelled, did NVQ2 and promoted to Sous Chef at age 19.
- Although recipes need to be read, training is by hands on, side by side demonstration and NVQ 2 assessment is about demonstrating understanding, not dependent on reading and writing.
- Goal was to become a GM, so decided to move out of the kitchen into a restaurant and operations manager role at an independent hotel – CHALLENGING.
- Faced with tasks such as P&L, rotas, letters to bride and groom, he found 'work-arounds':
 - Used s for 'spilt shift' and l for 'late shift' as he could easily do the rotas but didn't want to get caught up on the spelling
 - Wrote templates for letters and got other people to skim over them
- NVQ assessor – lots of written work, was determined and has improved with time, uses computers a lot and has little ways to remember spelling etc that still does not come naturally
- Flexibility is the key – many people with dyslexia can do almost anything, but might approach things a different way eg. Hiring a new client manager, instead requested admin assistant to train up – allows him to carry out more client contact, whilst freeing up admin tasks that take a lot of time and effort due to dyslexia difficulties.

2c. CASE STUDY 3 – SEVERE DYSLEXIA

Head Chef

Difficulties

- Memory
- Spelling
- Grammar
- Numbers - Maths

Education

- Older than other interviewees.
- Dyslexia never discussed or picked up during education.
- Education very difficult
- Did not complete education to any high degree

Workplace

- Chef all his life
- Due to severe nature of dyslexia and memory problems, some areas in the kitchen are more difficult than others, for example, the hot pass involves remembering called orders so involves short term memory and can therefore be very difficult.
- Progressed as a head chef by having help from colleagues with spelling.
- Kitchen Brigade and colleagues know that he can't spell and despite a little snickering behind his back occasionally, he is upfront about this and doesn't go to great lengths to spell internal notices etc correctly.
- External communication is different and is difficult. He uses templates where possible and prepares things such as menus well in advance to allow time for checking and proof reading by others.
- In each workplace to date he has 'cultivated someone tame and helpful' to help with proofing and writing external or important internal documents.

3. **ADVICE FOR EMPLOYERS**

1 – Create and Open Environment

Be open about dyslexia and encourage employees to be open to their colleagues – once people know colleagues or others with similar difficulties they are much more comfortable asking for help.

Education and awareness to get people to be as open and honest as possible is great, ideally the dyslexic person is honest about strengths and weaknesses and the employer is flexible. Often the most appealing thing as a prospective employee is a **close knit, open team environment**. Large environments where there is less mutual support are not appealing

2 – Understand Differences

Understand that people with dyslexia have **different difficulties**. People can have issues ranging from reading and spelling to comprehension and numbers and will have different coping strategies. So ASK what you can do to help.

Most often it will be things like:

- Simply allowing someone to do something their own way
- Offering help to proof read important documents
- Giving someone a little more time to carry out a task or more warning eg reading aloud – need time to practice.

3 - Educate

Educate Line Managers that Dyslexia is NOT related to IQ. People with Dyslexia are not stupid and in fact many have strengths that are ideal in our industry such as strong interpersonal skills and creativity.

Encourage managers to ask the question and provide necessary support – in the end it's the individuals around someone with Dyslexia that make the biggest difference. Being upfront with people "I know you can't spell – it doesn't matter" or offering people possible solutions or 'work-arounds' makes an enormous difference.

At the same time, there are many people who do not discover that they are dyslexic until later in life or may not even admit it to themselves, this can require sensitivity.

4 – Be Flexible

With existing employees **flexibility is the key** – many people with dyslexia can do almost anything, but might approach things a different way or need just a little more time or warning.

Try to allow people the flexibility to create their own support networks and draw on others for support in tasks such as proofing.

5 – Be Realistic

Not all job descriptions are accurate and at times people are screened from progression unnecessarily.

By ensuring that an ability to read and write to a high level is actually relevant to a particular role or task you can prevent unnecessary, automatic screening. Dyslexic people have many other strong qualities and if they then need to perform predominantly practical tasks you may be screening out true talent.

6 – Understand Time Pressures

Often people with Dyslexia can do most or all of the tasks required, however if these tasks involve any form of reading, writing or arithmetic then it is likely that more time will be needed to complete the task successfully. Given that many people with Dyslexia have

corresponding strengths that really complement out industry such as strong interpersonal and creative skills, giving a little time in some situations may well reap rewards in other areas.

Preparation is also important - give people with learning difficulties or dyslexia time to prepare and 'do their homework'. Stand up, on the spot presentations are very difficult to execute well without adequate time to prepare and ensure that slides are proof read.

4. ADVICE FOR RECRUITMENT

1 - Online Recruitment

Overall, online application processes were considered a good interface with potentially dyslexic applicants.

Not surprisingly, all those interviewed particularly liked tick boxes, multiple choice questions or drop down boxes.

When using 'free text' boxes online difficulties arise if the user cannot copy and paste from another programme with spell and grammar check functions. As long as there is the opportunity to copy and paste these were not seen as a major challenge or barrier.

Time limits were universally despised. Not only can they be difficult to complete in the allocated time, the existence of time limits often exacerbates the dyslexic persons difficulties and results in much poorer completion.

Online systems are best if there is an ability to review the form, both prior to beginning and after completion before the form is submitted. The best case scenario is a form that can be saved or printed in its entirety for checking and proofing.

There are also a number of people with dyslexia for whom black on white text is particularly difficult to read and comprehend. Whilst none of those interviewed are in this category, the ability to print a set of questions or a completed form onto pastel coloured paper can really assist these people.

In addition to saving and printing, the ability to move 'backwards' through a form was seen as a necessity. Systems that only let you complete one page at a time and not return to previous pages limit the users ability to review and proof the submission.

- One interviewee specifically mentioned the Compass website as an issue (with no prompting) as it is an automated form with an attached CV and no mechanism to move backwards and review the content.

2 - Job adverts and Job Descriptions

As mentioned in section 3, really being honest about the skills required for a job role would encourage more people with learning difficulties to apply for new opportunities.

For example, one case study mentioned that in his current role has to have input into budgets, but the organisation is small enough that he can do this with his line manager and have input without having to layout/fill in the budget itself. However, if the job description insisted on ability to write and manage a budget he would self select 'out' and not apply.

3 – Interview and Induction

Where possible it is beneficial to give applicants a chance to present themselves before submitting any hand written work. In particular 'on the spot application forms' are difficult and intimidating. It would be preferable to send out application forms in post or online prior to presenting for an interview. As with timed tests or online applications, the stress involved in having to complete a form on the spot exacerbates the issue.

Allowing people a space to alert you to the fact that they have a learning difficulty at some stage in the process (including induction) was also mentioned. Interestingly the interviewee who mentioned this was un-aware that the space for this answer is generally the 'disability' question and indeed was unaware that Dyslexia is considered a disability – there could be some merit in a more specifically worded question.

5. SUMMARY

- Dyslexia NOT IQ related.
- All dyslexics have different challenges and strengths – find the strengths
- It is about enabling individuals to both ask for help and find their own support mechanisms (eg. Obliging colleagues)
- Where possible removing some of these barriers such as unnecessary elements in job descriptions and recruitment processes will not disadvantage anyone but it may unlock talent that previously may have self limited and avoided the opportunity and may just be the person that you are looking for!?