

# The Hidden Disability

Employees with learning disabilities can find success in the workplace with simple accommodations.

It's common knowledge among workplace learning and performance professionals that there are many different adult learning styles, but how many training programs include modalities for all of those learning styles?

The workplace is becoming more diverse every day—not just with baby boomers, Generation Xers, and immigrants, but also with employees who have learning disabilities. This diversity is creating design challenges among workplace training professionals.

"It is important to make sure that training materials are multisensory," says Dale Brown, an author, speaker, and strategic leadership consultant for people with disabilities. "The goal of training is to make sure presentation materials and training techniques reach every single person. You don't want to just talk to the audience. You want slides and interactive exercises—varied means so every participant can process the information."

The statistics are staggering—about 15 percent of the U.S. population, or 39 million, have a learning disability—and with the impending labor shortage, they will become a more vital part of the workforce. This group of learning impairments is the fastest growing impediment of employment today, according to the Rehabilitation Services Administration.

"A diverse workforce is vital to business success," says Katherine McCary, vice president of human resources at SunTrust Bank. "Recognizing disability as a diversity initiative is critical to this diversity effort."

According to the Learning Disabilities Association of America, 62 percent of students with learning disabilities are unemployed one year after graduation and about 50 to 80 percent of adults with severe literacy problems have an undetected or undiagnosed learning disability. This talent pool can help companies alleviate the impending worker shortage.

"It's all about trying to raise awareness," McCary says.

Everybody learns differently, and workplace learning and performance professionals must create training programs that appeal to each learning style and help participants achieve their learning goals.

"The education model in this country is to do what's easy—get the information up there, be efficient, and then take what we get. Where it sticks, it sticks—we'll be satisfied with that percentage," says Donna Flagg, principal of The Krysalis Group. "Our goal as trainers should be to make sure everyone has processed the training information correctly."

## Hidden disability

Learning disabilities are disorders that affect an individual's ability to understand or use spoken or written language, do mathematical calculations, coordinate movements, or direct attention. Learning disabilities are lifelong conditions that cannot be cured as some myths suggest.

It is often called a "hidden disability" because it cannot be seen like a physical limitation can, and employees with learning disabilities, according to the Americans with Disabilities Act, do not have to disclose that they have a disability and cannot be asked directly by the employer. So trainers must be prepared to assess an employee's learning style and make the necessary accommodations.

"According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, it is a violation of the law to perceive or regard a person as having a disability, when in fact they may not be disabled at all. It was necessary for Congress to put this information into the ADA because of the many stereotypes, fears, and misconceptions about individuals with disabilities," says Suzanne Gosden Kitchen, human factors consultant at the Job Accommodation Network. "It is the responsibility of the person with a disability to make their requests known, which would include disclosing their disability."

By Paula Ketter

*Because many employees with learning disabilities will not disclose their disability to their employer, workplace learning and performance professionals must be able to recognize some clear signs that an employee may have a learning disability. These signs can help in the assessment, but should not be used alone to assume that an employee has a learning disability.*

**Inefficiency:** An employee with a learning disability may take longer than his coworkers to accomplish a task. This can lead to low productivity on the job.

**High error rate:** An employee with a learning disability may have trouble writing memos, taking messages, reading instructions, filling out forms, and making changes. This can lead to embarrassment when a boss or a coworker has to correct the errors.

**Problems learning a sequence of tasks:** An employee with a learning disability may have trouble learning a task that has multiple steps or may have trouble performing them in the right order. This can cause a high rate of error and low productivity.

**Time management:** An employee with a learning disability may have trouble reporting to work or a meeting on time, or planning ahead. This can lead to missed deadlines.

**Social skills:** An employee with a learning disability may have trouble meeting people, working with others, engaging in small talk, and making friends.

*There are many positive character traits that employees with disabilities bring to the workplace.*

**Persistence:** An employee with a learning disability may work on a problem long after coworkers have given up on it.

**Creativity:** An employee with a learning disability often comes up with creative solutions to workplace problems.

**Specialized talent:** An employee with a learning disability may have developed a certain strength or talent to compensate for his disability.

Source: National Center for Learning Disabilities

*There are numerous materials available to accommodate employees with disabilities in the workplace.*

**Accommodations for deficits in reading:**

- recording for the blind
- books on tape
- tape-recorded directives, messages, materials
- reading machines
- screen-reading software for computer use
- color-coded manuals, outlines, maps
- scanners to import hard copies of documents into the computer.

**Accommodations for deficits in writing:**

- personal computer/laptop computers
- voice output software that highlights and reads what has been keyed into the computer
- voice input software that recognizes the user's voice and changes it to text on the computer screen
- word processing software
- spell checking software
- grammar checking software.

**Accommodations for deficits in mathematics:**

- fractional, decimal, statistical, scientific computers
- talking calculators/large-display screens for calculators
- computer-assisted instruction software for mathematics.

**Accommodations for deficits in organizational skills, memory and time management:**

- day planners
- electronic organizers
- software organizers with highlighting capabilities
- LCD watches, data bank watches, timers, alarms
- personal information managers.

Source: Job Accommodation Network

But, to be able to assist individuals with disabilities with the learning process, trainers must know the different learning disabilities and how they affect a person's ability to learn.

"Research can bring new alternatives to the way we write and deliver curriculum," says Chris Pellegrino, college manager for SunTrust University's College of Mortgage. "Trainers need to connect with groups that deal with transitioning people with learning disability into the workforce and disability support agencies in the community."

### **Sensitive and aware**

While there are valid screening tools for learning disabilities and clear diagnostic testing protocols, trainers need to be sensitive and aware of the many physical and mental signs that can be present in individuals with learning disabilities.

"People with learning disabilities could exhibit deficits in reading, mathematics, organizational skills, memory, time management, and the cognitive or physical process of writing," Gosden Kitchen says. "Most or maybe all of these would be easily recognized by a trainer."

Flagg knows firsthand the signs that trainers need to be aware of because she is a trainer with a leaning disability.

"To try to identify people like me in classes, I examine their ability to process information," Flagg says. "If their lips are moving, if they use their fingers or something to follow the words on the paper, if they have to read the words on the page or on the board and can't look at me, then they are probably having trouble processing the information. Those different actions tend to assist people who are having trouble processing information. I can remember doing those things in grade school and getting in trouble for it."

According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities, individuals with learning disabilities may take significantly longer than their co-workers to accomplish tasks; may have trouble writing memos, taking notes, reading instructions, and filling out forms; and may have difficulty learning and carrying out multiple-step tasks and following directions. They may also have trouble managing their time efficiently and may find social interaction a challenge.

"What I find fascinating is that people with learning disabilities are actually very creative, and they figure out survival tactics," Flagg adds. "Personally, I found a way around everything. I was trained to do that from the minute I hit kindergarten because I couldn't be trained the way other people were being trained."

"Knowing your audience takes good pre-planning," Pellegrino says. "Any good facilitator should be doing

pre- and post-planning. It is important to talk to supervisors and managers about their employees' learning skills. Workplace trainers should have constant interaction with employees. I don't think enough trainers are evaluating the day-to-day work of company employees or doing the pre- and post-assessment. If they were, they would be discovering the learning styles of their company employees."

Knowing your audience does not just mean knowing your participants' fields of study, cultural background, employment background, and reasons for attending the course. It is all about knowing how your participants learn.

"I go into a training class with the assumption that there are individuals in the room who have a learning disability," Flagg says. "It is really, really personal for me. What I do, having been on the receiving end, is create an environment with a lot of different facets so the information I provide will ultimately be processed by everyone. I am committed to incorporating every single modality into the training so that everyone has an opportunity to learn."

### **Time and modality**

Many individuals with learning disabilities have auditory perceptual problems—difficulty hearing sounds in order, hearing things against a difficult background, and distinguishing similar sounds. Some simple accommodations include holding the training in a quiet place with no outside noise or distractions, speaking slowly and clearly, and providing different locations for breakout sessions.

Individuals with learning disabilities can also have visual perceptual problems—trouble pulling something out of a complicated background or seeing things in order. Simple, cost-effective accommodations include providing clear handouts that are double spaced and in 10- or 12-point type.

"When it comes to training, the two most important things for adult learners who have any kind of learning disability are time and modality," Flagg says. "They take longer to process, and they need information to be fed to them in ways alternative to visual."

"And from a psychological perspective, never call on them to read out loud or do other things that might reveal their trouble processing information in front of peers, seniors, subordinates, or customers," she adds. "It can be traumatizing. I just about died when it happened to me. I wasn't equipped to deal with it in front of 30 people."

### **See it, hear it, do it**

Many experts stress that accessible design of training programs can also benefit people without disabilities. With the aging baby boomer populations, simple ac-

commodations such as providing humorous statements, catchy initials or phrases, and pictures to associate different facts will help people with short-term memory problems.

“Workplace trainers should use the approach often utilized by educators: See it, hear it, and do it,” says Gosden Kitchen. “Provide the training material in a visual format (manual or PowerPoint slides), in an auditory format (read the slides or manual, engage participants in repeating terms, provide podcasts, and allow tape recorders), and kinesthetic format (participants should practice what they have been taught).”

Flagg agrees. “I move around from side to side so everyone can see and hear me. I use color and movement on my slides, and I don’t talk for a long time. I write in key words and use sound bites.

“When I assign activities, I create roles for every learner. I always create activities where there is not a reading part. If the program includes case studies, I create opportunities so people can get out of reading,” Flagg explains.

Individuals with dyslexia, a common learning disability, have difficulty reading and writing, but so do foreign workers who don’t speak English and the 93 million adults in the United States who have a reading level of basic or below.

“Today’s trainers should not be assuming a high reading level for participants,” Brown notes. “Studies have shown that reading abilities have gone down.”

In this age of globalization, many companies use videoconferencing to provide training worldwide. That, Flagg says, creates major problems for individuals with learning disabilities.

“The videoconference is live and everyone has to go with the program,” Flagg explains. “At the end of the day, you are putting a one-dimensional screen in front of an individual with learning disabilities, and to them it’s just like a piece of paper. They can’t read lips or practice with a team.”

Many trainers fear that making accommodations for one employee may skew the training or test results.

“I often hear from trainers who are concerned about modifying instructional material for persons with learning disabilities,” Kitchen says. “I also get a lot of questions from trainers about how to modify a test for a person with a learning disability, and how to keep the reliability and validity if the test is changed.”

### Good business

Accommodating people with learning disabilities does not just make good business sense, it’s the law. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, employers must provide employees with disabilities the “reasonable accommodations” they need to perform the essential functions of their jobs. Since ADA became law, many employers have expressed concerns about the potential costs of accommodations, which leads to a reluctance to hire individuals with disabilities.

These fears appear to be unfounded. According to a study by the Job Accommodation Network, more than half of the accommodations needed by employees and job applicants with disabilities cost absolutely nothing. Of those accommodations that do cost, the typical expenditure by an employer is \$600.

While it’s important for trainers to understand some simple accommodations that will help individuals with learning disabilities gain career development knowl-

**Situation:** A person with a learning disability worked in the mail room and had difficulty remembering which streets belonged to which zip codes.

**Solution:** A rolodex card system was filed by street name alphabetically with the zip code. This helped him increase his output. Cost: \$150 (Source: Job Accommodation Network)

**Situation:** An individual with dyslexia who worked as a police officer spent hours filling out forms at the end of each day.

**Solution:** He was provided with a tape recorder. A secretary typed out his reports from dictation while she

typed the others from handwritten copies. This accommodation allowed him to keep his job. Cost: \$69 (Source: Job Accommodation Network)

**Situation:** Three individuals with learning disabilities were employed by a company that cleaned a large hospital. One individual, David, has been employed as a cleaning assistant for five years. He sorts out the stockroom, unpacks supplies, stacks shelves, and moves materials to where they are needed.

**Solution:** When David first started, the manager wrote out a daily list of tasks for him. The support worker then turned it into language David

could understand. David had difficulty remembering things, so he also wrote out key numbers, digital lock numbers, and information about where things were kept (Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation)

**Situation:** Philip works in a busy Tesco store. The staff use a bank of lockers to store their belongings each shift. They use whichever locker is available, thus having to remember which locker they used that day. This was not possible for Philip.

**Solution:** Philip was given his own locker and key, which he carries with him every day. (Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation)

edge, it is crucial for managers and supervisors of those employees to also recognize their importance.

“There needs to be a commitment to develop a disability-friendly environment where learning disability issues are commonplace,” said Glenn Young, a federal official dealing with learning disabilities in adults. “Also, it is important to respect a person’s confidentiality about their impairment and their needs relating to it.”

On the job, many employees with learning disabilities may need to break down the job into separate tasks; receive instructions verbally or in writing; work in a private area; take frequent short breaks; or use a tape recorder, color-coded files, or a specialized computer software. No two individuals with disabilities will have the same strengths and weaknesses.

All accommodations are individualized, so standardization is a difficult thing, Young notes.

Flagg agrees. “There are no rules. You just have to figure out how to make it work.”

### **Creativity and commitment**

Diversity is all about sensitivity.

“I was talking to my partner yesterday and I said, ‘I don’t know if I would assume individuals had a disability if I didn’t have one myself,’” Flagg adds. “Maybe it comes down to sensitivity and realizing that learning disabilities exist.”

A myriad of myths exist about individuals with disabilities—they are lazy, stupid, unmotivated, or taking advantage of their disability—but it’s important for a workplace trainer to keep in mind that people with learning disabilities can learn.

“I had a teacher who said to me, ‘You are not necessarily disabled. You just don’t learn the way the system structured it,’” Flagg adds. “Everyone processes information differently. I don’t want to be treated like I am disabled. I just need a little extra time to learn.”

It’s important to remember that simple accommodations help all learners and will go along way to helping employees with disabilities find success in the workforce.

“Most accommodations don’t cost a lot of money,” Flagg says. “All it takes is a little creativity and a commitment to learning.” **TD**

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