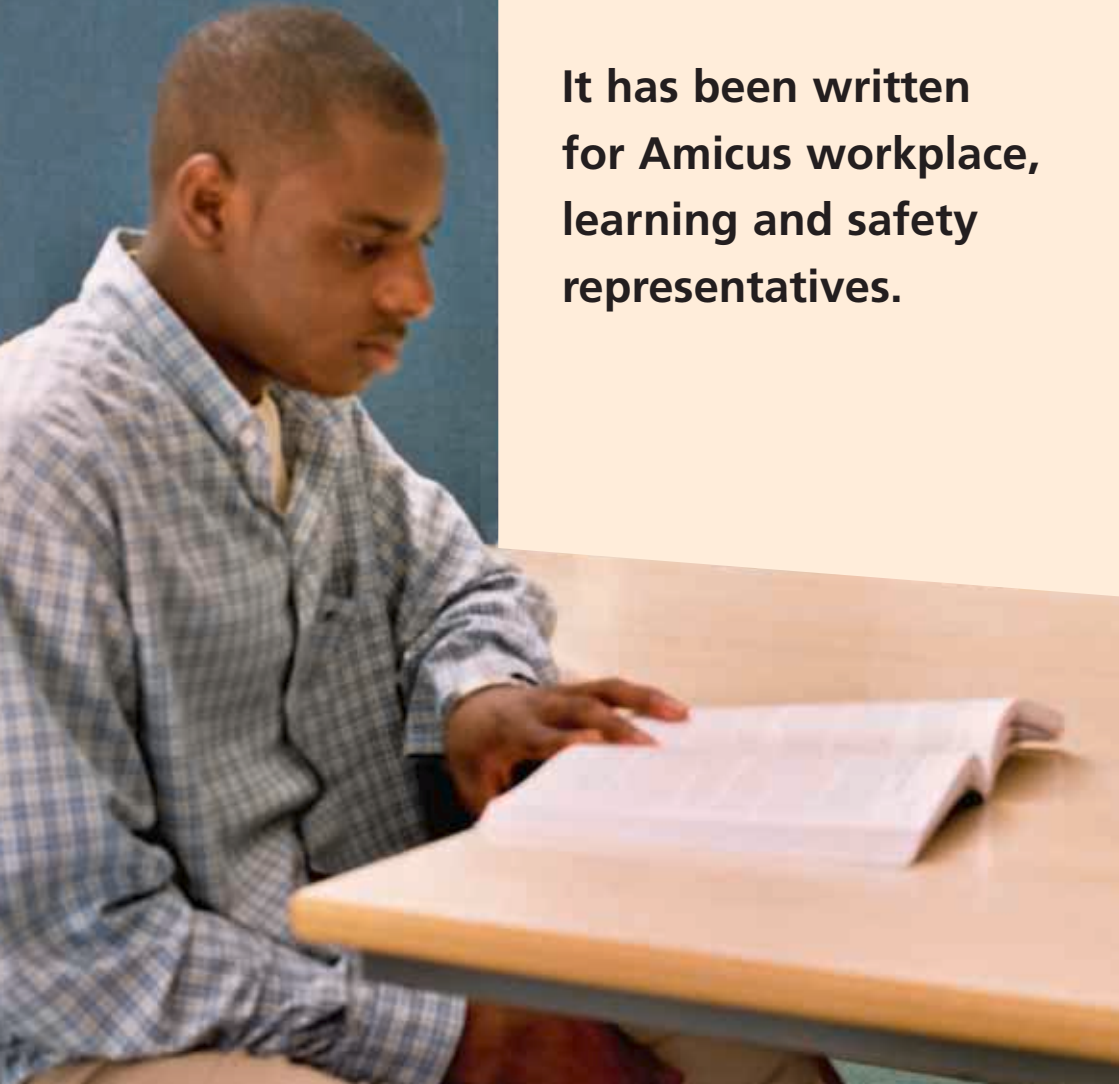




Amicus Learning
and Skills

This booklet is about dyslexia

**It has been written
for Amicus workplace,
learning and safety
representatives.**



This booklet aims to:

- Give you some straightforward information about a very complex condition.
- Help members who may have a dyslexic problem and let them know what they can do about it.
- Give some guidance to Amicus representatives on helping a member when dyslexia is causing a problem at work.
- Ensure that the workplace is as safe for people with dyslexia as for everyone else.

This booklet is accompanied by a leaflet that you can give to members who need more information. Additional copies can be requested from your regional office, or downloaded from the Amicus website.

What is dyslexia?

Dyslexia affects the way the brain works. It is not a medical condition, like an illness or a disease, it's a problem with the way the brain processes information.

Perhaps the best way to describe it is that the connections in the brain have been wired-up differently, so that it processes information in a different way. The word 'dyslexia' means "a difficulty with words", and its most common characteristic is difficulty with reading, writing and spelling.

However the real problem is with processing and recalling information, so this means that dyslexics can experience difficulty with a wide range of tasks that require the brain to process, organise and recall information.

How does dyslexia affect people?

Dyslexics may have a range of problems depending on the severity of the condition. The main problem experienced by dyslexics is difficulty with reading, writing and spelling. Other common problems include:

- Personal organisation difficulties, e.g. forgetting where they put things.
- Getting number sequences mixed up, e.g. telephone numbers, account numbers or PIN codes.
- Short term memory problems, e.g. remembering a series of instructions accurately.
- Difficulties with concentration on repetitive tasks.
- Confusing things with a 'mirror image', e.g. 'b' and 'd', or things that look very similar.
- Coping with work reorganisation or repeated changes in the workplace.

All these things can be made worse if the person is under pressure, or there are other distractions in the workplace like noise. The condition can also lead to low self-esteem, lack of confidence and depression. This can also result in frustration and anger.



It's not all problems

But it's not all problems. As well as experiencing some very real difficulties, dyslexics can also be extremely creative and innovative. Many dyslexics have special and uncommon abilities. They can be very good at:

- Working out what needs to be done and solving problems quickly.
- Lateral thinking and creative thinking.
- Team working.
- Using words, being articulate and expressing themselves.
- Thinking intuitively.

A dyslexic may display one or more of these characteristics, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the severity of their condition. Some of the characteristics of dyslexia may cause difficulties at work, other characteristics may help dyslexics to be high-flyers.

Can dyslexia be cured?

Dyslexia isn't an illness, so the simple answer is "No". The condition is permanent.

However, dyslexics can be very good at developing strategies for learning things and getting around their problems. Having a dyslexia assessment can help. Understanding the way their dyslexia affects them is often the first step to developing good strategies to deal with their condition.

How do people deal with dyslexia?

People with dyslexia often develop 'coping strategies' to deal with the problems their dyslexia poses. Dyslexic people remember lists with mnemonics, rhymes or other memory tricks. Visual images often help – for example colour coding charts and diagrams. For some dyslexics, using coloured lenses and acetates can help. Often dyslexics have to work harder and concentrate harder, to get certain kinds of things done.

Dyslexics become very skilful at concealing their condition. This can be because they fear that their employer may not understand their condition and could discriminate against them – or simply because of embarrassment. Tasks like filling in a form or remembering a list of instructions can be a nightmare for someone with dyslexia. They may deal with this by taking the form away, and completing it where nobody is watching. When they are 'put on the spot' to read or write, they may pretend to have forgotten their spectacles.



The condition can simply make life at work more difficult and unpleasant than it would otherwise be – more seriously it can affect performance on the job, leading to disciplinary action. This is especially true in these days of constant change and reorganisation, and greater demands on literacy skills. It can also mean that promotion opportunities are denied.

Who is protected by the law?

The Disability Discrimination Act provides protection for people with disabilities, and requires that employers take steps to avoid discrimination against people with disabilities.

Whether or not dyslexia can be classed as a disability has been tested in the courts.

- Some employers have argued that effective coping strategies negate the effect of dyslexia, but that argument can fail if, for example, it can be shown that the strategies may break down under stress.
- The severity of the difficulties experienced by the dyslexic person is also an important factor, and a tribunal has held that if those difficulties are 'more than trivial', it does not even matter that they don't hinder a person's competency at work.

A dyslexic person does not have to be formally assessed by an educational or occupational psychologist to come within the guidelines of the Disability Discrimination Act. However this is not the case for claims of Unfair or Constructive Dismissal.

What can Amicus Representatives do?

The Disability Discrimination Act provides a framework that can help Amicus representatives negotiate improvements with their employer, and ensure fair employment practices.



There is a lot that we can do to help dyslexic members

- Our aim should be to create an environment where someone with dyslexia doesn't have to hide their condition and can get the support and assistance they need to cope with it.
- Dyslexic members may need support to improve their conditions at work and when problems arise. Amicus representatives need to be approachable and show understanding when representing members.
- Dyslexic members may also need advice on how to get their condition assessed and how to get assistance when dealing with their condition. The leaflet that accompanies this booklet is designed to be given to dyslexic members.
- Further help may be available by contacting the Amicus officer responsible for Learning and Skills at your regional office.

A Case Study

Susan* had worked in a High Street branch of a major bank for 15 years. She left school with a few GCSE passes and was quite happy working in local branches undertaking a range of duties in a small team. Susan received annual appraisals which indicated she was doing fine.

She was then transferred to a new job. She now had to reconcile thousands of daily payments coming in and to respond to the customers' accounting needs. She worked alone and was left to structure her own working schedule.

Soon after starting this job, her supervisor began to raise mistakes with Susan. They seemed silly mistakes and she found it difficult to understand why she was making them. Her performance began to suffer and she ended up on a disciplinary charge. The local union official visited Susan's workplace to help her with the disciplinary interview. The official was particularly troubled by the fact that Susan had worked for the same bank for 15 years with no indication of any performance problems.

The official spent some time talking to Susan about her work, and Susan admitted that she did not like working on her own. During the discussion Susan also said that in the new job she had to remember a lot more because it wasn't written down. Susan felt she had more difficulty with this type of work as she preferred working with others and thought that it helped her 'get it right' more often.

The official recognised some of the described behaviour as characteristic of dyslexia. She talked to Susan about dyslexia, and asked if she would be interested in assessment for dyslexia or related conditions. The official asked Personnel to pay for the assessment and everyone agreed that the report should be received before any hearing was arranged.



When the assessment was completed by an Educational Psychologist, Susan was identified as dyslexic, and the bank agreed to transfer her back to her previous environment where she could perform adequately and where she felt more comfortable.

*assumed name

Dealing with members' problems

Members who are dyslexic are most likely to face problems related to:

1. Performance and disciplinary matters.
2. Recruitment and promotion.
3. Harassment.
4. Health and Safety.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 makes it unlawful for an employer to treat disabled people less favourably because of their disability. In order for the Act to apply a person will need to show that the dyslexia has an 'adverse affect on his or her day-to-day activities' and that any coping strategies may break down in stressful circumstances. Nevertheless the Act provides union representatives with a framework on which to represent members.



The main requirement of the Act on the employer is that they should make "reasonable adjustments" in the workplace to remove any disadvantages that the disabled person faces in doing their job. A key argument is that this is in the employer's interests, as it gets the best from the individual worker, and contributes to high morale in the workplace.

1. Performance and disciplinary matters

Problems often come to light after a reorganisation at work or after a new system is introduced.

- The member may need help, but be reluctant to inform the employer about their dyslexia. This needs to be handled sensitively and with care.
- The key to successful representations is to negotiate for whatever “reasonable adjustments” the employer needs to make to allow the member to perform effectively. Reasonable adjustment may also be needed to improve the quality of their working life.
- The member with the problem will have lots of ideas about what would help to improve things. What is achieved on the job is more important than a rigid procedure for doing it. A little more flexibility can work wonders.
- Many adjustments can be made at little cost and no disruption. All that is required is a positive approach and some careful thought and planning by the employer, helped by the member identifying the problems and possible solutions. Often all that is needed may be good practice.
- Adapting workplace communications to the member’s needs can resolve many problems. For example, if the main problem is with reading, then instructions can be given orally. If the problem is memory, then instructions should be given clearly and slowly, and written down in a simple way – demonstrations given etc. A confirmation check that the instructions or information is understood also helps.
- Establishing a system of work that helps the member overcome problems, and sticking to it. This helps to maintain consistency and avoids the need for constant re-learning.

2. Recruitment and promotion

Union representatives are more likely to represent members with problems related to promotion opportunities and procedures than recruitment. These issues can be dealt with through an effective equal opportunities policy and agreement.

- Make sure job descriptions and person specifications don't unreasonably exclude people with dyslexia.
- Keep application forms simple and clear.
- Make sure the procedure concentrates on a person's ability to do the job, not their success in written tests and assessments.
- Allow applications to be in electronic or word-processed format where appropriate to avoid written presentation and spelling problems.
- Use pastel coloured or off-white paper and typefaces of at least 12 point size for information and forms.
- Check if it is helpful to waive any aptitude or other tests, and substitute techniques such as questioning.
- If tests are essential, ask the candidate what adjustments are necessary to help them.
- Give clear verbal instructions for tests and allow extra time if appropriate.
- Wider objectives should be to ensure an effective equal opportunities policy and agreement covering:

Recruitment and selection

Performance

Promotion opportunities

Monitoring

3. Harassment

Dyslexics are very skilled at concealing their condition. They know the problems that can result from public knowledge of their condition. If it does become public knowledge, it can result in harassment or bullying.

- Harassment is language and behaviour that is unwanted and offensive to the recipient. It can include:

Abusive language and 'name-calling'.

Behaviour designed to belittle the recipient in front of others.

'Jokes' and comments about a person's ability.

Direct threats.

Unfair allocation of work.

Isolation and exclusion within the work group.

- Make sure the harasser is told their behaviour is a problem.
- Give the member concerned as much support and confidence as possible.
- Involve senior management as soon as possible.
- Make sure that management inform everyone that this behaviour is unacceptable and will be considered a disciplinary matter.
- Ensure that supervisors and managers are properly trained.
- Use the provisions of an existing harassment policy and procedure, or negotiate a new policy and procedures.

4. Health and Safety

Good Health and Safety practice should include:

- Giving instructions and information orally, and using practical demonstrations.
- Keeping written instructions simple and clear – using bullet points to emphasise safe practices.
- The use of diagrammatic posters and notices.
- Ensuring that risk assessments take potential difficulties with reading into account.
- Making sure that the work is adapted to the worker, rather than the worker having to adapt to the work.

Further Information and Assistance

Specialist help and advice is available from Job Centre Plus through Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs). DEAs are based in local Job Centre Plus offices or Job Centres.

Employers can get assistance in assessing needs and help with the provision of specialist equipment through the Access to Work scheme (AtW), which is also available through Job Centre Plus.

Telephone numbers for your local Job Centre Plus are listed in local telephone directories, or you can find contact details online at:
<http://www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk/jcp/Customers/Helpfordisabledpeople/index.html>

There is a Disability Discrimination Act Helpline open Mondays to Fridays from 8am to 8pm, which can provide further information. Contact details are:

FREEPOST
MID02164
Stratford Upon Avon
CV37 9BR

Internet Address: www.drc-gb.org
Tel: 08457 622 633
Minicom: 08457 622 644 (Textphone)
Fax: 08457 778 878

For further assistance with any legal matters contact your regional officer.



This original edition of this booklet was produced with the help of the British Dyslexia Association, by Melanie Jameson. However Amicus is entirely responsible for the contents of this updated edition.