

THE POWER OF DIFFERENT

INTRO: What has become increasingly obvious over the past year is that a lot of the old ways of doing things need to adapt to a future where technology will dominate. This opens up lots of opportunities, especially for those who think differently. Recent news has highlighted that forward thinking employers are actively seeking neurodiverse, dyslexic talent, because of the unique skills they can offer.

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Try viewing learning disabilities such as dyslexia and dyspraxia as superpowers, says Tom Gilliford, and focus on their ability to make us stand out from the crowd.

I was diagnosed with dyslexia and dyspraxia when I was still in primary school. I didn't really know what it meant, except that apparently I was 'disabled'. Yet every time I tick the disability box on an application form I feel like a fraud. I've attended Oxford, got a great job, founded schools, spoken at a TEDx conference, had a drink bought for me by the New Zealand Minister for Education, and run global design competitions - what exactly is it that I cannot do? Sure, I can't really tie my shoelaces, I can't concentrate for more than ten minutes at a time, and I fairly frequently spell my own name wrong, but who cares? I can buy some Velcro shoes, doodle in my notepad, and keep spellings on my phone, and at the same time I can brainstorm a thousand ideas before most people have taken the lid off their marker-pen.

“ I don't use the term 'disabled' I just think I'm different ”

Personally I don't use the term 'disabled', I just think I'm different. This difference can sometimes be a blessing and sometimes a curse. I'm really lucky because 90% of the time I find that my dyslexia and dyspraxia are a blessing. I call them my superpowers. My brain is wired differently from other people's, and it means I'm capable of things they aren't. For me, this manifests in a capacity for creative thought and divergent thinking. When I look at some information - be it a picture or words - my brain usually focuses on something a bit different from other people. This can sometimes be a bad thing, such as in my GCSE English exam where I interpreted the instruction 'describe yourself' to mean that I should describe the word 'yourself' and got lower marks as a result. But most of the time it is wonderful because I can make connections others can't because I'm thinking differently.

SEEING THE POSITIVES

Although not everyone's story is the same as mine, I firmly believe that no learning difference is wholly negative. As a teacher, I worked with many young people with learning differences and in each case they had wonderful and unique talents. Indeed, I have never met anyone who doesn't. Some, like me, were creative thinkers and others were adept at devising methodical processes. I've seen young people with a staggering ability for empathy and others for logic, and in each case it would have been impossible to disentangle what made them different from what made them - them. While studying to be a teacher, I can recall clearly disagreeing with a lecturer who suggested that advances in science meant that in the future we could 'cure' dyslexia. The reason I objected was because I didn't feel I needed curing. It's true that at certain times dyslexia has made things difficult for me, but it's also part of who I am and I don't believe that I'd be the same person without it.

For some reason, people often find it difficult to comprehend the idea that I have dyslexia and am successful. I end up having awkward conversations with them. 'Really?' they say, 'But you went to Oxford, right?' In their minds, conditions like dyslexia are only ever negatives and can only ever detract from a person. People make the mistake of thinking that the condition makes a person disabled, but this isn't the case.

Reading ability is a good example of this. Most people would probably agree that dyslexia means you cannot read well. However, the truth is a little more complex. In reality, people with dyslexia struggle to read small and complex fonts that are presented to them in colours with poor contrast. If we change the font, increase the size and shift the colours around a bit, the ability of that person to read can increase dramatically. Judging that person on their reading ability using 11 point Times New Roman on white paper makes as much sense as asking an Olympic sprinter to run in a pair of lead shoes. It is the environmental factors that can turn dyslexia from a difference into a disability.

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MAKING SMALL ADJUSTMENTS

In recent decades we've seen massive improvements in this area. Fifty years ago it would have been a lot more difficult for me to achieve what I have in life. My dyslexia and dyspraxia would have meant people labelled me 'educationally subnormal' and I could never have contemplated a top university. Extra time in exams, a laptop, coloured overlays and a whole host of other support I was given at school and university meant that my condition didn't hold me back.

As our understanding of learning differences such as dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism spectrum disorders grows, we become better and better at finding ways to turn them from disabilities into differences. For example, we now know that for many people with these conditions, strip lights can be a big problem. Their brains aren't good at sorting useful sensory information from useless information. This means that while the majority of people are unaffected by the imperceptible flicker of such lights, which their brains ignore, for me and others it can make us tired or distracted. However, if you take those lights away the problem is solved. I'm fortunate that having been diagnosed early in my school career I've had support for most of my life and have benefited from it immeasurably. I have no doubt that without extra time I would have failed a great many of my exams, and had I not been able to use a laptop at university, I wouldn't have been able to submit a single essay. These small adjustments meant that I was competing on a level playing field with my peers, and that my skills and talents, many of which stem from dyslexia and dyspraxia, were able to be expressed.

“Our extreme differences help us to stand out and impress”

Everyone has differences, but people like me tend to have extreme differences. For instance, I have very sensitive skin. If I put on a shirt made of a slightly rough fabric, it feels like sandpaper. Others have the same reaction to odd smells or sounds, which are so intense that they are disturbing. It's not that the majority don't feel these things, it's just that they feel them less intensely. The flip side is that useful attributes also tend to be heightened. For me, this means that I am a better problem solver than most, and for others it means they can code as easily as breathing, or find order where everyone else sees chaos.

A NEW OUTLOOK

Better, more inclusive design of learning and learning environments means that we are edging ever closer to a world where there are no learning disabilities, only learning differences. In the modern economy, difference is king. Such an economy thrives on innovation, and successful businesses



are those that are able to stand out from the crowd.

Companies and industries that look for uniformity fail because they are unable to change. In this brave new world, the ideal employee is no longer the one who conforms and works in the same way as everyone else, but rather the one who is unique and brings their own special talents and perspectives to a problem. In such an environment it is precisely what may have held a person back in school that now gives them a competitive edge in the workplace. Our extreme differences help us to stand out and impress while technology and coping strategies stop them from holding us back.

However, not everyone is going to be happy about this change - difference is also scary. Just as with women's emancipation or immigration there are those who will feel that their position is threatened by the influx of talent from previously excluded individuals. When they see someone using a laptop in a classroom they are bound to question why the same has not been offered to them. When the same people they presumed to be disabled perform better in an exam or beat them to a job, they may begin to feel that the system is stacked against them. It's important that this resentment is not allowed to fester. Everyone, not just those with dyslexia or dyspraxia, has learning differences, and we must ensure that in every case people are supported in their weaknesses and encouraged in their strengths.

So yes, me and many others might technically be 'disabled', but don't forget that this is what makes us different and in our difference lies our power.

Article by Tom Gilliford originally published in nasen Connect 2016

SUMMARY: At the British Dyslexia Association, we often try and get the message to employers and schools that true inclusivity is better for everyone. The more the world understands the power of different thinking, the more we design education and work to welcome the full range of neurodiversity, such as dyslexia, the better it is for us all. A better future won't just be built by including people with dyslexia, it will be built by them. From architecture to technology, the creative arts to entrepreneurialism, dyslexic minds are leading the way. Everyone who thinks differently should be given the support they need so their talent can shine. We will all benefit.

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