

Job Market

On the Job, Learning Disabilities Can Often Hide in Plain Sight



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Donna Flagg waited nine years to tell her boss she had a form of dyslexia.

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When Donna Flagg was growing up in suburban New Jersey, she struggled through reading and math in school and had trouble following directions. It was not until she took a college course from an instructor who was dyslexic — and who sensed that Ms. Flagg might also have a learning disability — that she discovered she had a form of dyslexia. The disability affects her brain's ability to process what her eyes see.

“If I could be tested verbally, or if we could talk about the chapters I’d read, I performed well,” said Ms. Flagg, 42. “If I can put a sound to something, I’m fine. But if I read something only with my eyes, it doesn’t sufficiently register.”

When she got her first job as a sales representative for Chanel in Manhattan in the late 1980s, Ms. Flagg kept quiet about her disability. She phoned her father frequently for help with sales-related math and closed the office door to talk out loud.

Her decision to work around, rather than reveal, her disability is common. Lynda Price, an associate professor of special education at [Temple University](#), estimates that as many as one in 10 adults may have a learning disability and that the vast majority conceals it from workplace supervisors. “They are afraid their co-workers will think they are mentally retarded or that their employer will fire them,” she said.

In May, Ms. Price and a colleague, Paul Gerber, a professor of education at Virginia Commonwealth University, completed a two-year study of adults with learning disabilities. The study, financed by the Learning Disabilities Association of America, involved 70 adults throughout the country. The results showed that 90 percent had not heard of the Americans With Disabilities Act and did not know it protected them from workplace discrimination. Ms. Price said that even when the protections of the A.D.A. were explained to study subjects “most said they wouldn’t use it anyway.”

It took Ms. Flagg nine years to disclose her disability to her boss, the same one she had at Chanel, whom she followed to several other companies. A few years later she left to start a human resources training firm, the Krysalis Group, in New York.

Ms. Flagg’s decision to tell her boss about her learning disability is unusual. “The majority of the adults in our study said they would absolutely never talk about their disability at work, and a quarter of them were in management,” Ms. Price said.

Learning disabilities include dyslexia, which affects language processing; dyscalculia, which affects math calculations; and dysgraphia, which leads to difficulty with spelling and writing. These are neurological disorders that affect the brain’s ability to store, process or communicate information.

These disabilities are frequently confused with mental retardation, Mr. Gerber said. As a result employees should look carefully at their individual situations before deciding whether to tell a supervisor or co-worker about their disability.

Some companies have a “culture of acceptance” where disabled workers feel comfortable, Mr. Gerber said. But in other companies, “the risks of disclosing are sometimes too great,” he said. Yet in order to receive workplace accommodations under the A.D.A., employees must disclose their disability.

When a 26-year-old literary publicist in Washington, with a language- processing disorder and attention deficit disorder disclosed her disability two and a half years ago to a supervisor at a previous job, it was not taken well. “I was told, basically, ‘We’re not going to hold your hand,’ ” she said.

The publicist, who did not want her name used because she feared the reaction of current co-workers, switched to an entry-level job at the company, rather than continuing in the event coordinator position she had been hired to do.

This kind of “underemployment” is common, Mr. Gerber said. “Employees with learning disabilities hold back as a way of protecting themselves and are often overqualified for the job they are doing.”

About nine months ago, the publicist landed her current job and a few months later told her new boss about her disability. “I was tired of struggling in silence,” she said. “Fortunately my boss was very accepting and open. Now we meet once a week to go over my projects because there is a lot of information to remember. I feel less overwhelmed and am more productive.”

Accommodations for those with learning disabilities are usually inexpensive, generally under \$500, with many costing nothing at all. For example, Ms. Flagg at Krysalis reads everything out loud, either to herself or her partner, and organizes things by color rather than alphabetically. Other accommodations can include allowing employees to make audio recordings of information, having reading materials presented in an audible format or extending the time allotted for learning job tasks or performing work.

But Susanne M. Bruyère, director of the Employment and Disability Institute at [Cornell University](#), said accommodations would not solve the biggest problem facing these employees. “It’s the attitudes of coworkers, supervisors and managers that are the biggest barriers to success in the workplace,” she said.

Ms. Bruyère said corporate America had become a bit more sensitive toward workers with learning disabilities, but that the record was spotty at best. A positive sign, she said, is the number of companies opting to become members of the Business Leadership Network, a nonprofit trade association of companies that seek to hire and retain people with disabilities, as well as market products to them. The network now represents about 5,000 employers.

Highmark, a health insurance company based in Pittsburgh, joined the network in 2000. It took the company two years to create a corporate culture that encouraged acceptance of learning disabilities, said Tammie McNaughton, director of corporate diversity for the company. “Now employees feel safe in identifying themselves,” she said.

Companies that allow workers with learning disabilities to thrive may reap unforeseen benefits. Ms. Flagg said workers like her often brought a fresh perspective to the job. “I don’t see the world the way everyone else does and that has enhanced my ability to innovate,” she said.

Arlyn Roffman, a special education professor at Lesley University and author of “Meeting the Challenge of Learning Disabilities in Adulthood,” said employees with learning disabilities were often “incredibly hard workers.”

“They also tend to be creative problem solvers,” Ms. Roffman said. “It’s the yin and yang of the disability — along with the challenges, there are gifts.”

But despite the small steps forward, learning disabilities are still widely misunderstood, Ms. Roffman said, and until that changes, workers will remain reluctant to speak up.