

# Workers Struggle in Silence: Behind the Eyes of Learning Disabilities in the Workplace

By Donna Flagg

Imagine my surprise when I was having dinner with a colleague who runs a major fashion company, mentioned that I was dyslexic and his response was, “Would you like to have that fixed?”

Suffice it so say, that’s not the kind of help I need...or want.

I answered, “No, thank you.” It was hard to explain that I liked the way my brain worked. In retrospect though, I wish I’d asked, “Would you like me to fix what society has decided is wrong with you?”

I changed the subject, but realized that what is most in need of repair is our understanding of learning disabilities in general, and how they affect performance in the workplace specifically. In other words, we don’t need to be fixed, but the system does.

Yes, it’s true. People who have learning disabilities learn differently, but what distinguishes them from others is not attributable to learning style alone, as it is often assumed in corporate America. There are plenty of people who learn through auditory, visual and tactile channels, some of whom have a learning disability, but then again, some who don’t. The point is that everyone learns differently whether he or she has a learning disability or not. What does distinguish people who have learning disabilities from those who don’t is in the way their brains work. They see, think, read, hear, organize, interpret and process information in a way that does not respond to the traditional constructs of teaching methods most often used in corporate training.

The challenge however, is that people who have learning disabilities tend to hide them because they can. So companies in turn aren’t able to address the needs of this population because they are unaware of their presence within the organization in the first place.

As of 2001, the U.S. Department of Education stated that as many as 1 in 5 people have a learning disability, and the National Institute of Literacy predicts that anywhere between 30% and 50 % of the population has not even been diagnosed. Asking people to come forward and expose the disability that they have worked so hard to hide is unrealistic from an organizational point of view. Furthermore, those who have gone undiagnosed lack the awareness they need to go about asking for help. The more productive solution is to look at the opportunities we provide all employees to learn, perform and succeed, ensuring that those with learning disabilities are not excluded.

So the challenge for managers, trainers and human resource professionals alike is first to assume that people with learning disabilities are among the larger population, and then to engage them in a way that teaches “to” them and not “around” them. Here are four cornerstones to creating an all-inclusive training plan for the cognitively diverse.

## **Creating the Shortest Distance Between Work and Learning**

### **1. ASSESS**

Ask yourself if your organization’s training materials, presentations, performance evaluation forms, job descriptions, employee handbooks and policy manuals make it possible or impossible for someone with a learning disability to read and absorb.

### **2. RETOOL or REDO**

Make adjustments to materials or create them in a way that stimulates the brain, uses patterns to organize information and makes it easy to read. Create every piece and every component of training with the goal being to excite learning and teach people in a way that links learning to work.

### **3. DELIVER**

Utilize as many modalities as you can with as much variety as possible because the delivery of information to people with learning disabilities is where accessing multiple channels is vital.

### **4. EVALUATE**

Measure the efficacy of your programs by looking for evidence of the learning in employee behavior both during the training and back on the job.

### **About the Author**

Donna Flagg is the founder of The Krysalis Group, a consulting firm founded in 2001 specializing in workplace learning, organizational productivity, and its relationship to improving business results. Krysalis delivers programs and strategic solutions that drive employee performance, product performance and business growth.