



Persons with learning disabilities in the workplace



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July 2015

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Introduction

The strength of a company is characterized, among other things, by the quality of its people, their persistence, passion and devotion. Never underestimate the value of a proactive, reliable and determined staff as the company's success depends on it.

To have excellent employees, we must be able to recruit them outside the traditional pool of potential candidates. Diversity is a compelling factor in organizational effectiveness, and especially because of demographic pressures that are emerging. Indeed, a dazzling number of baby boomers approach the age of retirement and a shortage of young people available to replace them looms.

Thus, we realize that the recruitment of competent and qualified persons is essential for success. The inclusion of people with disabilities in the labor force is therefore a particularly interesting solution. These candidates are often sidelined by employers who tend to be fooled by the myths that surround them. Indeed, it is often said that these individuals generate enormous costs in terms of accommodations, in addition to being impossible to dismiss if they fail to meet the objectives of their position. This is a myth! And therefore, this guide aims to lower the barrier of prejudice that people with disabilities face on a daily basis.

Frequently, the term "disability" takes us back to the idea of a woman in a wheelchair, a man with Down syndrome, or someone who is visually impaired. Did you know that the range of disabilities is much broader than these?

We tend to limit our thinking to so-called visible disabilities, while a large part of these are indistinguishable and not visible. In New Brunswick, some of the most frequently found disabilities in the population are the learning disabilities.

Therefore, this document sheds light on this type of disability by drawing a general picture of the process of inclusion of these persons in the workplace with themes such as communication, the accommodations, the challenges and the benefits of hiring them.

1. Learning Disabilities

1.1. Definition

As noted earlier, learning disabilities are considered as invisible disabilities. But what does the term learning disability mean, and how can it affect a worker going about his daily tasks?

Before diving deep into the theme of inclusion of persons with learning disabilities in the workplace, it is



important to assign them a definition. The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) proposes the following passage as a formal definition:

"The term" learning disability "refers to a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or treatment of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate average intellectual abilities essential for thinking or reasoning. Thus, learning disabilities are distinct from intellectual disability (LDAC, 2002, para 1). "

"Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning. These processes include among others phonological processing, spatial and visual language, and the speed of information processing, memory, attention and executive functions such as planning and decision making (LDAC, 2002, para 2). "

People affected by learning disabilities may have difficulty with the acquisition or use of the following (LDAC, 2002):

- Listening
- Speaking
- Writing
- Reading
- Calculation
- Reasoning
- Problem solving
- Organization
- Social relations

It is common for a person to have more than one learning disability. We note that one in three individuals with a learning disability also have attention deficit / hyperactivity disorder (AD / HD) (LDAC, n.d., a). The degree of severity of the disorder is highly variable among those who have it, but all are permanent (LDAC, 2002).

The manifestations of these disabilities vary since they are frequently influenced by the individual experiences of those who have it. In this sense, each person has challenges and solutions of its own, even if they share the same learning disability as another individual (Learning Disabilities Association of New Brunswick, 2013).

1.2. Types

Within a general definition of learning disabilities, these types of disabilities also have a sub-definition of their own, allowing one to differentiate between each of them.

1. **Dyslexia:** Dyslexia represents 80% of the types of learning disabilities (Learning Disabilities Association of



New Brunswick, 2013), and is characterized by a disability of language processing generating challenges in reading, writing and spelling (LDAC, n.d., b). A person with dyslexia may have difficulty writing words or require more time to read text.

2. **Dysorthographia:** This learning disability is directly related to dyslexia, and affects the processing of language. The difficulties are mainly orthographical (Larousse, n.d.).
3. **Dyscalculia:** This learning disability affects the understanding and resolution of mathematical concepts. This can, among other things, be characterized by difficulties in calculation, time management and finance (LDAC, n.d., b).
4. **Dysgraphia:** Dysgraphia affects writing. The person generally has difficulty writing legibly and / or writes slowly, in addition to experiencing difficulty organizing his thoughts by writing a text (LDAC, n.d., b).
5. **Dyspraxia:** Dyspraxia affects fine motor skills of the individuals affected. The main symptoms are challenges in terms of coordination and manual dexterity (LDAC, n.d., b).
6. **Dysphasia:** Influences the ability to communicate verbally. Scholars usually classify dysphasia into three distinct types as follows:
 - a. **Expressive dysphasia:** The individual has difficulty orally. Constructing sentences and respecting syntax can be especially difficult to achieve (Neuropsychological and Learning Disabilities Assessment Clinic of Montreal, 2012).
 - b. **Receptive aphasia:** This disability disrupts especially the understanding of verbal messages. Affected individuals may have difficulty understanding instructions and perform what is asked of them (Neuropsychological and Learning Disabilities Assessment Clinic of Montreal, 2012).
 - c. **Expressive and receptive dysphasia:** Affects both oral and written comprehension (Neuropsychological and Learning Disabilities Assessment Clinic of Montreal, 2012).
7. **Auditory processing disorder:** This learning disability influences interpreting auditory information. People with this disability do not have a hearing loss, but have difficulties with interpreting what they hear (Job Accommodation Network, 2013). Affected individuals usually encounter complications during language acquisition, and therefore have complications with the oral comprehension (LDAC, n.d., b).
8. **Visual processing disorder:** affects the ability of a person to interpret visual information. We often encounter challenges in reading comprehension, reading and math calculations (LDAC, n.d., b).
9. **Nonverbal learning disorder:** Those affected often have excellent skills in terms of hearing and memory retention, but have great difficulty understanding people and adapt to changes. Therefore, this learning



disability can affect the social skills of a person, in addition to coordination and fine motor skills (Learning Disabilities Association of New Brunswick, 2013).

10. Executive functions disorder: Those affected may experience difficulties to structure and organize themselves, either to plan a schedule, manage their time and put their ideas in order (Learning Disabilities Association of New Brunswick, 2013).

11. Attention deficit / hyperactivity disorder (ADHD): The attention deficit - hyperactivity disorder - is not always recognized as part of the wide range of learning disabilities, but experts agree more and more to consider it as such. Knowing that a third of people who have a learning disability also have a form of ADHD, it is obvious that it is inseparable from learning disabilities, even if it is mostly recognized as only related to these. People who have this learning disability typically have difficulty concentrating and being attentive (LDAC, n.d., c).

1.3. Causes

Research has not yet discovered the exact causes of learning disabilities. However, we note that several factors influence the presence of this learning challenge in an individual. The three main factors are genetic (inherited), neurobiological and accidental following the birth (LDAC, 2002).

Factors that may contribute to the development of learning disabilities (LDAC, n.d., a)

1. Genetic Factors

Heredity sometimes affects learning disabilities. It is common that a person with a learning disability has, within his family, other members with a similar learning disability.

2. Neurobiological factors

Refers to such causes:

- Disease present before or at birth
- Injury occurred before or at birth
- Use of drugs or alcohol during pregnancy
- A lack of oxygen during birth
- A difficult or premature delivery

3. Factors arising from incidents occurring after birth

These factors can be varied and include:

- Personal injury or damage to the brain
- Malnutrition
- Exposure to toxins

Learning disabilities are not the result of hearing or visual impairments, socio-economic, cultural or linguistic factors. The fact remains that these elements may cause an increase or decrease in challenges to learning disabilities (LDAC, 2002).

1.4. Statistics

In 2006, there were more than half a million Canadian workers (15 to 64) with a learning disability. Of these, 18,000 are New Brunswickers. Note that the rate of men and women affected is similar, 52% and 48% respectively. Consequently, it is argued that learning disabilities are not influenced by gender (Brennan, 2009).

2. Challenges

Despite the challenges faced daily, the vast majority of persons with learning disabilities have jobs and contribute fully to the success of companies that offer them the opportunity to perform. These candidates often have no less education or skills than other workers. Despite having encountered challenges in their academic years, they have successfully made the transition between school and work environments, having found their own way to navigate the barriers their disability can present. (Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, 2011).

Every person, will face particular challenges at work and in other spheres of life. For individuals with learning disabilities, the reality is no different. Indeed, all have unique personalities, formations as well as skills and abilities of their own. Like other employees, they face challenges in the workplace, which are not necessarily the same for all.

People who have the same learning disabilities usually have similar challenges (Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, 2011). For example, many employees with dyslexia can have difficulty reading and / or writing reports, while workers with dyscalculia may encounter challenges with mathematical calculations. In short, despite their uniqueness, persons with learning disabilities can face common challenges, mostly related to their disability.

Another behavior that can be observed in persons with learning disabilities is their inconsistency, according to the situations or tasks (Government of Alberta Employment and Immigration, 2010). Among others, a person



with dysgraphia can speak very well orally, but have difficulty completing written tasks. An employee with dyscalculia can be very organized, but not be able to manage time. A worker with an attention deficit disorder / hyperactivity comes to effectively perform all its tasks and meet the requirements of his position, but when there are too many distractions, they can be less productive and have difficulty to concentrating.

If their learning disability has not been diagnosed in school, some people enter the labor market without even being aware that they have one. This is often due to the fact that this type of disability is not visible. Also, a person aware of his learning disability may not have been able to find effective strategies to overcome its related challenges (Disabilities Association of Ontario, 2011).

One of the biggest challenges faced by persons with learning disabilities - and people with disabilities in general – is derived from an external factor to the individual: prejudice. Among others, we associate persons with learning disabilities with a lesser intelligence (Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work, 2013). Therefore, persons with learning disabilities sometimes avoid being in situations where their disabilities will be highlighted, which in turn affects their relationships with their colleagues. However, these employees often have an IQ that is average or above it (Government of Alberta Employment and Immigration, 2010).

Another external factor that makes the integration of this group of workers particularly challenging for an organization is the request for accommodations. The majority of employees with these disabilities do not need accommodations, but it is still possible that some require it in order to perform at the same level as their peers. The perceived challenges ahead are usually from the following 1) Some accommodations are not always available; 2) employees are not aware of the options available to them; and 3) employers are reluctant to adopt them, believing that they will be very expensive (Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work, 2013). Maintaining good communication in the employer-employee relationship and the identification and introduction of accommodations are much less complex than the myths lead us to believe.

Another particularly important challenge faced by persons with learning disabilities is the lack of awareness within their team. Indeed, in many organizations, employees, supervisors and human resource managers have not received training or are not favorable to the inclusion of these candidates (Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work, 2013).

3. Benefits

As mentioned in the Business Case on hiring people with disabilities, recruiting and retaining from this pool of candidates can generate numerous business advantages. Persons with learning disabilities are no exception to the rule. Their integration within a team can be greatly beneficial to the company, other employees and also to customers. So as a reminder, here they are:

- 1. A new workforce:** In a labor market in constant evolution, employers must face the lack of skilled labor available (Buccigrossi, Pfeffer and Robinson, 2003), the aging population and the growing number of young workers leaving the province to work elsewhere in Canada (Martel, Caron-Malenfant, Morency, Lebel, Bélanger and Bastien, 2012). Employers can meet this challenge by turning to diversity and inclusion, including the hiring of persons with learning disabilities. There are about 60,000 people with disabilities of working age (15 to 64) in the province and people living with vision loss account for approximately 10 000 of these (Government of New Brunswick: Department of post-secondary education, Training and Labour, 2013; CNIB, n.d.).
- 2. The cost of accommodations:** Employers are often concerned about the accommodations and mainly by their costs. However, studies show that their cost is relatively low, generally between 0 and \$ 600. This amount is comparatively low when we know what the employee can bring in terms of profits and production. The accommodations usually increase the productivity and efficiency of both the employee and the organization. Note that the majority of workers with disabilities do not need paid accommodation (The Conference Board of Canada, 2013).
- 3. Health and safety costs:** Employers tend to believe that people with disabilities generate exorbitant costs of health and safety. However, studies show that the costs are similar for employees with disabilities and those who are not. This group has no greater frequency of accidents than other staff members and no more frequent recourse to compensation for accidents at work. So there is no causal link between disability and the costs related to health and safety in the workplace (The Conference Board of Canada, 2013).
- 4. Legal costs:** These refer to the potential costs arising from legal conflicts between the individual and his employer, which may occur as a result of a lack of accessibility, accommodations or human rights violation. Again, studies have shown that there is no more incidence of legal conflict with persons with disabilities compared to their peers (The Conference Board of Canada, 2013).
- 5. Performance and Productivity:** Performance and productivity are among the skills particularly sought by employers. People with disabilities do not necessarily perform better in terms of production and performance, but they are equal to others. If appropriately integrated into the labor force, they can work at the same speed and become reliable and competent employees contributing fully to the success of an organization (Work Without Limits, nd; Creative Workforce Solutions, n.d.; Government of Canada: human resources and skills Development Canada, 2013).
- 6. Absenteeism and safety:** Studies by DuPont and DePaul University reveal that people with disabilities have excellent attendance rate. In addition, they work safely and are not hurt more often than other staff members (Premier's Council on the Status of Disabled Persons, n.b.; Creative Workforce Solutions, n.d.).

7. **Staff turnover:** Turnover and employee retention are issues to which employers must seriously pay attention. When an employer manages to retain its employees, it can save considerable sums in recruitment, orientation and in several other spheres of its activities (The Conference Board of Canada, 2001). People with disabilities generally keep their jobs longer time than other employees (Deloitte, 2010; Government of Canada Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2013).
8. **Innovation and adaptability:** Because they are constantly finding different and creative ways to go about their daily activities, people with disabilities enable an organization to achieve considerable progress in innovation. People with disabilities can help promote openness, change and progress, bringing new ways of thinking, innovative perspectives and more creativity in the work force. A competitive organization in terms of innovation and capacity to evolve manages to better serve its customers by offering better products or services.
9. **The impact on all staff:** A diverse group can promote different viewpoints and influence the entire staff to be creative and innovative. The inclusion of persons with disabilities in the workplace contributes to making all staff more open to changes. Their integration into a team greatly improves morale and employee satisfaction, teamwork and motivation of the group (North East Community Partners for Inclusion, 2005).
10. **Public image and reputation:** The inclusion of persons with disabilities in the workforce can greatly improve the public image and reputation of an organization. When hiring a person with disability, a company demonstrates that it is open to diversity. A company oriented towards inclusion can reach a diverse and intelligent customer base. Employers can raise the goodwill of their business, as well as its image. Moreover, the hiring of people with disabilities promotes universal access, which can be profitable for other employees as well as customers.
11. **Purchasing power:** In Canada, people with disabilities represent approximately 13.4% of the population, and have a potential purchasing power of over \$ 25 billion. Including this group in the workforce is therefore good for the economy. In addition, people with disabilities can have a great influence on their families for their choices as customers. Promoting inclusion makes it possible to reach people with disabilities and their families, making them loyal consumers (The Conference Board of Canada, 2001).
12. **Human Rights:** For some respecting values such as equality, diversity and inclusion are valid reasons for hiring people with disabilities. Recruitment of these and other minority groups demonstrates that employers promote non-discriminatory practices and they convey values based on human rights.

4. Communication

Good communication between members of an organization is always essential, and this is no exception with employees who have learning disabilities. Employers can more effectively communicate with these employees when they are aware of the strategies that exist.

Some tips to communicate effectively with persons with learning disabilities (Government of Alberta Employment and Immigration, 2010; SenseAbility, n.d.):

- Be sure to reduce distractions and noises when communicating.
- Use simple language.
- Be specific and clear when giving directions both spoken and written.
- Divide the texts or conversations in small sections so that the person understands your message.
- Do not hesitate to repeat as necessary and to ensure that the person has understood.
- Check with the person to find out how they prefer to receive your information (written, oral, computer, telephone, etc.).
- Find the resources and tools available to promote better communication and use them if the person agrees.
- Be consistent in how you communicate.
- Be patient and positive.
- Get to know the person to encourage better communication.
- Involve the person in the process so that it can help you communicate better.

5. Accommodations

Persons with learning disabilities generally do not need accommodations or at least very little (Job Accommodation Network, 2013). When deemed necessary, you must first assess the person's needs. The types of accommodations, differences between learning disabilities and personal experiences make each case different. Make sure to know the person and the main challenges in order to achieve adequate accommodation allowing the employee to perform their duties well (Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters, n.d.).

Having identified the challenges, the employer may make a list of possible options. Then it can try the most relevant strategies to eventually set up the most efficient among those considered (LDAC, n.d.).

The accommodation process does not stop after an adaptation measure was put in place. Indeed, the employer must ensure they have the employee's feedback to see if the accommodation is still effective. The reevaluation of an accommodation is a crucial component that allows both parties to ensure the success of the process of accommodation (Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters, n.d.). The introduction of accommodations is effective



when both major parties are actively involved, namely the employer and the person who requires an accommodation.

For persons with learning disabilities, there are several different possible accommodations options for different situations. Besides the specific adaptation to certain conditions, there are also general strategies that can be greatly beneficial to persons with learning disabilities. Among others, changes to working hours, longer periods of orientation, the elimination of non-core tasks and flexibility on deadlines (Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work, 2013).

Include specific accommodations for each learning disability.

Here they are (Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work, 2013; Government of Alberta Employment and Immigration, 2010; Job Accommodation Network, 2013)

Learning Disabilities

Examples of accommodations

1. Dyslexia

- Screen reading programs
- Audio versions of documents
- Grant permission to provide answers orally instead of written form
- Print documents in larger size
- Use fonts that are easier to read
- Ensure that documents are written double-spaced for easy reading
- Having documents read aloud by a colleague
- Screen reading software
- Use detached script print when the document is not written with a word processor

2. Dysorthographia

- Grant permission to provide answers orally instead of written form
- Electronic and talking Dictionaries
- Spell check and grammar software
- Predictive software for writing to the computer
- Having documents revised by a colleague

3. Dyscalculia

- Electronic and talking calculators
- Checklist indicating the steps to some mathematical concepts
- Guides for fractions, multiplication tables, decimal numbers, etc.

- Electronic Measuring Tapes
- Electronic scales
- Digital Clocks

4. Dysgraphia

- Templates for completing paperwork
- Permission to provide responses (reports, messages, etc.) orally instead of handing them written
- Allow the use of computers, tablets or phones to facilitate written communication
- Voice text conversion software

5. Dyspraxia

- Voice text conversion software
- Larger keyboards
- Larger devices, consoles and work tools
- Work sitting instead of standing

6. Dysphasia

- Give topics and dates in advance for meetings
- Provide written responses at meetings
- Allow the use of text messages to communicate with colleagues

7. Auditory processing disorder

- Provide specific guidance and dictate slowly
- Provide paper copies of notes of meeting, conferences, guidelines, etc.
- Repeat or have the person repeat if needed
- Record meetings and conferences
- Give topics in advance when the person has to attend meetings, conferences, etc.

8. Visual processing disorder

- Read texts aloud to the person
- Allow more time for the person to read documents
- Highlight key passages of a document or provide a summary to the person
- After reading a document, organize meetings with colleagues to discuss

9. Trouble with nonverbal learning

- Allow the person to work from home
- Provide a mentor
- Review policies and procedures and provide copies thereof

10. Trouble with executive functions

- Provide list of tasks
- Alarms and timers to improve time management
- Ask colleagues to remind of dates, break times, tasks
- Keep a consistent schedule
- Keep the work environment in order
- Use color codes

11. Disorder attention deficit / hyperactivity

- Divide tasks to avoid long periods of time spent on the same task
- Provide private physical environment with the least possible distraction
- Allow the use headphones
- Provide shorter breaks, but more frequent
- White noise machine (an electronic device producing sounds and masking the noise of the environment)

Overall, these accommodations all have as a main objective to enable the person with learning disabilities to work to its full potential. Adaptation measures allow employees to be more efficient, productive and satisfied, which in turn is to the direct benefit to a company.

Conclusion

Individuals with learning disabilities are employees like any other, with strengths and weaknesses of their own. If well integrated, they have as much chance of success as the rest of the team. It is often enough to simply establish strategies and / or appropriate accommodations, and to establish a trusting relationship where the employee and the employer can effectively communicate and feel at ease.

Many employers fear that hiring people with disabilities, worrying that it is costlier than beneficial ... which often results in the exclusion of candidates from the time of disclosure. However, this is only a myth! In many cases, the individual already has his personal accommodations in possession or not required at all. If the implementation of accommodations is required, it is important not to worry. Often, they are not so expensive or even free (eg. A mobile app, changes in working hours, etc.), in addition to allowing the employee to maximize the use of his skills and talents.

It is essential to learn more about the different disabilities, and see beyond them. Undoubtedly, persons with learning disabilities actively contribute to the success of a business.

If hiring a person with a learning disability interests you, if you have any unanswered questions or if you just want to chat with a member of NBESS, do not hesitate to contact us!

We will be happy to assist you in this process, and consequently, to see your business flourish.

New Brunswick Employer Support Services (NBESS)

NBESS offers free services to employers through consultations, presentations and training.

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