

Let's talk about... Dyslexia

Living with my hidden disability in the Oil & Gas industry

I am a project manager with a varied background, working daily with dyslexia. I wish to share my journey in the hope that it opens up the conversation as organisations begin to look at the term 'neurodiversity' as a focus on the positive qualities of thinking and learning differently.

I recall clearly my first year at school, it stood out simply because it was the beginning of my realisation that I was very different from my peers. I had difficulty with learning in the “accepted” manner and, although I worked hard to overcome this, I often found myself at the back of the class with a hat on my head that had a big red D on it. Had I known then that the letter D accurately described my learning maybe my life's journey could have been positive from the start as it was some thirty years later before D translated into a Dyslexia diagnosis.

After many years of working my way upwards, I decided to take a career break and retrain at RGU University to do a part-time BA Business Management course. Up until now I had barely read a book in my life. I used to fall asleep after a few pages of reading and put it down to either a lack of interest in the subject matter or being too tired to absorb the content.

At University I quickly discovered that I was not able to digest what I had read. I decided to make enquires and was soon being tested for ‘Dyslexia’. This was a landmark moment for me as for the very first time I had a diagnosis. I could start to understand how my brain worked and experiment with different tools to assist in developing strategies to improve the readability of my work and how I could absorb information better in order to retain it. Most, but not all, dyslexics suffer from eye stress. I opted to have specially coloured glasses that assisted in flattening the text I was reading on the page. This meant I could read much faster instead of constantly re-reading the same paragraph to understand what I was reading. I graduated with a 2:1 which was a major success for me.

At the same time as undertaking the course, I held down a full-time position with an oil and gas service company where my day job was like walking in a minefield as I was constantly keeping an eye out for mistakes in my work. Re-reading things, taking time to write an email,

checking it and re-reading it. The job got harder as I was working with Excel spreadsheets and I struggled.

I had a Contracts Manager who was also my direct line manager. For two years I was watching my every move as this manager was never happy with my work. In hindsight, I can see that I was a victim of bullying in the workplace due to my disability. One day he pulled me aside as I was about to pack up to inform me, he was going to fire me because he had heard I was dyslexic. I called the HR Director and reported this incident which sparked an 18-month grievance process. They finally admitted that the contracts manager used the words 'fired and dyslexia' in the same sentence.

As I had always felt 'less than' all my life, I did not consider legal action with the company, but instead was happy I got to keep my job and was offered a role in business development within a decommissioning function. I strived with an amazing mentor who didn't at first totally get me and my way of working or thinking, but over time, got to understand the workplace from my perspective. I struggled in the role as not only did I have to produce reports, but I was also responsible for pulling together submissions from other engineers, some of which appeared to have been written by a fellow dyslexic.

According to the British Dyslexia Association, the number of individuals with dyslexia in the UK is around 10 to 15% or around 11.5 million people. It is also reported that in some engineering-based companies, up to 20% of the engineering workforce could be dyslexic, a statistic that is not far-fetched when I think back to how many engineering reports I have come across in my career with traceable dyslexic tendencies.

An [EY report](#) published in 2018 highlighted that those they researched with dyslexia had an exceptional ability in complex problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, and people management – all skills that are highly regarded in engineering. As neurodiverse people are wired differently from “neurotypical” people, they tend to bring new perspectives to an organisation to create or recognise value. Nevertheless, the neurodiversity population remains a largely untapped talent pool.

A practice that is almost universal within the traditional approach of recruitment is interviewing. Although neurodiverse people may excel in important areas, many don't interview well. Many of us are what we say we are and that shows highly on the psychometric tests in the interview process. In the last year I have made it on numerous occasions, to be one of seven being interviewed for Executive roles. As a close ally said, "Nobody knows how to talk to you or interview you, to understand how different you are and what your difference looks like on the job, day to day, challenging and making the changes they desperately need". Followed by this comment when I didn't succeed, "They missed out on you by going for more of the same!"

The case for neurodiversity hiring is especially compelling given the existing skills shortages in the UK Oil & Gas Industry as we transition to a Net Zero economy. The energy transition agenda demands robust challenges to how we think and do things in the industry. It requires dynamic thinking to challenge decisions being made. I challenge the greater community to look at neurodiversity candidates differently, to accept their differences and to embrace the positive impacts we can bring.

Organisations should consider more innovative paths to recruitment so that they tap into the neurodiversity talent pool. For instance, having a graduate trainee programme as opposed to standard assessment centre. The benefit of a longer assessment period is you get to see true potential which is unseen in a pressured 1hr interview situation. Silicon Valley is ahead of UK-based companies as Microsoft and others are currently working with universities to improve methods of identifying and accessing neurodiversity talent.

A lot of us in the industry have chosen not to disclose who we really are because it is not safe to; we don't get that interview when we tick 'do you have a disability' box. In my opinion, the industry is missing out on the greatest untapped talent with skill sets required to get us closer to Net Zero. We need your support; we need your understanding and then maybe I will tell you who I am.