

The elephant in the room

The facts are not new. At least 40 percent of the New Zealand workforce has literacy or numeracy problems that prevent them from doing their jobs effectively.

The impact of this on workplaces and on the nation's productivity and prosperity is enormous. We have known since 1996 but the problem is stubborn. Repeated international surveys show that adult literacy and numeracy deficits are extremely difficult to address. The government has put some money into addressing the problem, but the solution requires more money than any government is able to provide.

The effects of inadequate literacy/numeracy skills are everywhere. Health and Safety problems, quality issues, inability to adapt to new technology and workers inability to progress to more productive and rewarding jobs. Low literacy and numeracy is a handbrake on the nation's productivity and it affects the future for New Zealand Inc.

Many people blame the schools but the problem is much more complex than that. Schools should take some of the blame, but many people in the workforce were not educated in New Zealand and every nation

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in the OECD has an adult literacy/numeracy problem of the same dimensions. The workplace requires much higher literacy and numeracy skills than ever before. Complex and industry specific text is everywhere. Every sector has its own language and terminology and graphs and charts are everywhere. The problem is going to get worse. There are few places that anybody can hide if they struggle to read, write and do sums. Low skilled jobs will be replaced by robots and computers and the skills required to operate the new technology will involve more reading and number skills.

What are the schools doing about this?

Schools are doing their best to respond but they can only deliver generic literacy and numeracy skill development, while the workplace requires specific literacy and numeracy skills relevant to a specific workplace or sector. There is a much bigger reason why the schools do not provide the product that the workplace requires. Schools teach English and Mathematics – both academic subjects. The workplace requires literacy and numeracy skills. They are different. Related certainly, but different. Ask a young person who left school with low literacy and numeracy skills just which subjects they hated most at school and they will tell you, “English and Maths”. Even schools that offer Applied English and Applied Maths classes find that most

parents don't want their children to take a “non-academic” option. The result is that many young people leave school without the skills to get and hold down a job. Many are able to secure an entry level position – but with minimal chance to progress.

Sadly corporate New Zealand has largely ignored the issue of low adult literacy and numeracy. Some workplaces apply for the government Workplace Literacy Fund to put a programme in place to support staff with literacy/numeracy issues, but last year the fund was underspent! Corporate New Zealand companies sponsor all sorts of activities. Without exception they are worthwhile causes, but no corporate has seen the value of a project to improve the foundation skills of the around one million Kiwis who could benefit from support to address a national issue.

The reasons for corporate avoidance of this issue are many and understandable:

- › Many don't know the problem exists as least to the extent that is does.
- › Many would say it's the schools fault and leave it at that.
- › Many accept it is a problem but do not know what to do about addressing it.
- › Many solve the problem by “work arounds”. That is they leave the staff with low literacy/numeracy in low unskilled positions and arrange for supervisory staff to manage staff skills shortfalls.



The Health and Safety imperative

The new Health and Safety in the Workplace Act (HSWA) places much greater demands on employers to ensure their staff are safe. Often HSWA documents are written for an adult to read, but many of the audience have only the reading age of a child and will not have the skills to read the documents. **Staff that cannot read the safety brochures are not safe.**



Mike Styles is National Manager of Literacy and Numeracy at Primary ITO. He has been involved in the world of adult literacy and numeracy provision since 2001. He is currently the National Manager for Literacy and Numeracy for the Primary Industry Training Organisation. There are significant literacy and numeracy issues in the primary sector as well as large numbers of staff with dyslexia. Mike has led a number of initiatives to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of primary sector employees as well as initiatives to support adults with dyslexia. Mike has just returned from presenting a paper at Oxford University on how adult dyslexics are supported in New Zealand.

DYSLEXIA - A SPECIFIC LEARNING DIFFERENCE

Teaching everybody to “read, write and do sums” is much more complex than most people think.

“It’s not rocket science – it is much harder than that!”

If it was simple we could have conquered the problem years ago. One reason why a lot of people struggle to read and write confidently is the very complex matter of specific learning differences. The most common specific learning difference (SLD) is dyslexia.

WHAT IS DYSLEXIA?

Dyslexia is a condition whereby people of average to above average intellect struggle to read, write and spell, in spite of having received quality instruction.

- Dyslexia affects around 10 percent of the population worldwide.
- Dyslexia affects all races, ethnicities and languages.
- The most common sign is a difficulty to read, write and spell – in spite of at least average intelligence.
- The brain of dyslexic people is wired differently and it is a condition that affects both genders.
- Dyslexia is an inherited condition.
- With quality instruction dyslexic people can be taught to read, but the instruction requires different strategies to that required for non- dyslexic people.
- There are other symptoms shared by dyslexic people, like limited working memory and poor organisation and time management skills.
- Dyslexia is a lifetime condition. Dyslexic children become dyslexic adults. Many adults develop strategies for coping and many spend a lot of effort hiding their condition.

New Zealand has a horror record of failing to support people with dyslexia, and this is in stark contrast to many other countries. For a long time the Ministry of Education denied the existence of dyslexia and the outcome of that is that there are many adults and children who are unaware that they have dyslexia and are labouring under a misapprehension that they are slow and of limited intellect.

With support dyslexic people can achieve as well as regular workers.

Unfortunately however many dyslexic workers will shy away from promotions, and remain in positions where they can hide their condition. They are a group in the workforce whose potential has not been tapped.

HIDDEN TALENTS

The dyslexia story is not all bad news. There is definitely a silver lining. Dyslexia often bestows on those who have it a range of remarkable talents and skills. These come under the collective name of Positive Dyslexia.

Many of the world’s most talented people are dyslexic. Sir Richard Branson, Sir Richard Taylor (Weta Workshops), John Britten (the Britten motorcycle), Tom Cruise, Kera Keightly and Sir Winston Churchill are or were all dyslexic.

The skills fall into a number of categories and no one dyslexic person has all of them. They include: -

- Superior spatial visual and 3D skills.
- Creative innovative thinking.
- Entrepreneurship skills
- Great empathy, teamwork and collaborative skills.
- Big picture and left field thinking. Often able to consider a lot of complex information and leap directly to the answer.
- Often see patterns and relationships that others do not see.

The irony is that many dyslexics will not be fully aware of their special talents – because they think that “everybody thinks the way that they do.”

It does not make sense that the most creative and collaborative part of the workforce is left often unidentified and therefore not fully utilised. **HR**