The Journal of Inclusive Practice in Further and Higher Education 4:1 Autumn 2012

A special edition produced by NADP with Dr John Conway as guest editor

# Article 5: “Unusual Talent: a Study of Successful Leadership and Delegation in Entrepreneurs who have Dyslexia”

Authors: Julie Logan, Cass Business School, City University London & Nicola Martin, London School of Economics.

## Abstract

This study seeks to understand how successful entrepreneurs with dyslexia lead and manage their ventures and deal with workplace communications. Informed understanding of dyslexia potentially benefits organisations and helps employees to reach their potential. This research breaks new ground by providing evidence that positive aspects of dyslexia, when harnessed can benefit individuals and organisations.

Two questions are examined, firstly, what explains the high proportion of people with dyslexia among successful entrepreneurs, and secondly, what skills or attributes have given these individuals a head start?

Literature about dyslexia in adults in the context of the work place is examined alongside relevant entrepreneurship literature on leadership, team building and delegation.

A simple methodology has been utilised, a convenience sample of successful entrepreneurs with dyslexia were interviewed about their skills and how they run their ventures. These interviews were taped, videoed and transcribed. They were coded and analyses for common themes.

The study found that successful entrepreneurs who are also dyslexic have good oral communication skills they can communicate ideas clearly; they have good people skills; enthusiasm When they are in the process of starting the business they are able to network with others, explain their business vision and generate enthusiasm for their new venture. They are also often good salespeople because they have an interest in others. In short, the dyslexic potential entrepreneur may have skills that are very advantages for getting started in business. The ability to delegate is an essential task if the business is to grow and we see this skill in many dyslexic entrepreneurs. This is because dyslexics often learn early in life to trust those around them to do the things they are not so good at.

Many of the respondents in this study found working in the corporate environment frustrating so running their own venture was a viable alternative career move. Practitioners working in further and higher education are uniquely placed to offer advice about career choices and will therefore find this study useful, as will students who have dyslexia.

## Adults with dyslexia at work.

The limited research available on adults with dyslexia and their employment tends to focus on the difficulties they experience. Existing studies evidence stress at work associated with dyslexia (Hales, 1995: Reid & Kirk, 2001). Bartlett and Moody (2000) describe workplace anxiety, bewilderment, embarrassment, shame, frustration, anger, despondency and depression. McLoughlin et al. (1994) discuss difficulty in holding down jobs. In 1987 ALBSU produced evidence that people with dyslexia earn less than non-disabled people (the study has not been replicated more recently). In 2008 a report by the UK Trades Union Congress asserted that managers rarely appreciate links between dyslexia and commonly related performance issues. As a result, they may discriminate unwittingly and, in some cases,, this has resulted in dismissal of individuals. A number of these cases have ended up at industrial tribunals (TUC, 2008).

Fitzgibbon and O’Conner (2002) suggest large organizations can be dyslexia unfriendly because of environmental factors which are difficult to control. Taylor and Walter (2003) found adults with dyslexia were much less likely to follow professions such as finance, management, science, and computing and more likely to choose people-oriented occupations such as nursing or sales.

The authors suggest that a degree of environmental control allows the affected worker to be more creative and more involved with people. Successful people with dyslexia also develop ways of exerting control as a mechanism for coping with and compensating for difficulties (Fitzgibbon & O’Connor, 2002). Logan (2001) discovered that the incidence of dyslexia among entrepreneurs in the UK is 19%. Subsequent research in the USA found the proportion to be more than 30% (Logan,

2009). That is double and treble, respectively, the rate found in the general adult population (BDA, 2009). Logan (2009) discovered that only 3% of corporate managers in the UK are dyslexic and a mere 1% in the US. She proposes that because individuals with dyslexia feel more comfortable managing when they feel they have more control over their situation this may well lead to a preference for starting new ventures.

Among others also adopting a positive view, Stein (2001) suggests:

‘The genes that underlie magnocellular weakness would not be so common unless there were compensating advantages to dyslexia. In developmental dyslexics there may be heightened development of parvocellular systems that underlie their holistic, artistic, ‘seeing the whole picture’ and entrepreneurial talents.’

Evidence that dyslexia is associated with enhanced right-hemisphere skills is cited by Geschwind, 1982; Galaburda, 1993; West, 1992; West, 1997; Reid & Kirk,

2001and others. Use of intuition, visual thinking, spatial intelligence, pattern

recognition, problem solving, and connected forms of creativity are associated with the right hemisphere. Reid and Kirk (2001) believe that these skills are critical in many business activities including recruitment, decision-making and innovation. Moody (1999) asserts that holistic processing associated with dyslexia can lead to creativity and innovative approaches.

Evidence is cited by Everatt, Steffert & Smythe, 1999 of development of compensatory strategies translating into transferable skills which can provide an edge in business. Nicholson and Fawcett (1999) suggest that enhanced communication skills may compensate for poorer literacy.

Entrepreneurs with dyslexia were found by Logan (2009) to be more likely to score themselves highly on communication skills than would non-dyslexics (using a five-point Likert scale: ranging from one, poor, to five, very good).

Delegation was deployed more by entrepreneurs with dyslexia than by those without (who found the skill of delegation hard to master) (Logan 2009). Logan also found that entrepreneurs with dyslexia tend to grow their companies more quickly (a finding statistically significant at the 90% confidence level). She proposed that this is in part a consequence of their ability to delegate (Logan, 2009).

In summary, it seems the corporate workplace is often stressful for those with dyslexia. Arguably many stressors are socially constructed by an unsympathetic work environment. Therefore, they tend to gravitate towards careers as entrepreneurs or in people-oriented occupations in contexts where greater autonomy and control is possible. Heightened interpersonal skills, often displayed by workers with dyslexia, can be very useful to employers.

An examination follows of entrepreneurship literature concerned with leadership, team building and delegation.

## Leadership, team building and delegation

Research on leadership and management of the human resource function is evident in general management literature but less is available within the context of small entrepreneurial companies (Katz *et al*., 2000). Entrepreneurship literature is unequivocal in its contention that if a new venture is to grow, the entrepreneur must have leadership qualities (Perren, 2000; Perren & Grant, 2001; Perren & Burgoyne, 2002). However, Freel finds that many entrepreneurs lack leadership skills (Freel,

1999). Nicholson (1998) suggests that whilst some have prior experience in large organizations, many entrepreneurs reject this career pathway. Consequently, this limits opportunities to learn leadership, empowerment and management skills in formally structured organizations (Kempster and Cope 2010). Entrepreneurs, unlike many managers, will probably not have undergone a leadership apprenticeship (Kempster, 2006). Corporate managers however often receive pre-promotion leadership training and opportunities to observe leaders. This affords the chance to consider and possibly emulate leadership behaviours to facilitate dynamic teams. Most entrepreneurs will, in contrast, have had to learn either by trial and error (Gibb, 1997; Cope, 2005a), by gathering information from their social networks (Hoang & Antonic, 2003), by observing leadership within the family (Kempster & Cope, 2010) or by actively seeking training (Mazzoral, 2003).

Kempster and Cope (2010) found most entrepreneurs in their study saw their role as facilitator of business success, rather than leader, reflecting restricted understanding of the leadership role. Often the result was that the venture was hampered or grew more slowly than was likely if the entrepreneur had implemented a conscious leadership strategy.

A gap was identified by Mazzoral (2003) between the owner-manager’s vision and confidence in where the venture is heading, and their ability to articulate this to employees.

‘As the business grows and the number of employees increases, the owner- manager is challenged by the need to articulate their company's vision and mission so as to achieve a unification of purpose within the organization.’

In summary, apparently, many entrepreneurs must develop leadership skills whilst running the company. This ‘learning through doing’ may slow growth as it will take the entrepreneur time to explore different methods and to develop a style which facilitates team development and empowerment.

At the start of every new venture the entrepreneur will have to be able to complete all the tasks involved in running a business. Success and expansion eventually requires the entrepreneur to recruit, train and empower a team and to learn to delegate effectively (Smith, 1992; Formichelli, 1997; Timmons, 1999). Without an effective team the entrepreneur is unavailable to explore and develop new opportunities (Rosa 1998). Delegation is difficult for many entrepreneurs and this is a barrier to small firm growth (Churchill & Lewis, 1983; Greiner, 1972; Story, 1994; Perren & Grant, 2001). Baker (1994) explains that whilst there is a need for the entrepreneur to empower their team by delegating, many struggle to hand over authority, therefore teams are not empowered. He also suggests many entrepreneurs find it difficult to embrace the coaching role as a mechanism for team development and business growth.

Reluctance to delegate key tasks may arise from anxiety about the consequences of handing over control, even fear for the survival of the firm (Matley, 1999). Entrepreneurs faced with limited resources with which to recruit good people are even more reluctant to delegate (Hornsby & Kuratko, 1990; Atkinson & Storey,

1994). Mazzarol (2003) suggests that conditions for successful growth include learning to delegate authority and responsibility and developing structures, policies and practices to enable employees to embrace responsibility and participate in dynamic teams. He found that entrepreneurs moved from micro-management to empowerment and delegation as a result of training and as a response to environmental pressures. Mazzoral reports:

‘Faced with growing markets and increasing production the owners found themselves unable to achieve their goals using the haphazard HR practices with which they first operated their businesses.’

The European Commission (2006) found that entrepreneurs are reluctant to spend their limited resources on training for themselves; therefore, delegation skills may be learned by trial and error. The entrepreneur is clearly disadvantaged by having to learn to lead and delegate as they go. This is risky, will take time, and may hamper or slow growth. People with dyslexia often start their careers at a disadvantage yet many become successful entrepreneurs. The research presented here considers whether entrepreneurs with dyslexia have different experiences from non-dyslexics, whether aspects of dyslexia could be beneficial in entrepreneurial situations and advantageous in business.

**Methodology**

Two female and eight male entrepreneurial business leaders, all formally diagnosed with dyslexia, agreed to be interviewed and filmed for this case study research. They were part of a group of 19 volunteer mentors from a scheme to mentor younger people with dyslexia which was initiated in March 2009 by the British Dyslexia Association (BDA). ([http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/get-involved-and-](http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/get-involved-and-fundraising/mentoring.html) [fundraising/mentoring.html).](http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/get-involved-and-fundraising/mentoring.html)

The entrepreneurs came from careers in retail, service industries, television, consultancy, information technology, and engineering. Seven could be described both as entrepreneurs and business leaders because their businesses have multi- million-pound turnovers. Three led successful and sustainable social enterprises. The participants were self-selecting and a convenience sample. Though not a statistically significant sample, the ten interviewees provide us with a greater understanding of the potential of those with dyslexia.

Ten case studies were developed through semi-structured interviews using a common template. Interviews were conducted by an experienced interviewer with no specialized knowledge of dyslexia (which arguably added to his objectivity). Interviews were videoed, transcribed and subsequently approved for release by interviewees.

All transcripts were subjected to content analysis; responses were coded and grouped under emerging themes which highlighted the issues of greatest importance to participants. Subsequently further analysis was undertaken to identify patterns, including any significant differences between the opinions, beliefs and values of the interviewees.

## Question design

Questions covered schooling, early and current career, and business 'style'. The interview approach ensured that participants were free to tell their story within set parameters. Four questions about early life experience aimed to provide insights into their possible influence on later decisions, behaviours or actions.

1. When did you discover you were dyslexic?

2. How did having dyslexia affect your school days?

3. Is there a family history of dyslexia?

4. How would you say dyslexia has affected your confidence?

Four questions about business life and the affect dyslexia may have had on the individual within the work environment were designed to explore positive and negative impacts.

5. How has your business career evolved?

6. In what ways has being dyslexic affected your business career?

7. Which do you find is the most effective way of communicating your message?

8. How has being dyslexic affected the way you work with other people

(customers, partners, and staff)?

## The findings

### Background Information

Seven participants had been identified with dyslexia at school or university. Three found out when their own children were labelled. Nine described feeling 'stupid' (their word) and severely lacking confidence whilst in education and in their early career. Business success brought greatly increased confidence, particularly when dealing with their area of specialization. However, all respondents said they continued to worry about, and tried to guard against being tripped up by concerns they associated with dyslexia.

Interviewees typically relied on technology and a wife/partner/friend or non-dyslexic business associate who was willing to write for them and do much of the detailed work essential for running a business. Technological solutions included: Smart phones, Spell checkers and Dictaphones and assistive technologies such as speech recognition software.

Most had practical, vocational or menial jobs before starting their business. Half had been employed by a large company but had decided to leave.

* ‘I was at the BBC for quite a long time, but I always wanted to better myself. I suddenly realized that I wasn’t going to go up the ladder at the BBC because the whole culture had changed… It reminded me that the inability to read and write was going to limit me in that sort of organisation. I’m driven to succeed so I decided to leave.’ WE
* ‘I ended up at Oxford University in the computer laboratory doing research as a social scientist, as an ethnographer, which was fascinating. But I did find after a number of years that the inability to write and the dyslexia became such a frustration for me that I felt I had to leave academia.’ MB
* ‘And when I got into the work environment, I discovered my dyslexia became a problem again because the job I got involved me writing reports. So unfortunately, my different way of working - which doesn’t involve writing great long reports in three minutes that are eloquent… it takes me a great deal more time – again came back to haunt me.’ AC

Data analysis revealed four emerging themes. People with dyslexia who do well in the workplace have learned to be very good at communicating their vision, delegating, leading and team building, and harnessing their ability to think differently.

### A. Leadership style

In response to the question ‘How has being dyslexic affected the way you work with other people (customers, partners, and staff)?’ the entrepreneurs described using a (people-centric) team approach (with the focus on personal relations) in order to grow their business.

* ‘I like to think that the way I work with people is an involving way. I love working in teams. It’s always a joke in our family with my wife that I can’t do anything on my own. I can’t change a light bulb; I’ve got to have somebody helping me. But I do like the involvement of people around me, as stimuli, for ideas, and people who drive things forward. And, of course, you can’t do anything on your own in life.’ DR
* ‘I love dealing with people. Don’t judge people by what you see on the surface. I’m fascinated to know what’s underneath the protection that enables people to survive life. And if you can get to what’s underneath it means they can operate much more effectively.’ WE
* ‘I built up a great team of people around me. One of the major strengths if I look back was my ability to pick great people, to work with them and to create a wonderful environment where everyone wanted to succeed together.’ DR
* ‘I’ve always engendered great loyalty in my employees because I listen to them. I understand what they want to get out of life. I help them understand themselves. And through that we work together on every project. And that’s a very powerful way of leadership in an entrepreneurial environment.’ MB

### B. Communicating the vision

When asked ‘Which do you find is the most effective way of communicating your message?’ the entrepreneurs talked about the way they (verbally) ‘painted pictures with words’ in order to express themselves.

* ‘In terms of wanting to get people behind you to deliver a business, then that’s about communication, that’s about meetings, that’s about standing up and inspiring people, that’s about telling stories, that’s about painting pictures with words that people can follow so that they want to do whatever it is that needs to be done. Or they can say: ‘I can see completely the picture you’ve just painted with all those words, but it’s dreadful and it’s never going to work because ...’ ZA
* ‘My best form of communication is verbally. I learned to colour pictures very vividly… the pictures I was feeling.’ JS
* ‘Being able to convey a story, or the importance of why something has to happen …, face to face is the best for me.’ GQ
* ‘I’ve discovered that my particular skill is visual. My hobbies include photography. I communicate very well visually. I enjoy it and feel at ease and can draw out performances.’ WE
* ‘I obviously work very well in a verbal environment, an oral environment, where I can present to people, talk to people, meet people face to face.’ DR
* ‘I like to talk to people. I like to engage people. I like to win their confidence. Often leading by example, but winning the team over is important to me. Winning the confidence of people is important. And I can best do that by talking to them and, as I say, showing by example rather than producing something in the written form.’ JH
* ‘Largely, my business abilities stem from those challenges [as a dyslexic schoolboy]. If I want today to go and sell or market something or introduce a new concept to the board of a major multi-national corporation, those skills are still my basic skills – of communication and of getting people on board by being excited by the descriptions of what the upsides or the downsides might be. I genuinely believe they may be as dumb as I am. So if I give them as colourful a picture as I can of what potential there may be in something there’s a much better chance of me being able to sell the concept.’ JS

### C. Delegation

Ability to delegate (and the necessity to do so in order to facilitate success and the growth of their companies) is one of the strongest themes voiced by the participants.

* ‘Even back in the early days at school I was always looking for ways to get somebody else to do the writing bit as I could do something else. It’s always like ‘there’s going to be a trade here’: I need this other person at school to write my report for me, so what can I do?’ MB
* ‘Over the years you just learn to play to those skills and strengths and complement them by people around you who perhaps make up for your short-comings. So identify what your short-comings are then make sure that people around you, the team around you, are there to help and support’. DR
* ‘I’m able to delegate because that’s what I’ve done all my life. If I’ve got a large document that needs proofing I’m able to say, can you proof that for me? If I didn’t announce that I am a dyslexic person I think things would be a lot more difficult.’ MA
* ‘If you want to expand and grow organizations you have to be able to delegate, to be able to trust other people around you and find ways of pushing things forward. I love working in teams. That’s my passion if you like.’ DR
* ‘I’ve surrounded myself with people who are considerably better at what they do than I believe I am at what I do. So my reliance on other people is very high.’ JS
* ‘When I got to running my own company, delegation is considered to be one of the most important attributes of a successful business- person. I naturally delegate; I have to delegate. There’s no way I can get through the day without delegating on a daily basis. I was very natural at it and that, I’m quite convinced, is one of the reasons we were able to grow our company so rapidly without it just exploding in on itself. MB
* ‘I am conscious of when I need to delegate and how I can communicate that delegation and why’. AC
* ‘The way I look at it it’s like a blind man and a deaf man. If you’re blind your hearing gets better; if you are deaf your eyesight gets better. If you are dyslexic you build on other skills. And for me they are all about the personal interaction with the individual and using those skills as opposed to the written word. I’ve also learned to delegate quite well to people who can write better than I can’. RT
* ‘What’s typical with many entrepreneur types is they end up trying to do everything themselves. So they put in forty hours a day to do everything; then they explode in a pile on the floor. I delegate on a daily basis. I always have to find somebody else to do it and I’m sure that is one of my business strengths.’ MB
* ‘In the last few years I’ve twice employed people and paid them more salary than myself because they are the people I wanted in my company to do the job I wanted them to do. And they can do the job a thousand times better than I’ll ever do it.’ GQ

### D. Harnessing the ability to think differently

In response to the question: How has being dyslexic affected the way you work with other people (customers, partners, and staff)? Entrepreneurs described utilizing intuition and viewed this as particularly important in team selection.

* ‘I went along to one of these companies that are supposed to advise you on how to be better at being a managing director or an executive. The chap asked how [When] I evaluate opening a store. And I said, well, I stand outside of it and I can see it. I can see the people. And I can actually work out what I think the money will be. I work it all out in my head. And then I do it. And he looked at me and said ‘you need help’. I never went back again. I knew what I did and why I did it and they couldn’t understand what I did and why I did it.’ GQ
* ‘I think dyslexia has allowed me to see very quickly, if I’m talking with some software engineers, about the details of their code. I can see the whole picture of the software. I can see quite clearly what the overall architecture is. I can see the points where their bit fits into the whole thing. I’ve been told that’s very common for dyslexics. And I have certainly used that ability, particularly when I am running large teams of programmers. That is my skill. What I give to the team is that ability to see the whole picture. So that’s another thing I think is very, very useful and good.’ MB
* ‘I’m very quick to try and find the solution. But I’m also very good at the application of that. So if I can see a solution then I can very quickly visualize how it may play out and see what some of those unintended consequences might be.’ ZA
* ‘I’ve discovered that my particular skill is visual. I communicate very well visually. I enjoy it and feel at ease and can draw out performances. … I wish I’d recognized earlier in my life that I am a visual person and I would have directed my whole career towards that.’ WE
* ‘I just tend to think I see things differently to other people. And, whether it’s dyslexia or not, I don’t see boundaries, I don’t see barriers to doing things. I see ways to do things.’ GQ
* ‘I’m more somebody that has an instinct, a feeling for what is right. WE
* So I tend to think on my feet. I don’t know what the decision is going to be until it’s come out of my mouth. I make decisions fast and that is extremely useful in getting businesses off the ground.’ ZA
* ‘One of the major strengths if I look back was my ability to pick great people, to work with them and to create a wonderful environment where everyone wanted to succeed together.’ DR
* ‘I back people for their talent. It’s much more interesting to me what somebody brings to the table than their skills and abilities, what they’ve done, what pieces of paper they’ve got. So I’m quite good at seeing potential and I’m also very good at helping people play to their strengths … and ensuring that they do. I tend to go with people I like; with people I can get on with.’ ZA
* That ability to create things and find solutions to difficult problems, and see them through, and deliver financial business models, has always been a part of me. I think that ability to both do something I enjoy and get a business model behind it is something that’s been there for as long as I can remember really. ZA
* I saw the opportunities that were, for me, wide open simply because other people all thought the same way. It’s a very narrow road that they travel. JS
* ‘For me, being dyslexic means that it’s a reason why I see things differently and seeing things differently is exactly what projects in the middle of Palestine needed.’ AC
* ‘So in many ways the learning disability that I had has turned out to be quite an advantage because the competition isn’t that tough when you take a completely different approach to anything that you do.’ JS

## Discussion

The study yielded many valuable insights into possible reasons why there are so many entrepreneurs with dyslexia. Deficit model thinking is problematised as positive characteristics useful skills and creative strategies employed successfully in business are illuminated.

Participants typically had someone close willing to undertake work writing and admin tasks. Self employment makes it easier to bring people in to compensate for weaknesses leaving time free to maximize strengths. Despite a decade of equalities legislation [(www.homeoffice.gov.uk/equalities/equality-act](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/equalities/equality-act/)/), and the potential for Access to Work funding [(www.accesstowork.co.uk/](http://www.accesstowork.co.uk/)), corporations may be unwilling to hire an assistant alongside a person with dyslexia. Employment within corporations may mean having to work much harder or even take work home in

order to complete administrative tasks. Stress and other difficulties are likely to result as discussed earlier in this paper (Hales 1995; Reid and Kirk 2001 and Bartlett and Moody 2000). Starting one’s own venture may be preferential to coping with barriers in the corporate environment. Four participants clearly stated that they had left corporate work because of their belief that they could succeed more easily running their own company.

Participants described coping strategies which seem to have given them a head start and corroborated Logan’s finding that entrepreneurs with dyslexia tend to grow their ventures more quickly than those without (Logan, 2009).

Content analysis of transcripts revealed four salient attributes: highly developed skills in communication, leadership, delegation and the ability to think differently.

Firstly excellent oral communication skills, possibly developed to compensate for

weaknesses in written communication, used to gain an advantage in business. Participants described having a vision for how their business would succeed and the ability to communicate this persuasively. Most entrepreneurs are passionate about their vision; having excellent communication skills to articulate this passion will almost certainly inspire others. Participants described (verbally)'painting pictures' to explain concepts, thus facilitating understanding.

Secondly, motivating people to get the job done is achieved by a leadership style which involves developing personal and long-lasting relationships with ones team. Taylor and Walter (2003) discuss excellent interpersonal skills in people with dyslexia. Participants describe how, throughout their lives, they have been able to persuade others and rely on others for help. Responses indicate that participants value the contribution of others, can assess people quickly, keep in touch with the needs of their employees, and strive for better team relationships.

Thirdly, delegation had to be learned early in life and participants had the advantage of being able to bring this well-honed skill to their new venture. Because delegation is essential the entrepreneurs tended to value those around them and view building and maintaining effective teams as central to their success. We have seen that delegation is a skill that many entrepreneurs struggle to learn but dyslexic entrepreneurs master this early and gain a head start when it comes to growing a business.

Abilities in communication, leadership and delegation are essential for any successful entrepreneur. Those with dyslexia in the study are notably skilful in these three areas, and display a vital fourth skill – they have harnessed their ability to think differently. They are prepared to trust their intuition when making business decisions, especially when selecting staff. Participants referred to their ability to pick good people and know intuitively that they will fit within the organisation. Participants

talked freely about seeing things differently when looking for solutions and about having the ability to paint concepts and solutions in pictures. A propensity to be creative and display ‘right brain’ skills is associated with dyslexia (Geschwind, 1982; Galaburda, 1993; West, 1992; West, 1997; Reid & Kirk, 2001). We observe that entrepreneurs in our study seem to be applying a right brain creative approaching successfully to leadership and management.

Research cited here has shown that entrepreneurs may struggle to develop high levels communication, leadership and delegation skills and this can hamper the growth of their businesses. We have found that entrepreneurs with dyslexia tend to acquire these skills early. Amalgamation of communication, leadership and

delegation skills with the fourth attribute of thinking differently may well be what gives these entrepreneurs the edge in business. Viewing dyslexia as an aspect of neurodiversity rejects deficit model thinking and celebrates the ability to think outside the box. [(www.brainhe.com/](http://www.brainhe.com/)).

## Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

Findings from this exploratory study derive from a relatively small self-selected sample. Other larger and more quantitative studies suggest an association between dyslexia, entrepreneurship and the ability to grow ventures more quickly (Logan, 2009). The study has contributed to a richer understanding of how successful entrepreneurs with dyslexia (and often associated right brain thinking) lead, manage and develop their ventures.

Future studies could include more participants and a comparative group of non- dyslexic entrepreneurs. The affects of low confidence on people with dyslexia in business merits investigation. This study found entrepreneurs with dyslexia making use of a proxy to help deal with particular tasks. Another rich area for consideration would be how this might be replicated in the corporate environment.

## Conclusions

This research set out to find an explanation for the high proportion of people with dyslexia among successful entrepreneurs and to consider what skills or attributes have apparently given them a head start in business.

Literature suggests that large corporate environments can create organisational problems for employees with dyslexia. Our findings suggest four of the ten entrepreneurs were provoked, as a consequence, to leave the corporate world and start their own ventures.

Participants found that coping strategies developed quite early in life had evolved into skills which helped later, when starting business ventures. Important skill areas included the ability to communicate ideas, lead and motivate, delegate, and harness their intuition. Drawing on earlier finding that entrepreneurs with dyslexia tend to grow their companies more quickly (Logan, 2009), we deduce that possibly these acquired skills enabled them to by-pass the trial and error stage usually required in order to learn to communicate, lead and delegate effectively.

The much higher incidence of dyslexia among entrepreneurs than among corporate managers (six-fold in the UK and thirty-fold in the US) appears to be explained by a combination of factors. Firstly, the entrepreneurial route can ease frustration associated with having dyslexia in the corporate workplace, and can lead to faster career progress. Secondly, starting their own companies afforded opportunities for entrepreneurs with dyslexia to better organise the work environment and bring in others to complete specific tasks they find difficult. Thirdly, by applying coping strategies developed when young, and by not being afraid to trust their instincts, entrepreneurs with dyslexia can steal a match on non-dyslexic peers and rivals. Whilst this paper has focused on entrepreneurs with dyslexia it is likely that many adults with dyslexia employed in the corporate world may also have similar skills as a result of growing up with and coping with dyslexia. Communication and leadership skills are vital for any business and perhaps if organisations could foster an environment that allows those with dyslexia to have more control over their work place, their strengths could be used to benefit their organisations.

Graduates with dyslexia should perhaps look for organisations who offer them a degree of control over their work environment.

## References

ALBSU (1987). *Literacy, Numeracy and Adults: Evidence from the National Child Development Study. Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit*.

Atkinson, J. & Storey, D. (1994). "Small firms and employment", in Atkinson, J. Storey, D. (Eds), *Employment, the Small Firm and the Labour Market,* London: Routledge

Baker, W. (1994). The paradox of empowerment, Chief Executive, No.93, pp.62–5. Bartlett, D. & Moody, S. (2000). *Dyslexia in the Workplace*. London: Whurr Publishers.

British Dyslexia Association

Churchill, N. & Lewis, V. (1983). The five stages of small business growth. *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 61 No.3, pp.30–50

Cope, J. (2005a) Toward a dynamic learning perspective of entrepreneurship. *Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice*, 29(4), 373-398.

Cronin, T. (1991). Early warning signals. *Small Business Reports*, Vol. 16 No.9, pp.53–62.

European Commission (2006). *Final Report of the Expert Group on Management Capacity Building.* <http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/sme/files/support_measures/mcb/mcb_en.pdf> Accessed 25th October 2010

Everatt, J., Steffert, B. & Smythe, I. (1999). An Eye for the Unusual: Creative Thinking in Dyslexics. Dyslexia: *An International Journal of Research and Practice*, Vol. 5: 28-46.

Fitzgibbon, G. & O’Connor, B. (2002). *Adult Dyslexia: A Guide for the Workplace*.

London: Wiley.

Formichelli, L. (1997). Letting go of the details, *Nation's Business*, pp.50–2.

Freel, M.S. (1999). Where are the skills gaps in innovative small firms? *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research*, Vol. 5 No.3, pp.144-54.

Galaburda, A. (Ed.) (1993). *Dyslexia and Development: Neurobiological Aspects of Extraordinary Brains*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Geshwind, N. (1982). *Annals of Dyslexia* Vol 32. pp 13-30 Springer

Gibb, A.A. (1997) Small Firms' Training and Competitiveness: Building upon the Small Business as a Learning Organisation. *International Small Business Journal*. 14. 3. pp 13-29. April/June.

Greiner, L. (1998). Evolution and revolution as organizations grow. *Harvard Business Review*, pp.3–11.

Hales, G. (1995). “Stress factors in the workplace”. In Miles, T.R. & Varma, V. (eds)

(1995) *Dyslexia & Stress*. London: Whurr. pp. 74 – 82.

Hoang, H. & Antonic, B. (2003). Network-based research in entrepreneurship: A

critical review. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 18(2), pp165-187.

Hornsby, J. & Kuratko, D. (1990), Human resource management in small business: critical issues for the 1990s. *Journal of Small Business Management*, Vol. 28 No.3, pp.9–18.

Katz, J., Aldrich, H., Welbourne, T. & Williams, P. (2000). Guest editor's comments special issue on human resource management and the SME: toward a new synthesis. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, Vol. 25 No.1, pp.7–10.

Kempster, S., (2006) Leadership Learning through lived experience. A process of Apprenticeship? *Journal of Management & Organisation*, 12 (1) pp 4 - 22

Kempster, S. & Cope, J. (2010). Learning to lead in the entrepreneurial context. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, 16(1), pp 5-34.

Logan, J. (2001). “*Entrepreneurial success: A study of the incidence of dyslexia in the entrepreneurial population and the influence of dyslexia on success*”. PhD thesis, Bristol University

Logan, J. (2009) Dyslexic Entrepreneurs: the incidence, their coping strategies and their business skills. *Dyslexia*, 15(4), pp.328 -346;

Matlay, H. (1999). Employee Relations in Small Firms. *Employee Relations*, Vol. 21 No.3, pp.285–96.

Mazzarol, T. (2003). A model of small business HR growth management. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research*. 9 (1) pp. 27 – 49

McLoughlin, D., Fitzgibbon, G. & Young, V. (1994) *Adult Dyslexia: Assessment Counselling and Training*. London: Whurr Publishers

Moody, S. (1999) *Arranging a Dyslexia Assessment*: A Guide for Adults. London: Dyslexia Assessment Service

Nicolson, R.I. & Fawcett, A.J. (1999). Developmental Dyslexia: the role of the

cerebellum. Dyslexia: *An International Journal of Research and Practice*, 5 (3): pp.

155-177.

Perren, L. & Burgoyne, J. (2002). *Management and leadership Abilities: An Analysis of Texts, Testimony and Practice*. London: CEML

Perren, L. (2000). *Comparing Entrepreneurship and Leadership: A textual analysis*. CEML, London.

Perren, L. & Grant, P. (2001). *Management and Leadership in UK SMEs: Witness Testimonies from the World of Entrepreneurs and SME managers*. London: CEML.

Reid, G. & Kirk J. (2001) *Dyslexia in Adults: Education and Employment*. London: John Wiley & Sons

Rosa, P. (1998) Entrepreneurial processes of business cluster formation and growth

by ‘habitual’ entrepreneurs. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 22, pp. 43-62

Smith, G. (1992), Entrepreneurs: when and how to let go. Business Quarterly, Vol. 56 No.3, pp.102–6.

Stein, J. ( 2001). The Magnocellular Theory of Developmental Dyslexia. *Dyslexia: An International Journal of Research and Practice*, 7 (1): 12-36.

Taylor, K. & Walter, J. (2003). Occupation choices of adults with & without Dyslexia. Dyslexia: *An International Journal of Research and Practice*, 9 (3).

Timmons, J.A. (1999) *New Venture Creation; Entrepreneurship in the 21st century*, 4th edition. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill,

TUC 2008, *Dyslexia in the Workplace, A Guide for Unions*, 2nd edition. London

West, T. (1992) *Annals of Dyslexia*. Vol 42 pp124 -139. Springer

West, T.G. (1997a). “Slow Words, Quick Images – Dyslexia as an Advantage in Tomorrow’s Workplace”. In P.J. Gerber and D.S. Brown (Eds.) *Learning Disabilities and Employment.* Texas: Pro-ed Publications

## Web References:

[www.homeoffice.gov.uk/equalities/equality-act A](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/equalities/equality-act)ccessed 6th August 2012

www.accesstowork.co.uk Accessed 6th August 2012

www.brainhe.com Accessed 6th August 2012