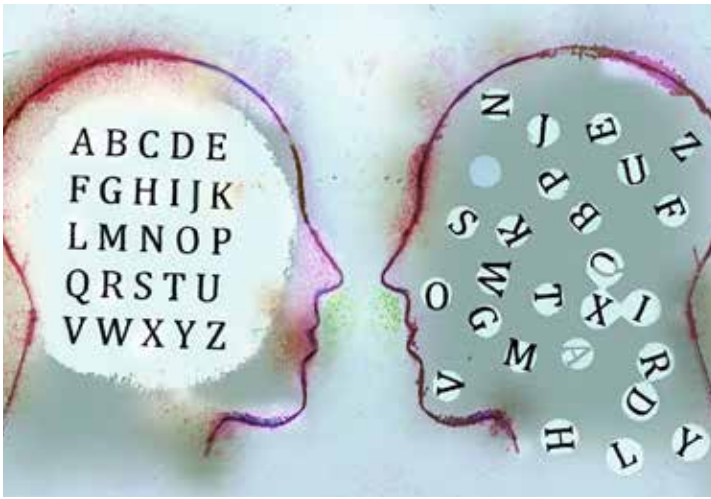


Dyslexia and the Army

By Major Symon Smith



In March 2022, having identified both a lack of awareness and support for something that impacts roughly one in five of us, Major Symon Smith founded the Defence Dyslexia Network. The network is going from strength to strength;

and already has over 1,300 members and 240 ambassadors. Through both the network and wider initiatives such as this article, Symon aims to spread awareness, normalise the conversation and ensure we all understand what we can do to help maximise each other's full potential. This includes signposting everyone (including our Corporate Members) where to go for more information and support.



Co-Chair of the Defence Dyslexia Network and OC 252 (Hong Kong) Signal Squadron, 22nd Signal Regiment.

words, and the **overuse** of acronyms (most people don't actually understand). If you have found yourself skimming a huge document only to read the bold text and bullet points while hunting for the images that summarise the document then you are not alone.

What is Dyslexia?

Dyslexia is a form of **Neurodiversity** that refers to the differences that exist in the brain. We all think, move, process information and communicate differently; that makes us all neurodiverse. 20% of the population think and process information differently to Neurotypical people.

Everybody's profile is different. If you are Neurodistinct, you will have a spiky profile, potentially like the one shown below. All this means is that there are big differences in how you perform in different areas.

Those with Dyslexia will typically peak at the strengths listed on the next page and dip at reading comprehension, spelling and/or writing skills.

How can it add value and what is stopping it?

Looking at the image on the next page, a large proportion of those traits are ones we train and teach our junior and senior non-commissioned officers. Exploiting people with these traits means adding greater analytical thinking, problem solving etc

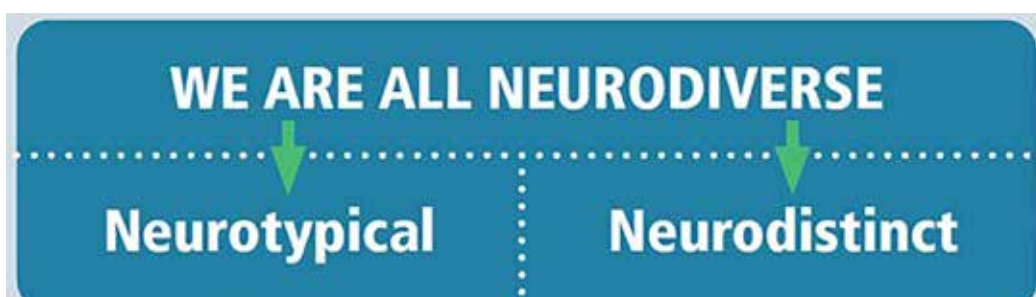
Introduction

As it stands, up to **1 in 5** people are **Dyslexic**. That is just under one Squadron in a Regt. One whole squadron's worth that thinks differently to the rest of the Regt. This article outlines what dyslexia is, the exceptional talents that can be added and more importantly, how to harness and support those with Dyslexia!

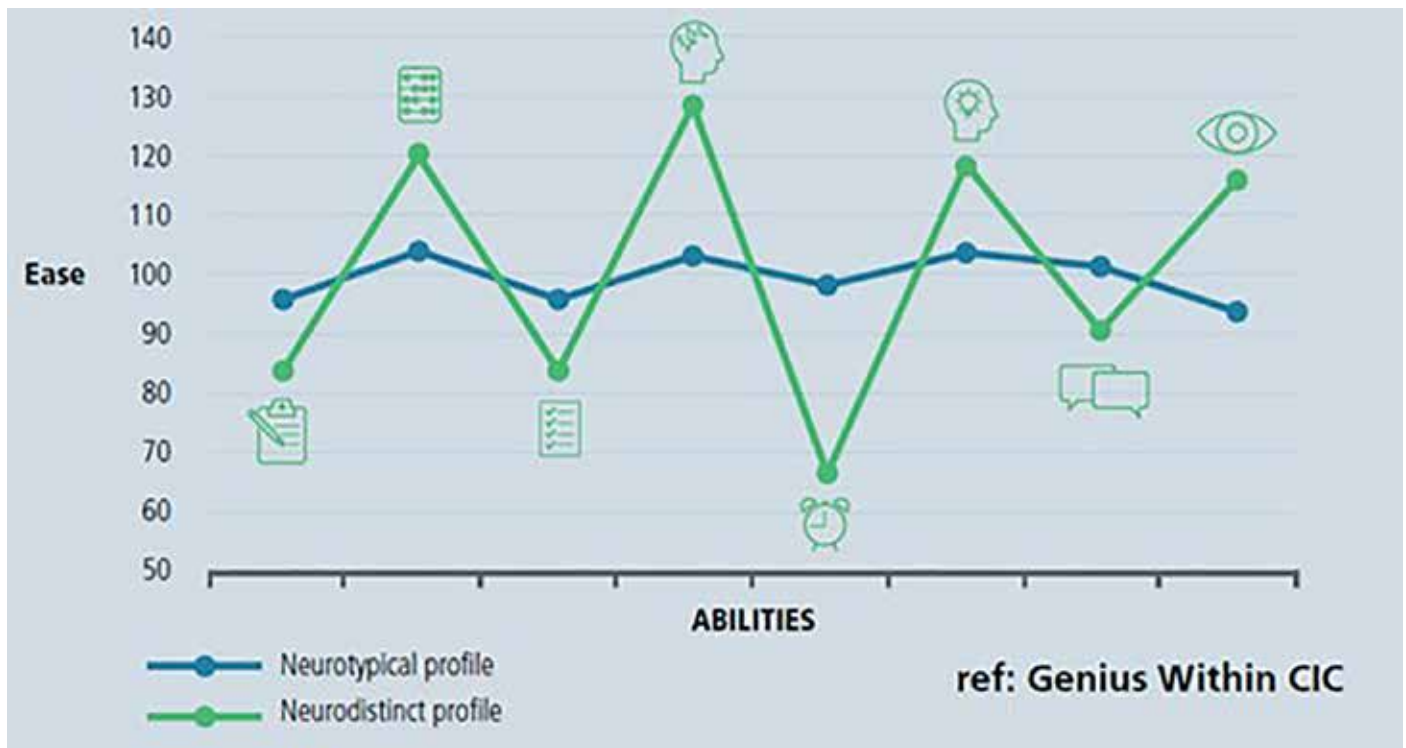
The current situation

Strangely enough, we unintentionally recruit Dyslexics. As an Army we have historically recruited those who weren't enjoying the educational environment and wish to join the Army to be more 'hands on'. Those individuals are coincidentally more likely to be Dyslexic as the educational system didn't (some may argue still doesn't) play to neurodiverse strengths. Our statistics from the Defence Dyslexia Network reinforce this with well over **1/3 of our membership** being from the **Army**.

Ironically, for an organisation that is probably higher than the 1 in 5 statistic we focus heavily on the processes, using **complex**



Neurodiverse profiles.

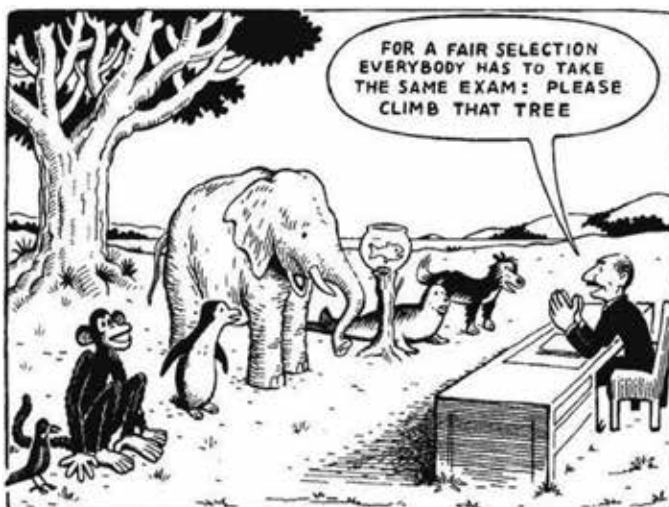


to the organisation. Currently, a large majority who have these

Top dyslexic strengths, trending competencies, all industries, 2022		
Exceptional	Very strong	Strong
- Leadership and social influence - Creativity, originality and initiative	- Complex problem-solving - Analytical thinking and innovation - Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation - Active learning and learning strategies - Technology design and programming	- Critical thinking and analysis - Emotional intelligence

Top Dyslexia Strengths

amazing skills are judged or assessed on the areas they find challenging, i.e. following processes, writing complex and long documents. In a blog by Richard Branson (proud Dyslexic) he reinforces this with a great quote from Albert Einstein.



"Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."
Albert Einstein (also Dyslexic).

The image and quote summarise that if you assess Dyslexics in the areas they find challenging they will also not show their true ability. This reduces a Dyslexics ability to demonstrate their skills through **lack of confidence** as you cannot **quantifiably** assess someone's complex problem-solving skills in the same way you can assess their ability to write an SJAR.

How can we support those with Dyslexia?

Put simply, it is exploiting the 'top dyslexia strengths' (see image) and not focusing on the challenges (reading comprehension, spelling and/or writing skills). Find the strongest parts of someone's aptitude within their role and allocate tasks to fit. Where their role requires an output for something that is focusing on their challenges then provide support. If you are unsure of what this support looks like then **ask** them.

I think the need to 'train as you fight' is essential and the ability to write briefs at short notice in custom styles will always (rightly so) be required. But without the support, specifically during courses, then those with dyslexia will be doomed to fail when this ask is required of them back at unit. I was lucky to have a set of coping mechanisms developed from my early diagnosis but others won't be so lucky, especially the 80% who leave school undiagnosed.

A common misconception is that repetition creates efficiency or improvement with Dyslexic challenges, this is not the case. I will always take longer with my written work, I will always misspell certain words regardless of how regularly I use them. For some aspects, my brain works **5x harder than a Neurotypical brain** to do the same task. That is 5x more effort for every repetition as my brain is **physically wired differently**.

If you have found yourself skimming a huge document only to read the bold text and bullet points while hunting for the images that summarise the document then you are not alone.

How do I know if someone is Dyslexic?

If you recognise the definition below for yourself or believe it describes someone you know, it is a strong indicator for dyslexia.

A mismatch between what an individual seems capable of verbally and the written work they produce.

If you do one thing after reading this far, reach out to that person. Ask them what you can do to best support them. Ask if they are getting enough support. I am beginning to lose count of the number of experiences from those within the network saying they have been brought to tears because of the lack of support or understanding they receive from colleagues and line managers.

What if you think you are Dyslexic?

The good news is the support is available from your local Army Education Centre (AEC) with or without a diagnosis. The two QR codes below link to a **flow chart** to getting a diagnosis and also a map of the AECs across the UK.

Why the Royal Signals?

The complexity facing the future of the Royal Signals is ever growing and we must be prepared for this. Thinking differently to problems presented will be the only way we can protect our future as a Corps. With the significant number of variables present with the future of the Corps, our best minds will likely include those Dyslexic minds thinking outside the box.

What is the Defence Dyslexia Network?

Forming in March 2022, we have reached over 1350 members (as at Sep 23) with over 240 Dyslexic ambassadors across Defence. Our aim is to change the narrative on Dyslexia by

showcasing the amazing strengths it brings to the Army and wider Defence. This will in turn normalise the conversation about it and allow Dyslexics to thrive across the MOD. We run a virtual monthly discussion event open to everyone and two in-person events every year (with around 100 people at each event).

What do we do to help?

We provide:

- Direct support to line managers
- Briefs across the MOD to share the positive messages of Dyslexia.
- Support in navigating the process minefield for securing support, i.e. gaining a diagnosis.
- Areas to share tips and tricks with managing the challenges we face.

What next?

There are lots of avenues we as a network are looking at addressing:

- Dyslexic assessments for everyone when they enter basic training.
- Enabling the entitlement to support for all mandated courses.
 - o Also increasing the psychological safety on these courses so people feel comfortable to ask for support.
- Adding the ability to track Dyslexia on JPA

Want to join the network? Scan the QR code below or contact the Defence Dyslexia Network email address People-DefDyslexiaNetwork@mod.gov.uk.

What are industry doing to support?

Luckily those in industry can be offered more support under the equality act 2010 than those within the military. Organisations such as Made by Dyslexia offer some really good support. These include but aren't limited to:

- Training those to spot dyslexia
- Tips to support children
- Ways to identify people with dyslexia



Flow chart for getting a diagnosis



AEC locations



Sign up to join the Defence Dyslexia Network

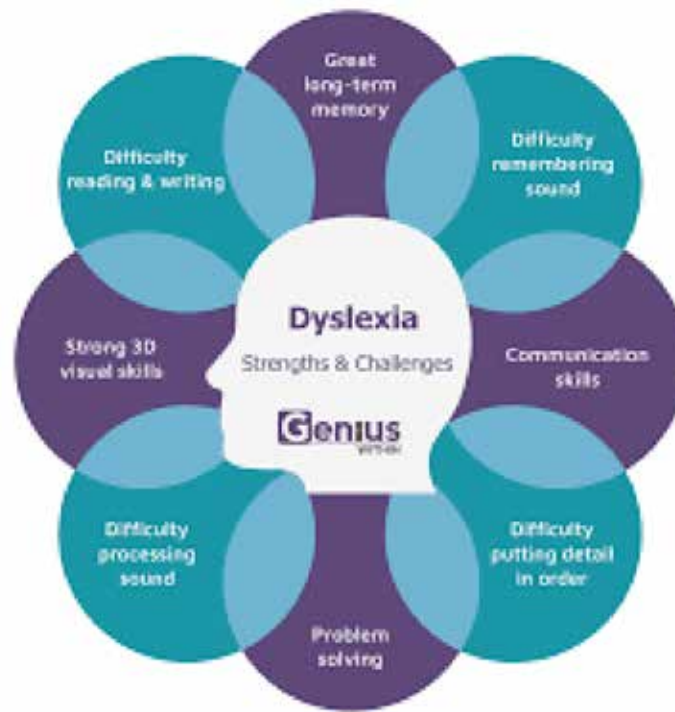


2-minute video describing Dyslexia

The British Dyslexia Association (BDA) are usually the go to organisation with anything on Dyslexia. They predominantly conduct/facilitate all the assessments and provide support to education establishments.

The forces employment charity provides some really useful support and guidance to those with Dyslexia. They work with the career transition partnership as well, so a must for talking to them about what help/support you might need.

Several other organisations work hard to support neurodiverse people in all workplaces so there's usually an organisation who can support. Even if it is just a listening ear.



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