“Unusual Talent: a Study of Successful Leadership and Delegation in Dyslexic Entrepreneurs”

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Introduction

This study examines how dyslexia has affected the way ten successful entrepreneurs who are dyslexic lead their companies and manage their teams. It seeks to understand whether dyslexia has shaped the way they organise and manage their ventures, their leadership style, the way they communicate and the way they deal with the people around them, including their employees.

A better understanding is needed about how dyslexia affects adults in the workplace so that the organisations for which they work can help them to reach their full potential for mutual benefit. This research breaks new ground by addressing the lack of evidence to support claims that dyslexia has a positive side which, when harnessed, confers benefits upon the individual and their organisation. To do this two questions are examined. Firstly, what explains the high proportion of dyslexics among successful entrepreneurs? Secondly, what skills or attributes have given these dyslexic entrepreneurs a head start?

The paper starts by reviewing the literature regarding dyslexia in adults in the context of the workplace and then the relevant entrepreneurship literature on leadership, team building and delegation. The methodology for the fieldwork is explained, followed by the findings. Conclusions are then drawn.
The adult dyslexic and the workplace

There is a shortage of research literature on dyslexia in adults. The small amount of research that is available tends to focus on the difficulties associated with dyslexia.

Existing research affirms that people with dyslexia experience stress at work (Hales, 1995: Reid & Kirk, 2001). Bartlett and Moody (2000) describe cases of dyslexic adults struggling in the workplace and as a result having to cope with anxiety, bewilderment, embarrassment, shame, frustration, anger, despondency and depression. McLoughlin et al. (1994) discuss the difficulty for dyslexics in holding down jobs and there is evidence (ALBSU, 1987) that people with dyslexia earn less than those without a disability.

A report in 2008 by the TUC (the UK’s Trades Union Congress) asserts that many managers do not appreciate the links between dyslexia and commonly-related performance issues and, therefore, can judge their dyslexic employees unfairly. The report cites cases in which the employer has been taken to industrial tribunal as a result (TUC, 2008).

Fitzgibbon and O’Conner (2002) suggest large organisations can be difficult places in which to work for those with dyslexia because they are unable to control their environment.

Taylor and Walter (2003) found adults with dyslexia were much less likely to be found in professions such as finance, management, science, and computing. Individuals with dyslexia were more likely to be found in people-oriented occupations such as nursing or sales. They suggest this may be either because dyslexia discourages affected people from entering the science and management professions or because people-oriented occupations are preferred because they are less structured. The feeling of a greater degree of control allows the dyslexic worker to be more creative and more involved with people.
Successful dyslexics also develop ways of exerting control as a mechanism for coping with and compensating for their deficits (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 the explanation is that because dyslexics are more comfortable managing a situation in which they feel they have a degree of control over their situation and this leads 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.

There is evidence to suggest that many dyslexic people have enhanced right-hemisphere skills (Geschwind, 1982; Galaburda, 1993; West, 1992; West, 1997; Reid & Kirk, 2001). The work of these authors indicates that tasks or activities associated with the right-hand side of the brain will be easier for dyslexic people to accomplish. Such tasks are thought to include: the use of intuition, visual thinking, spatial intelligence, pattern recognition, problem solving and connected forms of creativity. Reid and Kirk (2001) believe that these right-brained skills are critical in a number of business activities. Examples could include recruitment, decision-making and innovation. Moody
(1999) asserts that because dyslexics tend to process information holistically they can be extremely creative and innovative within the work place.

Research also indicates that dyslexics have developed skills or strategies to help them overcome some of the problems associated with dyslexia and these abilities may have become transferable skills, giving them an edge in business (Everatt, Steffert & Smythe, 1999).

Nicholson and Fawcett (1999) suggest that dyslexics compensate for their lack of written skills by developing enhanced communication skills. Logan (2009) found that dyslexic entrepreneurs were more likely to score themselves highly on communications ability than entrepreneurs who were not dyslexic. (Entrepreneurs were asked to score themselves on a five point Likert scale: ranging from one to five; one equating to poor and five to very good).

Logan (2009) found that entrepreneurs with dyslexia were more likely to say they were very good at delegation than entrepreneurs who were not dyslexic. This research ascertained that delegation is a skill which many non-dyslexic entrepreneurs have difficulty in mastering. Logan also found that dyslexic entrepreneurs tend to grow their companies more quickly than non-dyslexic entrepreneurs (a finding statistically significant at the 90% confidence level) and proposed that this is a consequence of their ability to delegate (Logan, 2009).

In summary, it seems the corporate workplace is often a stressful environment for those with dyslexia. As a result, they tend to gravitate towards careers as entrepreneurs or in people-oriented occupations where they are more able to control their environment and/or employ their heightened interpersonal skills. Furthermore, although dyslexic workers have difficulty with the
written word and with highly structured workplace environments, many have developed complementary skills which can be very useful to an employer.

We now examine the entrepreneurship literature concerned with leadership, team building and delegation.

**Leadership, team building and delegation**

There has been a great deal of research both on leadership and management of the human resource function in general management literature but less on these issues within the context of the small entrepreneurial company (Katz *et al.*, 2000).

Whether or not an entrepreneur is dyslexic, the entrepreneurship literature is unequivocal: if a new venture is to grow it is essential that the entrepreneur has leadership ability (Perren, 2000; Perren & Grant, 2001; Perren & Burgoyne, 2002). However, Freel finds that many entrepreneurs do not have these skills (Freel, 1999). Nor is it easy for entrepreneurs to acquire leadership skills. Nicholson (1998) suggests that whilst some entrepreneurs will have prior experience in large organizations, many reject the career pathways that would provide them with the opportunity to learn the leadership and empowerment skills of managers in formally-structured organisational contexts. Unlike such managers the entrepreneur will probably not undergo a leadership apprenticeship (Kempster, 2006).

Kempster and Cope (2010) offer a convincing explanation: entrepreneurs have restricted opportunities for learning leadership skills whilst managers within the corporate sector receive training in leadership skills prior to promotion to that role. They also have the opportunity to
watch and emulate the leaders within their organisations and to experience which leadership styles work best in terms of creating and motivating dynamic teams. Most entrepreneurs will not have this opportunity; they will have to learn either by trial and error (Gibb, 1997; Cope, 2005a), by gathering information from others in their social networks (Hoang & Antonic, 2003), by observing leadership within the family unit (Kempster & Cope, 2010) or by actively seeking training (Mazzoral, 2003).

Kempster and Cope (2010) found most of the entrepreneurs in their study saw their role in the context of what was necessary for the business to succeed, rather than as leaders. They suggest that the entrepreneur may not fully understand the leadership role, or may not be reflecting on the methods they are adopting, with the result that the venture may be hampered and may grow more slowly than if the entrepreneur had implemented a conscious leadership strategy.

Furthermore, Mazzoral (2003) found a gap between the owner-manager's sense of vision and confidence in where they are heading, and the ability to articulate this in a meaningful way to employees. He suggests:

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.

So, in summary, it seems that for many entrepreneurs learning to lead is a skill they must develop whilst running the company. This ‘learning through doing’ may slow the growth of the company as it will take the entrepreneur time to explore different methods and to develop a style which facilitates team development and empowerment.
Together with the need for leadership skills there is a need to delegate tasks to others so that the company can grow. At the start of every new venture the entrepreneur will have to be able to do all the tasks involved in running a business but if the venture is to be successful and grow the entrepreneur will need to recruit a team and then train, empower and delegate to that team. If the entrepreneur is unable to do this the business will not succeed (Smith, 1992; Formichelli, 1997; Timmons, 1999).

Rosa (1998) suggests that effective recruitment, team development and delegation are essential not only for growth of the existing venture but also to allow the entrepreneur to explore and develop new opportunities.

However, there is much evidence that entrepreneurs find delegation difficult and that 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 learning how to delegate, many struggle to hand over authority and, as a result, teams are not empowered. He also suggests many entrepreneurs find it difficult to embrace the coaching role that is necessary in order to develop the team so that the business may grow.

Entrepreneurs may also be reluctant to delegate key tasks because they fear the consequences of handing over control; the survival of the firm may be at stake should these tasks be performed incorrectly (Matley, 1999). Furthermore, 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 the entrepreneur must learn to delegate authority and responsibility. If their venture is to thrive and grow they must put in place structures, policies and
practices to enable employees to embrace responsibility and participate in dynamic teams. He found that entrepreneurs moved from the micro-management stage to the stage of empowerment and delegation as a result of both 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.

A further issue is that entrepreneurs are reluctant to spend their limited resources on training for themselves (European Commission, 2006). As a result, delegation is a skill which many entrepreneurs have to learn by trial and error. The entrepreneur is clearly at a disadvantage if he/she has to learn to lead and delegate as they go along. This will take time, is risky and may hamper or slow growth.

Why should this be any different for entrepreneurs who are dyslexic? Does dyslexia confer any benefits upon entrepreneurs? Do they have skills which may give them an advantage in business? Those with dyslexia often start their careers at a disadvantage as a result of their difficulties, so how is it that so many become successful entrepreneurs?

Sample and methodology

A case study approach has been employed. Ten entrepreneurial business leaders agreed to be interviewed and filmed for this research. These entrepreneurs have all been formally diagnosed with dyslexia. They were among 19 who had volunteered to participate in a mentoring scheme.
initiated in March 2009 by the British Dyslexia Association to mentor younger dyslexics who wish to embark on business careers and/or are not yet successful in their business careers. (http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/get-involved-and-fundraising/mentoring.html).

The sample is comprised of two women and eight men. Their careers are in retail, service industries, television, consultancy, information technology, and engineering. Eight are entrepreneurs and two are corporate entrepreneurs – ie ‘intrapreneurs’ (Lessem, 1987). Seven could be also described both as entrepreneurs and as business leaders because their businesses have multi-million pound turnovers. The other three lead social enterprises which are both successful and sustainable. Although the sample was self-selected and not statistically significant, the fact that four have a background in engineering rather contradicts the typical profiles characterised by Taylor and Walker and others in the general entrepreneurship literature reported above.

The ten cases were developed by means of a semi-structured interview with a common template. The interviews were undertaken by a researcher with expertise in the interview process but who was objective because prior to this project he had no specialised knowledge of dyslexia and its effects. The interviews were video-recorded and transcribed and subsequently approved for release by the interviewees.

The collection of transcripts was subjected to content analysis; responses were coded and grouped under emerging themes which highlighted the issues of greatest importance to this sample of entrepreneurs and business leaders. Then a further analysis was undertaken to look for patterns, including any significant differences between the opinions, beliefs and values of the interviewees.
Question design

The questions asked covered their schooling, their early and current career, and their way of doing business. The interview approach ensured that the entrepreneurs and business leaders were free to tell their story within set parameters. There were four questions about the respondent’s early life so that we could gain an understanding of how their early experiences might have influenced their later decisions, behaviours or actions. These included:

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?

There were four questions about the respondent’s business life and the affect dyslexia may have had on the individual within the work environment. These questions were designed to explore both the positive and negative effects of living with dyslexia.

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

The answers to questions 1 to 4 provided some useful background information. This will be explored in more detail in subsequent reports. However several points are relevant to this paper.

Background Information

Seven of the respondents had been assessed as dyslexic when at school or university. The remaining three did not find out until their own children were diagnosed. Nine out of ten said they suffered a severe lack of confidence whilst in education, when they were branded as ‘stupid’, and in their early careers. However, their business success had brought greatly increased confidence, particularly when dealing with their area of specialisation. Despite this, all mentioned (in terms) that they continue to worry about, and try to guard against, being tripped up by the difficulties they experience as a result of being dyslexic.

The interviewees typically had a wife/partner/friend or non-dyslexic business associate who was willing to write for them and do much of the detailed work that is essential for running a business. They also relied on technology: including: Smart phones, Spell checkers and Dictaphones and assistive technologies such as speech recognition software.

Most had had practical, vocational or menial jobs before starting their business and 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 realised 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

- After several months of therapy and feeling very suicidal and all sorts of bad things happening I picked up a job that I didn’t know if was going to enjoy very much. I became a technical director of a software company in Birmingham .... I discovered I had a great talent for managing other software engineers. I was quite busy looking after nearly two hundred engineers by the time I decided it was time to move on. MB

- 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.

- 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

In addition, four key themes emerged from our analysis of the data. Dyslexic people 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. On 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 in this study use a team approach to grow
their business. It is very much a people-centric approach with the focus on personal relations.

Responses to the question include:

- **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. On 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 used verbal communication and ‘painted pictures’ 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

Through presentations; through meeting people face to face; through hands-on experiences. I’ve been very good at meeting people and making people feel at ease. MA
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. It’s not just selling; it’s deeper than that, it’s a wider foundation. JS

C. On delegation

The ability to delegate is one of the strongest themes voiced by the respondents. There is strong agreement that this is one of the main reasons for their success and the growth of their companies.

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?’

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’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

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.

If you want to expand and grow organisations 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

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. On 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)? The entrepreneurs also talked about their use of intuition. The entrepreneurs in this study attached a great deal of importance to this in selecting a team.

- 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. They wanted to put me into a box. I don’t believe business is about being in boxes. GQ

- Another thing that I think dyslexia has allowed me to do is 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 visualise 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 recognised 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 of the findings**

The findings provide many insights in answer to the question: *Why there are so many entrepreneurs with dyslexia?*

The interviewees typically had someone close at hand willing to do the writing and admin tasks within their business. If you work for yourself it is easier to bring in other people to compensate for your weaknesses leaving you free to maximise your strengths. Corporations are unlikely to be willing to hire a dyslexic person, plus an assistant to write for them, when they can hire a single non-dyslexic person to do the same job. Dyslexics who do secure employment with corporations may have work much harder or even take work home in order to complete administrative tasks.
Such enforced behaviour leads to the stress and other difficulties discussed earlier in this paper (Hales 1995; Reid and Kirk 2001 and Bartlett and Moody 2000). Starting your own venture may be preferential to coping with the difficulties you encounter on a daily basis in the corporate environment. Indeed four of the respondents in this study clearly stated they had left the corporate environment because they believed they could succeed more easily by running their own company.

The findings also offer an explanation for the success of entrepreneurs with dyslexia. Our interviewees have learned coping strategies to manage their dyslexia and it is these strategies that seem to have given them a head start over non-dyslexic entrepreneurs. This also corroborates Logan’s finding that dyslexic entrepreneurs tend to grow their ventures more quickly than other entrepreneurs (Logan, 2009).

Our content analysis of the transcripts revealed four salient attributes. Our interviewees display highly developed skills in communication, leadership, and delegation.

Firstly they have excellent oral communication skills. It may be that these skills have been developed to compensate for their weaknesses in written communication. Having developed these skills they are able to use them to gain an edge in business. They have a vision for how their business will succeed and this ability clearly helps them to communicate their vision persuasively. Most entrepreneurs are passionate about their vision; having excellent communication skills to articulate this passion will almost certainly inspire those around them. But our respondents also talk about painting pictures to explain concepts to those around them. This is a very powerful tool; painting pictures with words can help a difficult concept to be understood more readily.
Secondly, they lead and motivate by developing personal and long-lasting relationships with their team; it is not just about getting the job done. Taylor and Walter (2003) talk about dyslexics having excellent interpersonal skills and our interviewees describe how, throughout their lives, they have been able to persuade others and rely on others for help. As highlighted in the sample quotes above, they value the contribution of those around them, are able to assess people quickly. They stay in touch with their employees and their needs, and strive for better team relationships.

Thirdly, they had to learn early in life to delegate in order to cope. Bringing this skill to their new venture gives them an advantage. And because they have to delegate they value those around them. So building and maintaining effective teams is central to their success. We have seen that delegation is a skill that many entrepreneurs struggle to learn but dyslexic entrepreneurs master this particular skill early and this gives them a head start when it comes to growing a business.

These three skills – communication, leadership and delegation – would be necessary for any entrepreneur to have. Our dyslexic entrepreneurs are notably skilful in these areas but, in addition, display a 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. The interviewees refer to their ability to pick good people and to know intuitively that a candidate will fit within the organisation. Furthermore they talk freely about seeing things differently when looking for solutions and having the ability to paint concepts and solutions in pictures. As referred to earlier, other researchers have found that dyslexics have a propensity to be creative and display ‘right brain’ skills (Geschwind, 1982; Galaburda, 1993; West, 1992; West, 1997; Reid & Kirk, 2001). We observe that the entrepreneurs in our study seem to be using these skills in order to lead and manage their ventures.
As we have cited, research has shown that entrepreneurs in general struggle to develop high levels of skill in communication, leadership and delegation and that this can hamper the growth of their businesses. We have found that dyslexic entrepreneurs tend to acquire these skills early. We believe that this and their amalgamation with the fourth attribute gives these entrepreneurs the edge in business.

**Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research**

The findings of this exploratory study are derived from a relatively small and self-selected sample. Other studies that are larger and more quantitative suggest there is a higher incidence of dyslexia in entrepreneurs and that they grow their ventures more quickly (Logan, 2009). There have also been studies which suggest dyslexics have skills that are associated with the right brain. The objective of this study has been to gain a richer understanding of how successful dyslexic entrepreneurs think and manage their ventures.

Future studies could include a larger number of respondents and provide a comparative group of non-dyslexic entrepreneurs. There is a need to investigate how low confidence affects those who are dyslexic and in business. This study found dyslexic entrepreneurs use a proxy to help deal with the tasks they find difficult. Another rich area would be to study how this might be replicated in the corporate environment.

**Conclusions**

This research set out to find an explanation for the high proportion of dyslexics among successful entrepreneurs and what skills or attributes have given these dyslexic entrepreneurs a head start.
The literature discussed earlier in this paper suggests that a large corporate environment can create organisational problems for dyslexic employees. This had provoked four of our ten entrepreneurs to leave the corporate world and start their own ventures.

The dyslexic entrepreneurs in this research found that the coping strategies they had developed quite early in life had helped them later, when starting their business ventures. These coping strategies had evolved into attributes and skills, predominant amongst which are the ability to communicate their ideas, to lead and motivate, to delegate, and to harness their intuition. Drawing on the earlier finding that dyslexic entrepreneurs tend to grow their companies more quickly (Logan, 2009), we deduce that these acquired skills enabled them to by-pass the trial and error stage that many entrepreneurs have to go through in order to learn to communicate, lead and delegate effectively.

We have shown that 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 the frustration and stress dyslexic individuals tend to experience in the corporate employment and also lead to faster career progress. Secondly, by starting their own companies dyslexics are better able to organise their environment and bring in others to do the tasks they find difficult. Thirdly, by applying the coping strategies developed when young, and by not being afraid to trust their instincts, dyslexic entrepreneurs can steal a match on their non-dyslexic peers and rivals.

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


British Dyslexia Association


**Other useful resources:**

Everatt, J. (1997). The abilities and disabilities associated with adult developmental dyslexia. *Journal of Research in Reading (Special Issue: Dyslexia in Literate Adults),* 20 (1), 13-21


