

Dyslexia Association of Ireland Conference 20 October 2007

Opening Address by Turlough O'Sullivan, IBEC Director General

I am delighted to be here with you today to provide the opening address to this important conference. It is impressive to see so many people gathered early on a Saturday morning to discuss dyslexia, which is of course hugely significant to so many Irish people, particularly the 8% or so of people who have the condition. The line-up of speakers today is also very impressive and I am sure that the discussions will be most interesting and challenging.

I want to begin on a positive note. I represent the world of business and in preparing my notes for today, I was thinking about those successful business people who have admitted to struggling with dyslexia throughout their lives. Richard Branson has dyslexia and has often spoken of his struggle with education and his thorough dislike of school. He failed many exams dismally and left school early. Yet Branson has gone on to become one of the world's most successful businesspersons and has often spoken of his belief that being dyslexic has actually been an advantage to him. Charles Schwab, listed as the 57th richest person in the United States with a fortune of approximately \$5.5 billion, also attributes his business success to his conceptual and visual skills, which were honed because of his condition.

Looking into this further, I found a study of entrepreneurs in the UK, which showed that dyslexics are actually 5 times more likely to be entrepreneurs than those without specific learning difficulties.

Other studies have shown that large numbers of UK millionaires are dyslexic – about 40% in total it seems. This really is an incredible statistic, and shows that whatever problems a dyslexic person might have with formal schooling and regimented learning, there is no reason why that person cannot go on to achieve great things.

It is often said that those with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia are able to develop creative thinking and other compensatory skills. In many cases, dyslexics demonstrate an ability to think differently and innovatively, albeit that they sometimes struggle with particular situations such as school or being in very structured jobs. For example, I came across one famous architect's practice in the US, which gives preference to employing people who are dyslexic because of their spatial awareness and lateral thinking abilities.

Biographers claim that both Einstein and Edison, two of the world's finest and most influential scientists, were both dyslexics. Einstein was considered a rather poor employee for a number of years when he had a desk job. It was more by chance that he fell into the world of invention with which we associate him now. He might never have made that transition, possibly struggling on in his office job for years feeling frustrated and bored - and we would all have been the poorer for it. Einstein, like many people with specific learning difficulties was incredibly creative and inventive, but he had to find the right kind of environment in which to succeed and in which his special talents could shine through. There is probably a lesson in that for all of us.

I started with these few examples for a reason. I have been asked today to encourage employers to recruit and accommodate people with dyslexia, in recognition of the sometimes extraordinary talents that these people can bring to their work. I don't think there is any doubt that an employer can benefit from having dyslexic employees, but it would be naïve to say that there are no challenges involved. I want to touch briefly on some of the current issues facing employers that perhaps form a backdrop to this discussion.

Employers often find themselves trying to make up for that fact that many employees, particularly older employees, have very poor levels of education. Nowadays we are familiar with the concept of specific learning difficulties, be it dyslexia, dyspraxia or attention deficit disorder. However as recently as 10 or 15 years ago these concepts were unknown to the public and poorly understood. Employers certainly did not understand the different kinds of conditions that their employees could have and this was a real barrier to engagement with such problems. Today we have much more awareness and openness to addressing them, but we are still dealing with the legacy of the past. Many adults do not realise that they have dyslexia because it was not something that was diagnosed in Irish schools. Some have also developed coping mechanisms that make it much more difficult to diagnose dyslexia in later life.

Not being able to diagnose dyslexia of course makes it more difficult for an employer to accommodate the problem. A psycho-educational assessment is needed to determine the presence of dyslexia, but unfortunately, the state does not provide such a service to adults who must arrange it themselves.

I notice that the Dyslexia Association organises such testing and I compliment you on providing this important service. Once the test has been done, it will allow adults who have been frustrated by their learning difficulty for many years to finally understand what the problem is and to seek appropriate help. This is also the point at which a good employer can step in and be of assistance.

Thankfully, the modern world of work has changed so that dyslexia can be accommodated more easily than in times past. A very simple development such as the fact that we now do most of our writing and correspondence electronically means that dyslexic employees can easily check the accuracy of their work as they go along. There are a number of low cost techniques that can be used in the workplace to accommodate dyslexia. The very simple use of colour coding or the provision of information on audio tape can be very effective. There are many IT packages available at a reasonable cost, which employers can acquire to help their employees. A whole range of books and other materials providing further advice and guidance are also available and I would urge employers to bring themselves up to speed with modern means of accommodating learning difficulties. It is certainly worth it, given the numbers of employees who have such difficulties and that employers are keen to recruit and retain the best possible staff.

We know that many thousands of adults in Ireland have very low levels of literacy and numeracy and that this can be a source of great embarrassment. The high level of literacy problems in Ireland is unacceptable and it should be a national priority to reduce it within as short a time as possible.

This requires the adoption of a long-term programme with an objectively measurable target and an adequate budget. The proposal in the National Development Plan to quadruple the adult literacy tuition budget is welcome but should be viewed as an intermediate step.

The National Skills Strategy, which was published last March, has highlighted the importance of basic literacy and numeracy skills. However, it has also emphasised the importance of other generic competencies such as IT, people-related skills such as communication, customer-service and team working and, most significantly for today's proceedings, conceptual skills such as problem-solving, planning and organising, innovation and creativity. The strategy will aim to move half a million Irish workers up one step on the national qualifications framework. This is no small objective and will involve employers making a serious commitment to examining ways in which this can be done. Increasing the availability of workplace learning will be one option.

I would urge employers to consider the needs of those employees who may have specific learning difficulties, to ensure that they too can avail of any education and training that is made available and are not left behind. I would also urge those of you who suffer from dyslexia to focus on your strengths, transferable skills and what you have learnt from your disability.

I cannot pretend to be an expert in this area but even a brief survey of the literature would suggest that people with dyslexia are likely to:

- have creative ability and may have special gifts in engineering, computer programming or art and design
- possess strong reasoning powers and lateral thinking ability and are good at seeing the bigger picture
- have developed strong IT skills and are familiar with a wide variety of software
- have developed a range of strategies to handle information and prioritise workload
- have good organisational and problem-solving skills
- be self-reliant and be able to work independently
- have developed an awareness of the different problems that other people face
- have a positive attitude and shown their commitment to success

The National Skills Strategy is one of the key elements of public policy that will have an impact on Irish workplaces in the coming few years. It is part though of a wider strategy, which is focused on developing a knowledge economy in Ireland, creating high-skilled jobs and increasing our levels of innovation. A lot of work is ongoing on the topic of ‘the workplace of the future’, which seeks to identify the aspects of work in Ireland which will need to change significantly over the coming few years if we are to maintain our economic growth and social cohesion. This is all very relevant to today’s theme, because the kinds of work that will be available in the future may very well fit better with the learning styles of people with dyslexia.

I mentioned earlier that dyslexics think creatively and innovatively and these are exactly the kinds of skills that will be required more and more in the Irish workplace in future.

I want to say a little more about the broader area of education because it is a theme that is of great interest to IBEC. Although I have touched on the importance of education and training for workers, I have not mentioned the obvious importance of children's education and how dyslexia and other learning difficulties are addressed in schools. It is one thing for employers to accommodate dyslexia – which is after all a lifelong condition – but it is fundamentally important that children are diagnosed and treated early so that they have every possible chance to succeed. Children can receive an assessment through the National Educational Psychological Service, allowing appropriate remediation to be arranged. It is critical that children get this remediation, so that they are allowed to succeed at school to their full potential.

I am aware that the Dyslexia Association also organises a series of summer schools and pre-exam classes, which is to be commended. Early diagnosis of dyslexia allows children to get the full benefit of this extra help and I would urge parents who suspect that their child has a problem to have it investigated quickly. There are also accommodations available from the State Examinations Commission, which can prove vital to students sitting state exams.

It is so important that young people are not entering the world of third level education or of employment unnecessarily carrying the disadvantage of poor exam results because this can set them on the wrong path from the outset.

Increasingly our education system is developing a more inclusive culture. Coming back again to the world of employment, let me quickly touch on the topic of inclusion in the workplace. In 2007, we marked the third year of the O2 Ability Awards, which acknowledge companies that are particularly supportive of people with disabilities including learning difficulties. The Awards, which are organised by the Aisling Foundation along with a number of partner organisations and sponsors, have very quickly become recognised in the business world as important and lucrative awards to win. Many of IBEC's member companies, those we would consider to be best-practice employers, have already been winners and we hope to see more of our members taking part in future.

The Ability Awards are significant because of the positive message created by accommodating people with disabilities or learning difficulties. In the past, we have perhaps focused too much on the challenges and difficulties associated with inclusion in the workplace, be it in terms of cost, resources, access issues or other problems. I think what has happened more recently is that businesses are beginning to realise that employing people who learn differently or who have different abilities is actually an advantage and can result in positive business gain. If we think back to the example I gave earlier of the number of entrepreneurs who have dyslexia, it is not hard to see why this is so.

IBEC has previously produced guidelines for employers on the recruitment of people with disabilities and learning difficulties, explaining some of the issues that might arise and how they might be addressed.

I know that many other organisations have looked at this topic and produced similar guidelines so there is plenty of support and guidance available to potential employers. In this context, I would draw your attention to the Workway website at www.workway.ie, which is a joint IBEC and ICTU initiative to promote the employment of people with disabilities in the private sector. Between 2002 and 2005, private sector employers, trade union representatives, disability service providers, government agencies and people with disabilities themselves, came together to form four regional Workway networks in Cork, Kerry, Donegal and Galway.

These networks addressed the complex and challenging barriers that people with disabilities face in accessing and remaining in employment. Although the work of the project is complete, the Workway website is being maintained by IBEC and ICTU, with support from FÁS, and has been redeveloped during 2007.

Before I finish today, I would like to compliment again the ongoing work of the Dyslexia Association of Ireland. Its extensive network of branches, providing services and supports to parents, children, tutors and others, plays a vital role in addressing the challenges of dyslexia. The provision of out of school learning workshops for children is a particularly important support provided by the Association, and I have no doubt that many families find your services invaluable.

The Association also plays a key role in constantly challenging the state, employers and wider society to understand the concepts of specific learning difficulty and dyslexia, and bringing about that kind of attitudinal change is very important. I also want to congratulate you on the organisation of today's event and I look forward to hearing the outcomes of the discussions.

I will conclude by reiterating that dyslexia is not a condition that should nowadays spell disaster for anyone. I emphasise that people who are 'blessed with dyslexia' as Richard Branson describes himself, are often highly creative and talented and perhaps even better suited to the world of business than others who don't have the condition. In an economy where we value knowledge and innovation, dyslexics can thrive and become leaders, given the right opportunities. I encourage employers to accommodate and support this strand of talent within the workforce, because without that accommodation it is hard for many to succeed. I have no doubt that, even within this room, we have future leaders and that in the future we will wonder why dyslexia was ever considered unusual. I hope that we can have a positive debate today and make some real progress in how to reach that worthy goal.