

Workplace matters

Visible talents/hidden disabilities Sandi Mann

Let me introduce you to two members of staff. They're not real people but the chances are they'll remind you of someone you know at work.

Luke works in the computer department of a bank. He is bright and a real whizz when it comes to trouble-shooting and solving technical problems. Despite his value to the organisation, his colleagues tend to regard him as a bit of an outcast – a geek, who doesn't really fit in. He dresses oddly, in clothes that are functional rather than fashionable. He is obsessed with certain things, like computers, but has little awareness of other aspects of popular culture. It is hard to have a conversation with him as he doesn't seem to obey the normal conversational rules. He is very routine-driven and gets irritated if meetings or venues are changed.

Charlie works in PR and is a popular member of the team that he joined six months ago. He is full of ideas and his enthusiasm is infectious. However, there are areas that are causing concern to his line manager. He is always late for work or for meetings. He is disorganised and invariably forgets to bring important documents along. Meeting deadlines is a major problem – while he is very good at the ideas stage, getting him to actually follow things through to their conclusion is very hard. He never keeps still, is always fiddling with things or tapping his legs, which is awkward because he gives the impression that he is bored. He is very sociable, but often blurts things out without thinking and interrupts rather a lot.

You might have realised, Luke and Charlie each have a hidden disability. It's not immediately obvious from initial contact, and yet it can cause them more problems in the workplace as time goes by. Luke has Autistic Spectrum Disorder Syndrome (ASD) while Charlie has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Most workplaces will have a Luke or a Charlie, or someone who seems a bit 'odd' but who really has what, in the educational arena, is termed 'special needs'.

According to the TUC, there are 113,084 workers in the UK with ASD (around a third of those of working age with the condition).¹ The challenge for organisations is to know how to deal with, and get the best out of, employees with special needs or hidden disabilities.

This can be particularly challenging, given that employees with hidden disabilities may choose not to disclose them to their employer for fear of discrimination (either at the interview stage or later on). Furthermore, a great many do not even know that they have them. While diagnosis of conditions like ASD, ADHD and dyslexia is more common now at school (due to increasing awareness), many employees will have been at school before assessment and diagnosis were widespread. They may have gone through their entire education knowing that they were different in some way, but not understanding why. Employers need to be aware that even if they suspect a hidden disability, great sensitivity is required as they may be alerting an employee to an undiagnosed condition.

Hidden disabilities can include a wide range of medical and mental health conditions such as hearing or visual impairments, depression, sickle cell condition or renal failure. However, my focus is on those conditions that cause neurological impairment in otherwise 'normal' individuals. The most common of these conditions that managers are likely to come across include dyslexia, ADHD and Asperger's Syndrome. All of these tend to attract some degree of special help nowadays in schools, but once young people have left full-time education, there is far less awareness of the need for accommodating their conditions – even though their disabilities are lifelong.

Workplaces can and should make reasonable adaptations to help get the most out of an employee, despite their difficulties. For example, if a manager is aware that a team member is dyslexic, they might supply screen-reading software or speech-to-text software or adapt computers with anti-glare covers, or coloured backgrounds on Word documents. Adaptations for people with

ADHD can include providing workplaces that are as free from distractions as possible (if not a private office, then the quietest cubicle possible) or allowing use of white noise (eg a fan or earphones) which can help minimise distractions. Employees with ASD can be helped by providing a quiet workspace where possible, especially one where they can be a little more isolated from office chit-chat, which can feel bewildering, and by assigning a buddy or mentor to help with social situations in particular (answering questions, or even explaining hidden nuances when other people talk).

Employees with hidden disabilities can add value to the workplace but may need some help to harness their skill base. The wise manager will be eager to provide this support rather than lose the knowledge, expertise and skills of any member of their team.

References

- 1 Booth J. Autism in the workplace. [Online.] <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/autism.pdf> (accessed 4 June 2015).

Useful resources

The British Dyslexia Association: www.bdadyslexia.org.uk
AADD-UK (Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder): www.AADD.org.uk
National Autistic Society: www.autism.org.uk



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Cyberwork

Cyberslacking – internet use policies at work Kate Anthony

A colleague of mine had an interesting (and, we found, somewhat amusing) experience when looking for resources for a client recently. As a therapist working with those with eating disorders, she sometimes uses the internet to find companies that cater for dress sizes outside of the norm and quickly Googled 'larger women' to pin down a specific type of outlet in her client's geographical area. While the search did indeed produce the desired outcome, Google also provided her automatically with pictures of women in various stages of undress, causing her to slam shut the laptop before her colleagues could notice.

Most internet searches at work are innocent, but if your company has a policy on internet use (and most do), you should make yourself familiar with it. More importantly, find out what you should do if the red flags start ping-ponging up identifying you as being at fault if a guiltless search makes it appear you are guilty of using work time to search for personal areas of interest. This can be of particular relevance to mental health counsellors, where our clients' issues are often something we seek to know more about. For example, my work in the field of gambling addiction and the impact of social gaming on mental health often means that I get bombarded with adverts for online casinos and online bingo websites – not a problem (although irritating) in my home office setting. But it is something that could cause concern to my employers at work if it identified me as someone with a gambling habit which could affect company time and productivity.

Most companies understand that a lock-down on using the internet for personal purposes during a lunch or coffee break, such as looking at Facebook or booking train travel, is unreasonable – and most employees understand that cyberslacking at work is an unacceptable use of company time. This two-way street works positively for both parties – employees get some downtime and relaxation while in the workplace, and

employers get happier workers as a result. Affording some trust to employees to surf responsibly while on company time simply makes for a happier environment. In addition, workplace internet blockers help employees avoid situations such as harassment as a result of pornography being accessed and being used to unsettle or bully co-workers.

However, it is worth having simple strategies in place if you find yourself the subject of investigation by your Chief Information Officer (CIO) or their teams because of an internet search, as could have happened to my colleague searching for 'larger women' or indeed myself because of researching the adverse affects of gambling and gaming. When monitoring tools are implemented in the workplace, it is usually done to protect the company from inefficient workers as well as spotting legal concerns, and corporate culture and employee morale remain undisturbed.

If you have a genuine work need to use the internet to search for any content in relation to your clients' issues, or indeed any other reasons to look up research that could trigger the keywords used in monitoring systems, it may be wise to warn your employers in advance. Monitoring applications are designed to be tweaked and to be flexible, so they can be configured manually to allow access to certain types of website necessary for your work. Furthermore, you can educate IT departments or teams as to the reasons why some areas of seemingly disreputable content may surface in the line of your work with clients, and so pre-empt the often long waits for firewalls to be removed which can hinder your efficiency at work in general. Making a business case for access to areas of the World Wide Web can be time consuming, so work with your employers to make sure they understand the nature of your work at ground level.

Finally, if you are moving into the realm of using electronic ways of communicating with your clients, you may already have come up against email account blocking or policies that

dictate membership of an intranet for communication. This is particularly the case for school or higher education institutions, where the level of protecting young people from cyber-harm is more prevalent. In these environments, it is worth being prepared for discussing the need for an entire new workplace system for client communication to be implemented, or allowing purchase of a bespoke platform designed for contact between therapist and client to allow distance sessions to take place.

Above all, remember that although company internet use policies often seem obstructive and over the top, they are there to protect both the employee and the employer. Crushing candies on work time is definitely cheeky, as Tory MP Nigel Mills found out recently!¹

References

- 1 Tory MP apologises for playing Candy Crush during committee. [Online.] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-30375609> (accessed 5 June 2015).



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