



BRIEFING SHEET

Working with learners who have learning difficulties

Introduction

This briefing sheet is one of a series that were developed by NIACE on behalf of the DIUS to support work-based learning practitioners when they are working with learners who have a learning difficulty or disability. The other briefing sheets may be found at:

www.niace.org.uk/research/workplacelearning/Publications.htm

Each briefing sheet is designed to offer a brief explanation of a learning difficulty or disability, indicate how it may affect learning in the workplace, and offer some practical suggestions for practitioners about how they may support learners alongside a case study.

In every instance we advocate using a person-centred approach, where the learner and their particular strengths and interests are placed at the centre of the learning and assessment process. More information about using a person-centred approach may be downloaded at:

<http://excellence.qia.org.uk/pdf/Person-centred%20approaches%20and%20adults%20with%20learning%20%20%20%20%20%20%20difficulties.pdf>

What are cognitive learning difficulties?

There are many forms of cognitive learning difficulties. They affect each person differently. You may have come across the terminology - severe (SLD), profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), moderate (MLD) and mild learning difficulties. Current practice tends not to use "labels" but relies on careful assessment of the individual and their training / learning needs, rather than on the terminology of their disability. Learning difficulties can affect the ability to learn i.e. memory retention, behaviour, conceptualisation and understanding of abstract concepts. It can also impair the ability to transfer skills, concentrate for long periods of time and to master sequencing processes.

How do cognitive learning difficulties affect work-based learning?

It is difficult to generalise when it comes to identifying strengths and areas for development for a trainee with learning difficulties. Each person will have individual strengths and areas for development. Below are listed some "tendencies" to give an idea of possible strengths and areas for development / management.

Strengths:

- Trainees will often have "spiky profiles" of learning. This means that they may have considerable ability in certain skill areas, but find other skills very hard. Concentrate on their strengths to develop the other skills e.g. use their special interest areas to develop sequencing activities.
- Do not automatically assume that a learning disability will mean that the trainee is unable to do something.
- Find out what interests and skills the learner has acquired already and build on these.
- Trainees with learning difficulties are often very eager to please and want to do a good job
- Trainees with learning difficulties are often reliable and conscientious.

Areas for development / management:

- Sequencing – put strategies in place to support / re-enforce sequencing tasks.
- Memory and retaining information - identify appropriate memory aids e.g. photo cards.
- Concentration span – pace input and interaction in bite size chunks.
- Transference of skills – do not assume that a learner can master a skill in one task and then transfer that skill to another task. The connection may have to be re-introduced and reinforced.

- Conceptualisation and understanding abstract concepts – keep language simple and straight forward. Use pictures, charts, timetables and icons to assist with difficult concepts.

What can I do to help?

Trainers and assessors are often worried about the correct words to use when referring to people with disabilities. It is important to see trainees as individuals first, not labelled by their disability e.g. Joe Smith, not LDD trainee. Currently, the terms approved by groups of disabled people themselves are:

“People or person with a disability” or “disabled people or person”.

- The recruitment process should include assessment of individual trainees / learners. This assessment should identify any support that will be required by the trainee to access NVQ training / assessment, and any literacy, language and numeracy needs.
- Use straight forward language and terminology. Be precise about time scales and activities.
- Plan to use a variety of styles, for example visual and verbal cues; practical and theoretical approaches; when you write something down read it out as well. Be aware of different learning preferences, e.g. verbal, visual, activity based etc.
- Build in moments when you can just observe what works well for a particular person and what doesn't. Make sure this includes observing strengths as well as things that a person finds difficult.
- Trainees may need to have individual arrangements for assessment, for example extra time, a reader or a scribe, adaptation of equipment, or different print size. These will need to be in-line with your awarding body's policies.
- Encourage an attitude where all learners' differences and difficulties in learning are openly discussed (not just those of a person with a particular learning difficulty or disability) and where all learners have the opportunity to discuss the ways in which they learn best. Celebrate diversity.
- If you are working with learners who are also from a different minority ethnic group, do not forget that their ethnicity is an important aspect of their identity as well as their disability.
- Ask trainees what works best for them and listen closely to what they say. They are the experts on the effects of their learning disability on how they do things.
- Look at how your own practice or the practice of the institution might be further impairing the trainee e.g. providing NVQ assessment requirements in text format only.
- Reflect on your own attitudes; it is often staff attitudes (such as embarrassment, patronisation, fear or irritation), rather than an individual's disability, that can cause barriers.

- When trainees have difficulties with remembering things, work with them on creating strategies which they feel might help them to remember e.g. laminated “flip” photos of a work process for practical use (see case study).
- Talk to individuals about their past learning experiences. Focus on what has worked and what has been less successful. There is no point in repeating past failures.
- Make sure learning is age appropriate. All adult learners need to feel that they are not being treated like children.
- Use a range of materials (visual and spoken as well as written). Trainees who have found writing extremely difficult may feel differently about it if they can begin to use a computer, rather than a pen and paper.
- If learners have difficulties with concentrating for long periods of time, plan sessions that have a variety of short activities / assessment opportunities.
- Always explain things clearly and check that they have been understood. Allow time for questions from the trainee.
- Be careful not to be too directive; some people with learning difficulties may say what they think you want to hear. Try using open question forms.
- Encourage all trainees to ask for help so that this is seen as an important part of learning for all trainees and not a sign of failure.
- Help learners to record progress and successes using a method that is accessible and appropriate for them e.g. using uncomplicated recording systems with words supported by pictures / icons (adapt existing paperwork where appropriate).

Case study

Nigel is a trainee on a NVQ Motor Vehicle programme. He has specific problems with remembering sequences regarding tasks e.g. stripping down and reassembling car components. The work place supervisor collaborated with the NVQ assessor to develop a system of practical support that was unobtrusive and appropriate. A set of laminated ‘photo cards’ has been developed which catalogues the sequence of removing a wheel and tyre, replacing tyre and reassembling etc. The laminated photos are small, about A5 size, a corner hole was punched to enable them to be put onto a key fob and turned over as required in sequence. The cards allow Nigel to practice the process as often as necessary, until he feels competent to do it without the cards. This photo card system has enabled Nigel to maintain his independence, develop his self confidence in the work place and take ownership of his learning / training. It has also enabled him to practice the skills without having to refer to his supervisor each time. This system was extended to other processes that Nigel needed to master and has proved very successful. Several other trainees in Nigel’s group have asked for photo card memory aides to assist them during long and complicated mechanical processes.

DDA

Many learners who have a learning difficulty or disability are protected by the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and subsequent legislation. They may be protected as both employees and as learners. In every case, a learner's disability or learning difficulty must meet the criteria described in the Act:

“Subject to the provisions of Schedule 1, a person has a disability for the purposes of this Act if he has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.”

(DDA, 1995)

Further information about disability legislation and its application in the workplace or in learning may be found at: <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/Pages/default.aspx>

Further information

Moving into Work:

There are six information sheets in this set which are aimed at a number of different key players who need to be involved in the process of supporting people in their transition to work: Copies of the information sheets can be downloaded from:

www.niace.org.uk/research/HDE/documents.htm

I can get a job:

a step-by-step guide to getting a job. This guide is for trainees with learning difficulties and / or disabilities and the people who support them.

With a foreword by Anne McGuire, Minister for Disabled People, Department for Work and Pensions. The above resource is published by Care Services Improvement Partnership

You can work it out:

Bill Love and Peter Gates MENCAP (employment) www.mencap.org.uk

Useful websites

www.base-uk.org – British Association for Supported Employment

www.lseducation.org.uk – Learning and Skills Network

www.mencap.org.uk – Mencap Pathway and Work Right

www.skill.org.uk – Skill – The National Bureau for Students with Disabilities

www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk