
WORKING WITH DYSLEXIA AND ADHD IN INDIA -- A HUMAN RESOURCE AND BUSINESS MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE TO MENTAL DISABILITIES IN DYNAMIC WORKPLACES

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ABSTRACT

10% of India's population suffers from learning disabilities. However, the level of awareness required to make spaces conducive for them is extremely low. This translates to the creation of spaces in education and workplaces that are inherently discriminatory towards such individuals. This paper has explored the challenges that people with learning disabilities face at the workplace. It has also looked into solutions that workplaces across the world have adapted and can adapt to that would make work conducive to such individuals. It has also sought to provide contextual policy recommendations that would improve the situation and circumstances that people with learning disabilities face in the workplace in India. Non-governmental organizations play a significant role in creating positive change at the grassroots level. However, the improvement of the rate and quality of employment available to individuals with learning disabilities requires much more attention from the government and industrial bodies to formulate and mandate the enforcement of guidelines that make workplaces more conducive.

Keywords: Learning Disabilities, Dyslexia, ADHD, Workplace, Learning Disorder

INTRODUCTION

The research and discourse on learning disabilities in India are highly underdeveloped.

Diagnosis and treatment of such disabilities remain restricted to the biggest and most economically developed cities of India, thereby excluding the majority of the population. Governmental authorities have been ignorant to the extent of several state educational departments questioning the existence of such disabilities. Most research and intervention is conducted by private organizations and NGOs, which are seldom linked to government policy-makers. Moreover, the linguistic divide within India and the disparity between languages used (regional languages and dialects) in daily life and the language used as a medium of instruction

make the detection of learning disabilities difficult. According to the Census conducted in 2011, out of the population of 1.21 billion people, about 26.8 million persons are 'disabled' which is 2.21% of the total population of India. Of the 26.8 million about 10% suffer from learning disabilities (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2016).

However, this figure is disputed because of the fact that the majority of the nation has no access to facilities that conduct a diagnosis of learning disabilities. Surveys are done at the grassroots level, majorly in schools show a much higher figure for the prevalence of LDs. Research conducted in different states in India reveals that 8%-16% of all students suffer from learning disabilities (Suresh, 1998).

In the past few years, India has been facing the problem of high unemployment rates, as they reached a 45 year high in 2019 (Patel, 2019). This has impacted people with mental disabilities more severely since they are, by default, at a position of disadvantage in the highly competitive labor market. Moreover, the education system has not been accommodative of their needs which has made the playing field more unequal. According to a report published by the World Bank in 2007, the employment rate of people with mental disabilities has actually fallen from 42.7% in 1991 to 37.6 % in 2002 (World Bank, 2007). This is significantly lesser than employment rates in developed countries like the United States, which employs 62% of people suffering from mental disabilities within a year of their graduation. Increasing dependence on automation coupled with the indifference of the state machinery has contributed to this. People with learning mental disabilities need specialized training and support to work in mainstream jobs. This would require investment on behalf of the government, which has been negligible over the past few years. Profit-oriented businesses do not take on this burden by themselves as they don't see it as an investment worth making. The systematic exclusion of people suffering mental disabilities from the workforce is thus a by-product of indifference on the part of the state machinery.

BACKGROUND

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) the taxonomic and diagnostic tool for psychiatry published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). The DSM 5 does not define dyslexia, stating that, "the many definitions of dyslexia and dyscalculia meant those terms would not be useful as disorder names or in the diagnostic criteria". Instead, it includes dyslexia in a different category termed as 'Specific Learning Disorders' (American Psychiatry Publishing, 2013). Specific Learning Disorders are developmental disorders that manifest in the form of difficulty in calculations or in reading and writing languages (Learning Disability Association of America, 2012). ADHD is defined by DSM 5 as "a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with

functioning or development” (Reynolds & Kamphus, 2013). Mental disorders might influence the productivity of individuals under normal circumstances for conventional tasks, but research shows that it is possible to create a conducive environment by adopting certain practices that partially or fully mitigate the effect that these disorders have on the quality of work that individuals perform.

Braun, Eldon and Davis, Ronald conducted research in 1998 to analyze the prevalence of dyslexia in the United States and determine methods to make schools and workplaces conducive to people with mental disabilities. It was found that these disabilities do not affect productivity beyond reading and writing text. A shift to oral modes of communication and evaluation resulted in a significant improvement in responsiveness, productivity, and self-esteem of individuals (Davis, R.D. & Braun, E. 1998). A team led by Dr. Marita Adam analyzed the difficulties in passing national legislation to strengthen the presence of people with learning disabilities in schools and offices in India. It was concluded that state-level legislation and localized policies were a more effective method of training people with learning disabilities for employment (Adam, Martia, et al, 2015). Supported by the British High Commission, the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP) surveyed the employment of disabled people in India in 2009. ‘Job Coaches’ associated with Non-Governmental Organizations working at the grassroots level were found to be extremely effective in providing on-the-job training to people suffering from mental disabilities (Chari, et al, 2009). Researchers have also found that people suffering from mental disabilities prefer to be involved with community-integrated employment like hospitality and customer relations (Blick, R.N., et al, 2016).

Individuals with learning disabilities continue to have problems with integral aspects of work including reading, writing and recording data despite completing their formal education. This not only creates practical barriers to functioning efficiently in workplaces but also adds to the emotional turmoil that these individuals already go through which adds barriers to growth, in their field of employment. However, reasonable changes in the work environment and culture can significantly improve the productivity of such individuals. The first step in this procedure is to diagnose individuals effectively so that they can be made subject to workplace adjustments.

Technological developments have enabled the creation and availability of products that make workplaces more conducive to people with learning disabilities. Dyslexia friendly fonts like Arial and Comic Sans are recommended by the British Dyslexia Association as they enhance readability (Rello & Yates, 2013). For cases that are more acute, text to speech software and audio note takers help people with dyslexia understand and record speech which needs to be written down. Mind- mapping software offers individuals a platform to flesh out their ideas and prepare presentations that are imperative for effective communication in conventional

workplaces. Employers, on their part, must ensure that all documentation related to meetings are made available to individuals beforehand so that they have enough time to process the data and respond to it. Increased participation and exposure significantly improves the self-esteem and morale of employees with learning disabilities.

DISCUSSION

The human resources department in companies is responsible for not only maintaining the levels of productivity amongst the workforce but also for creating an environment in which all members of the workforce have an equal opportunity to contribute to the growth of the company. In companies, it is the onus of the human resource division to ensure that the needs of those who suffer from learning disabilities like dyslexia and ADHD are incorporated to ensure that a level playing field is maintained within the organization. Many difficulties in work that people with mental disabilities face are contextualized, that is, they depend on the workplace and the nature of the work. It is imperative to pay special attention and place such individuals in jobs that are more compatible with their skills. Workplaces do show a tendency to evolving according to the needs of employees. In the 21st century, positions that were previously hegemonized by privileged men are now being occupied by women and other minority groups. As workplaces adapt their practices to more diverse employees, it is important to consider all kinds of diversities that exist amongst the workforce. Therefore, there is a need for a better understanding of disabilities on behalf of companies to not only challenge stereotypes and eliminate social stigma, but to adapt themselves to those employees who suffer from specific learning disabilities.

There is a significant level of social stigma around learning disabilities. This is compounded by the lack of awareness in India. This starts affecting individuals suffering from learning disabilities at a very early age. Disorders like dyslexia and ADHD severely impact the academic performance of individuals (Lisle, 2011). However, when their disabilities are not recognized, poor academic performance is perceived to be a by-product of their intellectual inferiority. Schools in India are rarely accommodative of learning disabilities and students are forced to fend for themselves (Singh, et al., 2017). This systemic injustice and exclusion need to be tackled at multiple fronts. This includes reforms in both- the educational sector and the workplace. There is a precedence for making adjustments and allowances for the oppressed in India as well as the international level. Reservation of seats in higher education, legislatures and government companies for “backward castes” that have faced oppression historically in India or The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 of the United Kingdom that facilitates the use of all-women shortlists with the aim to select more women as candidates in elections are some examples of effective affirmative action through the past century (Kelly & White, 2009). These changes are not only beneficial to individuals at the micro level, but also to companies and the

economy at a larger level. Exclusion of about 10% of the population from employment or restricting their productivity and contributions to the economy is an opportunity cost that the entire economy bears. A more productive workforce generally leads to the acceleration of economic growth.

In the absence of concrete and tangible actions on behalf of the Government, Non-Governmental Organizations, working at the grassroots level have taken the burden of improving the lives of those suffering from learning disabilities from the primary school itself. Organizations including 'Lehar' and 'Mann' aim to generate awareness and understanding of mental disabilities and impart skills to individuals so that they can achieve social and economic mobility. The Dyslexia Association of India, on the other hand, focuses its attention on research to develop programs that enable individuals with learning disabilities to integrate into the mainstream.

CONCLUSION

There is a need for greater state interference and regulation to make workplaces conducive for individuals with learning disabilities. The first step is to identify jobs in the government and public sector itself that are suitable for individuals with learning disabilities and reserving positions in those jobs for them. Legislations must be passed to lay down guidelines for the diagnosis of learning disabilities as well, in addition to those aimed at emancipating individuals suffering from them. The private sector should be regulated to stop discrimination against people with learning disabilities. Incentives such as tax concessions should also be considered to increase hiring in the private sector. Industrial bodies like the CII (Confederation of Indian Industrialists) and ASSOCHAM (Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India) should take the burden upon themselves to moral persuade companies to be more inclusive and accommodative of people with learning disabilities. Research and implementation of guidelines and policies that make workplaces more conducive should be conducted at the industry level so that they are more contextualized and relevant. The government should enable the creation of special employment exchanges and facilitate the provision of credit to people suffering from learning disabilities to enable them to pursue self-employment opportunities (Chari, et al, 2009).

Employers can make 'reasonable changes' in the work environment that they control to make it conducive for those with learning disabilities. However, the definition of what 'reasonable' constitutes is very subjective. Such changes represent a very minor increase in costs, but more importantly, they represent a major shift in the culture and perception of workplaces. Such changes to culture are very often met with resistance. This is similar to the resistance faced by communities including transgenders and other oppressed minorities when they attempt to reclaim public spaces they rightfully have access to. It is the prerogative of the state to promote such

reclamation in order to correct historical injustice and provide means of emancipation and growth to those who have been denied the same. Moreover, workplaces usually operate on a vague idea of 'merit', where more opportunities for growth are provided to people who excel better in the work environment. However, when the environment and culture are itself exclusionary and benefits some individuals more than the other, discrimination in workplaces the end result, even if it is not intended.

Indian law and policy have not been very considerate of individuals with learning disabilities because of the indifference and ignorance of subsequent governments. Unlike the west, India lacks any legislation specifically aimed to protect people with learning disabilities from discrimination (Cappa & Giulivi, 2014). A ruling by the Delhi High Court in 2012 mandated all public and private schools to equip themselves adequately to deal with students with learning disabilities (Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Science and Technology 2015). More recently the government has released new assessment tools for disorders like Dyslexia in Indian vernacular languages. These tests are supposed to be adaptable to not only the native language of students but also to differences in their ages and cultural upbringings. This is expected to expand awareness and possibility of early diagnosis from the upper echelons of urban society to rural and backward areas of the country (Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Science and Technology 2015).

Recent developments are expected to significantly improve the lives of students with learning disabilities in India. However, policies must be more holistic and should target discrimination and stigma beyond educational institutions to workplaces and beyond. Research and implementation through the combined efforts of the government, companies, nongovernmental organizations and institutions are imperative to create an environment where people with learning disabilities have equal opportunity to actualize growth in their fields of work.

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