

## The entrepreneur within

Jon Sutton meets **Nancy Doyle**, Director and Founding Partner at Genius Within Ltd

**Y**ou're an entrepreneur, Managing Director of your own company, and you see a lot of scope for innovative thinking in the dyslexic profile. Is that what drew you to the area?

I've worked in the area off and on since becoming an occupational psychologist (I graduated with my MSc from Birkbeck in 2003). I've always found it interesting to notice how different people excel in different areas and what can go wrong when we are trying to do something we're not suited to. Dyslexia is characterised in the research literature

as a weakness in 'phonological processing' and this is frequently combined with high abilities in visual spatial thinking. For those familiar with the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale this translates into high abilities in Verbal Comprehension and Perceptual Reasoning, and lower abilities in Working Memory and Processing Speed. When plotted on a graph, a dyslexic cognitive profile forms a 'spiky' line. A low Processing Speed score indicates a difficulty in procedural, rule-based learning. When combined with a high Perceptual Reasoning score we have an individual who thrives on working outside the prescribed path; creating their own rules; making up patterns and looking for connections between ideas. This translates to real skill in spotting the gaps in a market or finding a quicker, cheaper way to do something.

**Sounds ideal for most jobs in these 'difficult times'.**

Yes, but the dyslexic profile, with its inherent strengths and abilities in creative thinking, is often lost in large organisations with overbearing rules and procedure-driven work habits. I love listening to TED lectures and in particular Sir Ken Robinson, the educationalist. His ideas about creative thinking and holistic appreciation of intelligence apply as much to the world of work as they do in schools. In schools, we have created systems which alienate dyslexic thinking and prioritise the

typically non-dyslexic skills of procedural, rule-based learning. However, there are several examples now of large companies achieving success through networked, flexible structures (Google, Gore-tex). Added to this is our internet-age preference for personalised commerce and a shift away from the one-size-fits-all approach. If this trend continues, our industrial-age hierarchical management pyramids may be on their way out of schools and companies. This to me seems like an opportunity for dyslexics to shine. I want to educate employers and dyslexics to the true nature of dyslexia and how it can be an advantage in the right context. *The Dyslexic Advantage* was published last year by Dr Brock Eide and Dr Fernette Eide and provides a good overview of the positive, practical applications of dyslexic thinking.

**So what's the idea of 'Genius Within'?**

There are several problems with current dyslexia services for adults. Firstly, most resources are aimed at children and literacy. A lot of adult dyslexics have overcome literacy issues and struggle with less tangible aspects of dyslexia such as time management or working memory. Secondly, support is expert-dominated and expensive. Diagnostic reports are written by psychologists that are unintelligible to the lay person – the message is: 'You're too stupid to even understand what's wrong with you. You need an expert to come and tell you what to do.' Thirdly, coaching support varies enormously in quality. Only last week a client of mine recounted the tale of an of a national charity-affiliated dyslexia trainer who advised my client's whole team that dyslexics can't learn; that dyslexia affects intelligence; that dyslexia is on the autistic spectrum and that she was 'very brave' for admitting it!

My colleagues, Chartered Psychologist Cheryl Isaacs and Caitlin Walker, have been complaining about these issues for years. So in 2011 we got together and decided to do something about it. The Genius Within website is adult-focused,



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professional and aimed at addressing the specific learning needs through online interactive coaching. Our aim is for people to control their own access to learning and get good advice quickly. We think the materials need to be innovative and inspire metacognition rather than just read out tips and strategies, so we've designed our own video style with questions to the learner as well as case studies and information. This is what will develop self-awareness and self-efficacy for our clients. We also want resources to be available at the click of a button, without the need for expensive assessments and referrals. These break confidentiality and limit the support to those whose organisations can afford it. The technology is just about keeping up with what we want to create as a learner experience, and we already have great plans for improvements!

**You say in your online video that your clients with dyslexia or dyspraxia need to find out what their particular area of brilliance is, and then 'translate your world into that structure'. Surely that's easier said than done?**

I think that's actually a lot more straightforward than it sounds. Take a previous client of mine who was certain he had no organisation skills. However, he could cook professional quality food for as many as 15 people with very little notice. So at some level his organisational skills were brilliant. The trouble was that at work he was dealing with what he thought were the 'right ways' to keep information organised and following the rules of his colleagues. He needed to move everything out of long lists and locked away cabinets into overviews and colour-coded shelves – just like his kitchen mid-cook, which was strewn with ingredients and different pots on the boil. He also needed to follow his cooking procedure – start with an intuitive survey of the whole thing and then keep several things going at once, where he could see them – rather than trying to go step by step through a recipe. The Genius Within videos coach learners to explore their own skills so that they start from a place of 'I can do' rather than 'I am terrible at'.

**How have you found setting up on your own – dealing with website development, accounts, marketing, etc?**

Hey, I had twins six years ago and I survived that! It's not dissimilar – juggling, getting the right help in at the right time, learning on the hoof, working at odd hours and being up half the night... I have a great business manager and a flexible relationship with my web

## FEATURED JOB

**Job Title:** Link Worker – Offenders with Acquired Brain Injury Project  
**Employer:** The Disabilities Foundation Trust



**'This newly created role offers enormous challenges and rewards, which will create significant differences to the lives of excluded people,' says Dr Ivan Pitman, Consultant Clinical Neuropsychologist with the Disabilities Trust.**

The post contributes directly to the Foundation's mission: supporting people with, or who are affected by, a disability but who are excluded from existing services. One of these groups comprises offenders with acquired brain injury. Dr Pitman explains that many of them are unaware that some of their problems – poor memory, impulsivity or impaired decision making for instance – stem from such injuries. 'These issues are significant risk factors for reoffending. Our research shows that 46 per cent of offenders have a history of an acquired brain injury. We have screened over 600 offenders in HMP Leeds, developing a short, but valid and reliable, Brain Injury Screening Questionnaire. The Link Worker's role takes this project forward.'

The Link Worker will continue with the screening, assessment and interviewing programme in HMP Leeds, as well as supporting clients when they're released. They will run clinics for offenders, as well as raising awareness amongst prison officers, staff, and those services who support released offenders.

'There's a huge amount of liaison with these agencies – probation, employment services and housing for instance – making sure they're aware of our particular clients' issues and problems.' That sounds a pretty big role. 'There's another aspect. This person must be able to write reports, keep accounts and be organised enough to meet audit requirements. The role has a clinical element but will also introduce the candidate to a wider range of work skills. The support offered to the Link Worker will reflect this, being managed by both a Social Exclusion Project Manager and with supervision from a Clinical Psychologist.'

What sort of person are you looking for? 'It will suit a graduate psychologist who has some experience of supporting others, or someone with previous experience as an assistant psychologist. Above all it requires someone with strong personal qualities and a good dose of common sense. They've got to feel comfortable working with some challenging individuals both in and out of a prison setting. This is an accountable and, to a degree, autonomous role so the person must be really dynamic, self-starting, enthusiastic and assertive. Imagine trying to pass really important information across to a very stressed probation officer in the middle of a busy working day.'

'This is a 24-month contract in a new area which could have implications for national policy, so it's an ideal role for someone wanting to train as a clinical psychologist in the future who wants to show what they are capable of.'

**You can find this job on p.548, and with many others on [www.psychapp.co.uk](http://www.psychapp.co.uk).**

"It requires someone with good personal qualities and common sense"

developers.

I've been self-employed since my second year of my master's at Birkbeck so I'm used to a lot of the work involved in running a business. Previous to that I worked in senior training and development and operational roles for large corporates so I know what I'm missing... I have resigned from the day-to-day running of my other company, Training Attention, in order to focus on Genius Within. My business partner at Training Attention is also a shareholder

of Genius Within so it is like having 'sister companies'.

In terms of setting up a business, there are some very helpful things you can do, such as joining your local chamber of commerce and attending their free courses in business law and marketing. I do sometimes feel like I'm spending all my time in administration and drowning in the proverbial red tape, but this is usually only when dealing with HMRC!

I would advise anyone setting up an e-commerce site to spend a lot of time

reviewing other people's websites and getting a feel for what's out there. It will help you to be really clear about what you want before you start spending money. My web developers have given me a lot of good advice but I wish I'd done more research personally.

**You're an occupational psychologist, but obviously the areas you are practising in are traditionally associated with educational psychology. How do you ensure you're up to date with the latest theories and empirical evidence?**

This is a tough one for any independent practitioner. Having recently been to the Society's Division of Occupational Psychology Conference and listened to Dr Briner's seminar on evidence-based practice I did come away with a tinge of guilt as to how much reading should be part of my schedule. I have since in fact booked a day out in my diary to go and sit in the Birkbeck library and follow a few multidisciplinary threads. Thanks to the DOP organising online access to occupational psychology journals I really have no excuse now! But as you rightly point out, my own discipline isn't always helpful, so I have to look elsewhere.

As an organisational member of the British Dyslexia Association I have access to their journal which gives a broad picture of recent research. I also work with the Dyslexia Research Trust at Oxford, who explore the neurobiology of dyslexia and keep me up to date there. Charities like DANDA provide excellent CPD, and chatting to other psychologists on forums is useful. However, most research is still aimed at improving literacy and working with children. Occupational psychology research rarely delves into dyslexia and its effect on talent management, work performance, HR policy, psychometrics. A fantastic survey conducted by the Cass Business School in 2009 identified that whilst only 1 per cent of corporate managers were dyslexic, 35 per cent of entrepreneurs were. Now surely that should be interesting to Occ Psychs working in creativity and leadership development? Any academics interested researching within my client base, please contact me!

I also think academics have a

responsibility to make research more practical and readable. Implications for practitioners, digests, conferences with interactive seminars to build conversations between practice and research are all useful. As well as practitioners worrying about reading recent research, surely researchers should be worrying about researching current practice?

**As a fairly isolated practitioner, how do you access general and social support in your career?**

Actually I don't think of myself as isolated. I have two fantastic business partners and a team of wonderful web developers. I also have 15 associate coaches who are all at differing degrees of expertise in different fields, we take turns to run CPD days for each other. Working in large organisations was more isolating to me – I didn't have anywhere near the amount of trust and respect for my selected colleagues as I do for those I have selected myself. I feel free of the constraints of needing to 'manage' others or being 'managed'. My colleagues are simply other adult professionals with

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## Making a difference to the healthcare sector

**Maria Kordowicz on setting up her own consultancy**

I left school to work in retail management, but kept focused on my ambition to study psychology at university. So, at a young age, I learned that I was good at organising people and services. I also developed a passion for getting things right for clients.

On graduating with a First from the University of Westminster, I embarked on what I thought would be a straightforward clinical psychology career. It began, as for many other graduates, working as an assistant psychologist in the NHS. It was a very rewarding post, but I felt increasingly frustrated with what I perceived to be a lack of efficiency in the NHS. I was not making the difference at a strategic level that I wanted to. So a few fascinating jobs in healthcare management later, I decided to establish a consultancy organisation which would do just that – improve the way the healthcare sector is managed. Today I am the Director of Akord People, and so far every day has been immensely enjoyable.

Our ethos at Akord People is to be person-centred. The roots of this lie in the

interest I developed in Rogerian theory whilst still at university, but the desire to centre on the person also comes from my first-hand experience of working in the healthcare sector. Many times, I came across a frustrated, over-stretched workforce and saw the huge benefits of leadership and strategy that take into account the particular needs of healthcare professionals. We focus on the best ways to develop people because we can only improve the quality of patient services if there is an effective workforce. I am very lucky to have a passionate, strong team behind me with senior clinical and board expertise in mental and physical health services.

What I love most about my work is the way it challenges me to constantly adapt to new situations and projects. We work with such a range of healthcare organisations, from both the public and private sectors, that the need to understand their culture is

key to making our consultancy services responsive and effective. One day I may be designing targeted flyers for a local dental practice, the next working on the implementation of smoking cessation services across a huge NHS Trust. Having to teach such diverse workshop groups means

that I am constantly developing new ways to make our solutions accessible and usable in specific circumstances. For instance, our communication skills

workshops use a variety of team-building games that get our clients using their new-found communication strategies straight away. No working day is the same.

My psychology background is a definite asset in the work I do. I believe it makes me more sensitive to the subtleties of the organisations that I work with. Furthermore, if there is one key thing that I learned during my degree, it is that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach. Whilst certain frameworks and models in management

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whom I associate. I choose to take part in social events and development with a collective of willing enthusiasts.

What I do see as the downsides is the risk that I run every day in supporting my own income. I can't have off weeks or a bad month. I have to be on top of it all the time or the clients won't come our way. My colleagues are spread thinly around the country. There's no sick pay and there's no one else setting a direction to follow. High levels of freedom also equals high levels of responsibility. I have to be very disciplined about work-life balance, turning the Blackberry off at weekends, that sort of thing. Fortunately my husband is also a workaholic and my six-year-old twins don't take no for an answer, so breaks are enforced and no one minds a laptop open in the evening.

#### Have you come across many psychologists with dyslexia?

Not as many as I would like! Perhaps the path to psychological careers restricts those with weaknesses in procedural learning and linear thinking. Sadly this means we are also limiting our access to those with genius level skills in perceptual reasoning and innovative ideas.

consultancy do save time, I believe in identifying the unique factors that have the potential to make our clients outstanding. During my career, I have continued to study. A couple of masters' later, I am working towards a PhD in Health Services Research. Consultancy is such a varied, fast-moving world that it's important to keep abreast of the latest findings.

If you're thinking about setting up your own business you must be aware of the risks, but I've never regretted my choice. If you are someone who wants to make a difference, but is realistic about the huge workload running your own company entails, I believe that consulting is a great platform from which to share your expertise. Adaptability is key. The healthcare sector is undergoing huge restructuring; my current role is ensuring that Akord People offers solutions that are helpful to our clients at this time of immense upheaval. And, as psychologists, we are in an ideal position to help organisations deal with such challenges.

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#### Does dyslexia have a specific impact upon careers in psychology?

One previous client of mine was in supervision as part of studying to be a psychotherapist. He was having difficulty communicating with his supervisor, who would send out written questions that he didn't understand and was rarely available to discuss them in person. She also was very deadline conscious and made little allowances for lateness. When my client asked her for help in adapting their relationship to accommodate his dyslexia, she told him that his dyslexia was not responsible for his issues and that instead he should seek therapy for his narcissistic personality disorder! Failure to appreciate the potential impact of dyslexia on everyday relationships, managing appointments, prioritising workload and planning paperwork will affect anyone in any career. Most careers paths allow dyslexics to thrive at the top and struggle at the bottom. Entry-level roles place a higher value on admin and procedural tasks, senior roles value strategic thinking and complex reasoning.

Many managers, therapists and indeed psychologists will have clients or staff who appear chaotic and unmotivated, but their underlying dyslexia could be to blame. It's important to educate people in responsible positions, so that we can avoid dyslexics at work being characterised as 'not trying' – just like they were in school 30 years ago. Simple changes to the way we manage communication, such as sending text message reminders rather than expecting a client to remember a verbal appointment confirmation, can make all the difference in rapport.

#### Do you think Genius Within represents the end point of your own entrepreneurial road?

I doubt it, although Genius Within has got lots of potential for spin-offs. The amount of ideas we have far outweighs what is currently on the site, we are developing new ones all the time.

An internet business suits my family needs more than a consultancy role at the moment, but that won't always be true. In my occupational psychology career so far I have also developed strong ideas about unemployment and career agency, organisational development and learning, and cultural change. When my children started school and I had more time to think I experienced a little 'creative burst'. I chose Genius Within to develop first and I have a list of other plans that may or may not get hatched in the future. I think being an entrepreneur is a fairly stable personality trait so expect to see more...

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