

# *Primary Industry Training Organisation Diversability*

Adults with dyslexia often hide in the shadows, afraid of being ridiculed. But recognising that a significant number of their potential workforce was struggling, the Primary Industry Training Organisation (Primary ITO) developed a programme to provide support for staff and trainees with dyslexia and other learning differences.

Worldwide, an estimated 10 percent of the population has dyslexia. Unofficial estimates double that figure within the primary sector, as people with dyslexia often gravitate towards sectors where they can succeed despite learning challenges.



Seeing the need, Primary ITO developed a wrap-around support package to support trainees and staff with dyslexia as part of a wider initiative of supporting trainees with low literacy and numeracy. The Primary Industry Training Organisation manages industry training in the primary sector, with up to 18,000 trainees in the agriculture, horticulture, equine and food processing industries. Approximately 200 people work for Primary ITO in offices around the country.

National Specialist, Literacy and Numeracy Michael Styles says there is a widely established literacy and numeracy problem right across the New Zealand workforce. The fact it's bigger in the primary sector impacts on the uptake and completion of training, errors and quality management in the workforce, and has a negative impact on productivity.

"The goal was to support trainees through their industry training, so they could get qualified and move on in their careers," he says.

"Support for adults with dyslexia and other learning differences has benefitted both our own employees and the trainees for whom we facilitate training. Sadly, adults with dyslexia often hide in the shadows, for fear of ridicule. Most have underachieved at school and many are under the erroneous belief that they are 'slow learners'. At Primary ITO, we screen these folk to establish that they are dyslexic and provide them with quality information about their condition. We are able to reassure them that they learn differently and are capable of achieving as well as non-dyslexic people. This is both empowering and transformative for them."

Based on best-known international practice, the support programme includes:

- Screening trainees to confirm (or otherwise) dyslexia
- Provide those who screen positive with information about both the challenges and positive features of dyslexia
- Coaching to encourage trainees to own the condition, as opposed to hiding it
- Providing quality information about dyslexia to all those who come in contact with the trainee including their tutor, employer, supervisor and sometimes family members and friends
- Accessing technological and personal support

Michael says the programme has dramatically changed people's lives.

"It is fabulous to know that you are not of low intellect, rather your brain is wired differently."

Says Corey Juffermans, "It has transformed my learning – and my life, I just wish I had met Karen [the staff member who screened him] 20 years earlier."

Margaret, an Invercargill-based staff member, says Primary ITO has allowed her to work in her own style.



"Because of this I am able to manage my role within the organisation at the highest level. I feel that I am always on top of my work and get the same outcome as my colleagues who are in the same role and I'm never disadvantaged. My manager understands how to support me. Primary ITO has shown me that diversity and individuality are an asset to them and myself. They are supportive with training internally and externally," she says.

The Senior Leadership Team fully supports the initiative, and has committed to Primary ITO becoming a dyslexia-friendly organisation, with the logo advertising the fact proudly displayed on training manuals and resources. Support for staff and trainees with dyslexia and other learning differences is part of the organisation's culture.

Senior leadership has facilitated involvement in a major research project with other education providers to determine the effectiveness of the initiative and work towards a better future for those in the workplace with dyslexia.

Michael says the initiative has had a positive effect across the whole institution and has the potential to change the industry.

"What is good practice for people with dyslexia is good practice for all readers. Providing support for our own staff and for trainees with dyslexia and other learning differences has served to change the culture of our organisation. Primary ITO is an education and training institution and our goal is assist people to be as successful as they can possibly be."

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