

DYSLEXIA AWARENESS

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Case study from Air Photo Services

Introducing Air Photo Services



Air Photo Services (APS) is a small specialist limited company, and a family business, which was established in 1990. We provide interpretation of aerial photos, satellite imagery and Lidar data for planning, heritage, environmental and legal projects in the private and public commercial and research sectors as set out at www.airphotoservices.co.uk. It is run on a for-profit consultancy model in a commercial work environment. The past decade has seen great expansion of our team, and our products and processes, and we work routinely now as a part of larger teams delivering ES reports for major infrastructure projects.

Our products rely on

- technical ability
- attention to detail
- open mindedness and open discussion of professional issues and challenges – advanced and sometimes contentious but respectful professional discussion
- awareness and evaluation of, and complete engagement with, fast moving

technical developments in a commercial environment

- clear communication between different roles and responsibilities
- learning from mistakes and mis-communications and accepting our own fallibilities
- reading and documenting our processes so they are accessible and standardised
- supported independent working



Chris paying some serious attention to detail



Preparing for in person training, pre-CV19

We try, and are always trying, to improve our working environment so that everyone works to their strengths ...

- clear client management
- being calm and focussed enough to think clearly and logically; and
- accurate and flexible report writing, often to short timescales

The above requirements are perfectly clear and attainable to someone who is

- confident in their own ability
- able to read, write and process information which is presented in a complex and 'standard' manner
- confident to ask and be instructed if they do not understand the process or has difficulty with any concepts or tasks; and
- relaxed in their approach to their work, and able to interact freely with colleagues in a supportive environment

Since 2016, we have formed and expanded a team consisting of

- Director
- associate
- GIS Technician
- QA provider and PA/admin
- trainees on different levels
- experienced assistance with specific processes and external specialists; and
- projects co-ordinator

We are currently working as a reduced team, fully remotely, due to CV19.

Our approach to inclusivity and openness

Our approach to inclusivity and openness in the workplace is discussed below and we have tried very hard – and sometimes not attained our goal and have definitely learned from experience – to develop an inclusive and effective team to address what is a rather specific and complex job.

We try, and are always trying, to improve our working environment so that everyone works to their strengths with support in areas which may be considered to 'hold back' or even 'disenfranchise' or 'stigmatise' any individual who may have a non-standard route into our profession and has, for example

- dyslexia
- dyscalculia
- attention deficit issues (ADD or ADHD)
- anxiety – often caused by the perceived

negative attributes of the above

- some forms of high-functioning autism, such as Asperger Syndrome (AS); and
- a very clear, well developed, often technical skill or ability, which is a valuable asset to our team

I am highly aware, by direct family experience, of the multiple issues facing people who have a non-standard approach to work, or who have specific abilities which are not best enhanced or empowered by standard approaches to education, training, reading and communication. I believe, through experience, that people should be empowered and have the confidence to discuss issues such as dyslexia, right from the outset of their job application process. This places the onus on the candidate, possibly with external support if needed, at the invitation of the recruiter, to discuss, appropriately and in confidence, any issue which may require reasonable adaptation to their needs, both at interview and in the workplace.

With assistance from the HR Dept, Dr Raphael, our experienced heritage PA, and staff members with dyslexia or similar issues, we have created very specific job descriptions to ensure inclusion.



HS2 remote team celebration, completion of Phase 2b remote sensing project 2019

Recruiting staff

We began our recruitment by taking professional HR advice from HR Dept Ltd and the advice of a consultant, Dr Vicki Raphael, then of Inclusion East CIC (IE), who is also an experienced archaeologist, parent and carer to a disabled adult, and a specialist in enabling and inclusion issues at work.

All job applications are subject to the same assessment and scoring criteria which identify candidates who best match the job description. We also undertake practical project experience on the interview day for selected candidates. This can possibly be daunting, but also enriching and very informative both ways and this is why we ask if there are any access or other needs.

Impact of not being open about disabilities

It is clear that the worst case scenario as a manager is to be presented with a situation where a team member has not been able to access and understand instructions or has introduced a series of avoidable errors into their written and recording work which affect deadlines, productivity and team cohesion and morale – it affects everyone. If dyslexia or similar is not declared, or acknowledged, this leads to a series of extremely damaging issues which affect the self-esteem and ability of the employee and the productivity of the business. It causes major stress and often conflicts, all round.

This is a major 'lose-lose' situation which leads to

- anger
- management difficulties

- frustration
- anxiety
- tangible health and wellbeing issues such as stress and illness
- fear of, or actual, job loss; and
- career impedance and inability to ask for or attain assistance

Adapting our recruitment process

With assistance from the HR Dept, Dr Raphael, our experienced heritage PA, and staff members with dyslexia or similar issues, we have created very specific job descriptions to ensure inclusion. These specifically invite the candidate to declare any different abilities, inclusion issues or needs and discuss these in an appropriate manner at interview. It goes like this:

Air Photo Services is an Equal Opportunities employer. All applications are judged on the relevant skills and experience of the candidate, and not by gender, sexual orientation, different ability or perceived disability, marital status, religion, belief, age, nationality (other than where work permits may be required), or ethnicity. You must meet the requirements to live and work in the UK which have been set by UK Visas and Immigration within EU regulations. Reasonable adaptations will be made at interview and in the workplace for candidates and employees who are differently abled but meet the skills criteria for this position – please let us know in confidence how we may assist you at interview or at work.

It is vital that this 'screening' and 'opportunity to declare and discuss' is undertaken, as the company needs the candidate to be able to confidently fulfil the job description as well as being relaxed, open, and able to adapt and accept adaptation and assistance to fulfil their potential. How they do this, however, is negotiable, and done in consideration to any *appropriate and possible* adjustments we can realistically and sustainably make. Our HR advisers strongly stated that if a 'disability' is undeclared and unacknowledged (as is often the case due to fear or lack of confidence engendered by a previous experience) then the person must be treated in a standard manner, whilst being offered appropriate choice to undertake employee assistance or a workplace health assessment to identify any needs and adaptations. Employee assistance and workplace health assessment span all areas and may be appropriately focussed on assisting the whole team to support a member with dyslexia or similar, to build that person's confidence to develop their professional

abilities. This needs full engagement from the person with dyslexia or similar, and sufficient 'boundaries' in an HR context to determine that the person is able to perform the role without undue strain on the company. Personal preference and confidentiality may also be paramount.

It is possible, in some but not all circumstances, to turn that negative 'lose-lose' mentality into a great business asset, and a 'win-win' situation for our team.

Reasonable assistance and adjustments

Once in post, it is also vital to conduct a regular series of focussed and clear appraisals, formally, with HR support, to assist and document any issues and progress thereafter and refer back to our inclusion advisor if necessary.

The effects of remote working due to CV19, and the potential isolation of individuals has

also led to a number of further adaptations and alterations in communication, which are beneficial in our case, and have enhanced clarity whilst minimising distraction. Lone working with support, in a safe and familiar office, with access to a QA person for review of emails or reports and databases, in an open and interactive manner, and well timed brief personal meetings via MS Teams are very helpful. These are followed up with clear emailed instructions and responses using one platform of communication only.

We have successfully done this with regard to dyslexia, by providing an accepting, professional and supportive environment which has been effective for a former trainee, who has now moved on to a more senior role in HE/Local Government remote sensing, and for our highly skilled GIS technician. The adjustments are not undertaken just for the individual with dyslexia, but for the whole team, to support that individual and take on duties as standard. These include additional QA and other support mechanisms which add to the quality of our products, particularly when dealing with complex databases and long reports. I have also done extensive research about dyslexia, to ensure that I fully understand its effects as I do not have it. To me, successfully accommodating this difference in the workplace is about

- recognition
- acceptance
- support
- boundaries, clear expectations on both sides, and understanding of and compliance with HR requirements and employment law
- clarity of communication and instruction
- appropriate adjustment and consideration; and, most importantly
- being led by the person who has dyslexia, to empower them to succeed and retain control and choice over their own career path

So, on that note, I hand over to our GIS Technician Adam Jarvis, who has single-handedly rescued me from GIS data disaster, and its attendant major distress, on many occasions. Adam presents his case study about his role at APS, which he has developed since 2017, below.



Dyslexia Pic with inverted colour scheme

Adam:
'I can't even begin to tell you how many times it takes me just to log into my computer some days!'

Upon joining Air Photo Services (APS), having colleagues who were also dyslexic gave me a chance to be open about the difficulties I face dealing with GIS Data and put in place some suggestions and ways to limit the errors it could cause. It also meant for the first time being able to really see it from another dyslexic person's point of view and learn more about my own coping mechanisms and hurdles.

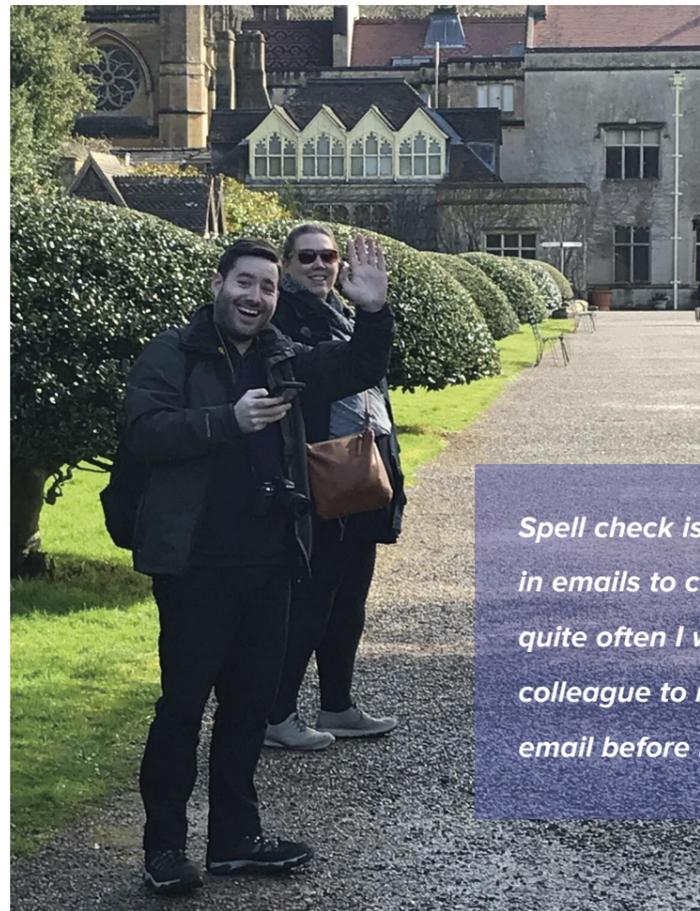
Having been formally diagnosed with a number of neurodiverse attributes (Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)) at college after Learning Support staff noticed and took interest, I was already aware of many of the quirks of how my brain works and developing methods around this. While speech therapy when I was younger covered up a multitude of sins in my ability to read, write and spell, these have been a constant issue for me. It makes me more attentive and dubious about my spelling and

maths when I can't do either! I was also re-tested and given new advice recently when I started to undertake a GCSE evening course which helped me adapt further.

When you deal with data, the last thing you want are transposed letters or numbers but sadly this is my life, however I feel very fortunate that over the last few years have had such a strongly knit team who are willing to chip in to help each other out which is key when you're a small team.

Spell check is my friend in emails to clients, and quite often I will ask a colleague to read my email before I hit send if I'm not sure about the tone. We all get each other to read our work over to pick out erroneous things. Turns out that while others may think it'd be best to keep me away from QA'ing, being dyslexic introduces an interesting dimension to QA'ing for me where I have been known to pull out things nobody else has caught. This coupled with the ASD makes nit-picking a report quite a fun task for me.

How do I handle GIS data which needs very specific and identical entries to classify and



APS team fieldtrip early 2020

Spell check is my friend in emails to clients, and quite often I will ask a colleague to read my email before I hit send



Discussing poster presentation with Darya Grossman at AARG 2019

sort them when I can struggle to even spell them? One of the first things I did in my role as Geomatics Technician was to overhaul how we entered data, a process which continues to be evaluated and refined. Instead of entering everything manually, I realised that the best way to remove the potential of multiple different spellings and issues with copying co-ordinates incorrectly, was to get the computer to do the hard work for us. I introduced coding to the office, which can be difficult for dyslexics however we made it so that it was available in a crib-sheet for people to copy and paste. This way, if it were spelt wrong, it was easily fixable because it would be spelt wrong consistently - find and replace in Excel is a godsend!

Over time we have worked as a team to develop workflows in bullet point form to make it easy to follow, and common phrases and data entries in a spreadsheet so it's a copy and paste job with correct spelling and using built in lists in our shapefiles to prevent errors.

In my time at APS I've given a few presentations. The hardest one was at the ClfA Conference in Brighton. I had an A4 sheet with size 20 bold font, with paragraph size spaces for pausing and emphasis. I had to tweak my prompt sheet from everyone else's so I could use it and I still stumbled over a few words and skipped a bit here or there. I even spoiled the punchline of a slide by over-excitedly clicking because I put my prompt to click in the wrong place, but I got through it.

The one time it came easiest, I was giving a presentation at the Aerial Archaeology Research Group Conference in Constanta, Romania. I was hoping to rely on having on-screen notes to read but unfortunately the computer was on the other side of the room to the microphone and the presentation was moved along with a clicker. I had to improvise and thankfully I knew the subject like the back of my hand. This allowed me to let go of the mild dread of getting a word wrong or stumbling on reading numbers. Just going with it was probably the most freeing part because I had nothing to get myself stuck on.

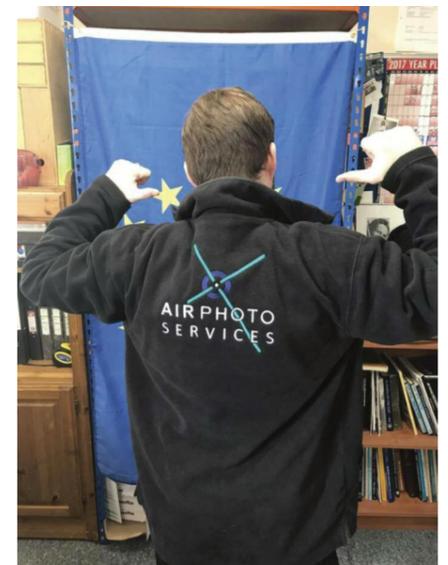
One of the best parts of being dyslexic is the fact that we think differently. I can solve a problem with a dataset or programme because I think outside the box and ask, "what if...?". We have had a few creative approaches to technical issues over the last few years. Not all went smoothly, however the majority went well enough that the belief and support in my suggestions has continued and given me a much needed confidence boost and given my colleagues the confidence that if there's a problem we can all come together to find a solution.

Training can be difficult, however. Due to the ongoing situation with Coronavirus, I recently took an online Leadership Course. While the content was great and I learned a lot, the course design was not set up to deal with non-neurotypical learners. Background graphics and animations on almost every slide made it incredibly difficult to learn

because there was no option to edit these. Help was available and on several occasions I had to request assistance in understanding what the questions wanted from me by asking for definitions or alternative wording. I'm in the process of giving my feedback which I think is integral for people like myself to open up training resources to people with neurodiversity. The course talked a lot about making sure teams are diverse because it helps with balancing workloads, specialisms and different approaches to problem solving and I believe to achieve these these courses must be accessible to everyone.

Over the last few years working at APS the one thing I've learned is that for me, while my dyslexia is more mild than some peoples, it would never have been possible to progress to dealing with datasets for large infrastructure projects without support and patience from colleagues, but it's also important not to get frustrated with yourself for something you cannot control.

Being given the time to develop new ways of tackling things, being supported enough to know you can ask if you're able, to totally customise my computer set-up to make it easier to work by tweaking colour schemes or adding tints/filters to make reading easier, have all been instrumental in being able to continue to progress without feeling like my numerous wins in the neurodiverse lottery are holding me back.



Adam displaying the branding he designed for APS