

Neurodiversity in law

Lynette Wieland is an Associate in the Health Advisory and Inquests Team at Browne Jacobson and also a member of Browne Jacobson's Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Group, and she was recently appointed as a Social Mobility Ambassador for the Law Society.

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Lynette Wieland is an Associate in the Health Advisory and Inquests Team at Browne Jacobson. Her role involves advising healthcare providers and commissioners on their obligations under the Care Act, the Mental Health Act and the Mental Capacity Act, including providing guidance as to best interests, deprivation of liberty and funding disputes. She also manages and represents healthcare trusts at inquests.

She entered the legal profession as an awardee of the Law Society's Diversity Access Scheme, which provides LPC sponsorship, work experience and mentoring. Before qualifying, she worked as a paralegal in Browne Jacobson's clinical negligence team.

In addition to her earning role, she is also a member of Browne Jacobson's Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Group, and she was recently appointed as a Social Mobility Ambassador for the Law Society.

In her free time, Lynette is generally found hiking, baking or on her spin bike. She also enjoys travelling and takes regular trips (when she can) with a couple of friends from different parts of the world. They met whilst travelling solo around Australia just before she started her training contract.

What does being neurodivergent mean to you?

I see neurodiversity as a variation in my cognitive functioning and the way information is processed, which is different to what is considered 'typical'. It is a combination of strengths and challenges, which are now successfully managed with workarounds and reasonable adjustments designed to level the playing field. To be honest, I am reticent to use the term 'typical' as I think everyone is different in their own way and everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses.

When did you discover that you had a neurodivergent condition/s?

In my second year of university, I noticed it was taking me a long time, hours in fact, to read textbooks and academic articles. I visited the student disability team, who ran a preliminary diagnostic test for dyslexia. Following a full assessment, I was found to have Dyslexia, Dyscalculia and Irlen Syndrome. Irlen Syndrome is a perceptual processing disorder, meaning that it relates specifically to how the brain processes the visual information. This affects processing of words on the printed page as well as wider activities involving depth perception e.g. driving and sports.

These diagnoses allowed me to access reasonable adjustments such as assistive technology and printing credits, as hard printed copies of articles and textbooks were easier for me to read than online equivalents.

These conditions manifested from differentiations in my working and short-term memory, processing speed and ability to handle numbers. Learning about my diagnosis dispelled any preconceived ideas that I had about dyslexia e.g. that it is entirely linked to literacy. It also started me on a journey to find more efficient and direct management strategies to handle these challenges.

Did you change the way you worked or studied after your diagnosis? If so, how?

Fundamentally, I recognised what techniques would help me work more efficiently and handle information better.

I also reflected on what techniques had worked previously and why. When I was a teenager, I read Tony Buzan's books on mind mapping and employed the technique throughout my secondary school exams. Following the diagnosis, I recognised that I responded better to patterns and diagrams, and I started mapping out lectures and dissertation ideas.

As an apprentice, prior to university, I recognised that I could find working processes that allowed businesses function better e.g. I created a file auditing system whilst working at MAPS Learning, an apprenticeship learning provider, that ensured that it continued to meet the criteria for apprenticeship funding from the government. After my diagnosis, I attributed these moments to my creative strengths.

Initially, I had doubts as to whether the law would offer enough creative outlets and opportunities to use the skills I had developed. My diagnosis also brought about a realisation that a legal career might not play to my strengths as it would require an aptitude for working with numbers and data. However, as a very traditional industry, I also saw huge opportunities for reforming processes in the legal world, and so I was satisfied that a career as a solicitor would be a fruitful one.

On reflection, my drive for a multidimensional career is how I have found myself becoming so involved in the D&I Group at Browne Jacobson and appointed as a Social Mobility Ambassador for the Law Society. I have come to realise that it is a very flexible and diverse profession with so many varied opportunities.

Did you disclose your condition/s on your application forms for the jobs that you have had in the past and/or for training contracts or pupillage applications?

Yes, I believed it was a strength and that the right firms would see that. However, the disclosure also came from a desire to reclaim the narrative around dyslexia and how my differences were a benefit rather than a burden. Unfortunately, the diagnosis is often associated with broad generalisations and inaccurate labels e.g. that a person can't read, spell, or write properly.

Whilst the above may be true for some candidates, it wasn't the case for me. It was important to me that firms recognised that I would need support with reasonable adjustments to account for my processing speed issues and deficits with working memory. After all, I just wanted to be the best I could be at work and for the clients I dealt with. I wanted to find the right firm to build a career with, one that would recognise and utilise my strengths, and I saw the conversation as one that needed engagement from both sides from the outset.

Do you believe neurodivergent individuals are prejudiced when applying for training contracts? If so, how?

When applying for training contracts, most firms tended to employ sifting techniques which favoured non-neuro divergent candidates, such as psychometric testing. There were not many firms that didn't use them but, thankfully, there now is a little more choice with more and more firms choosing not to use them.

I applied for training contracts across three recruitment rounds, and the common theme from the rejections I received was that I was not scoring high enough on psychometric tests. This was often the first hurdle before getting anywhere near an interview. I did months of preparation for psychometric tests to improve but, unfortunately, the time pressures meant my scores hovered, at best, around just about average which was often not enough for most firms. They had set the bar at above average to seek out, what they believed to be, exceptional applicants.

As a result of this stumbling block, I wrote an article for the Lawyers with Disabilities Division to raise awareness of this issue titled, "Increasing Diversity for Dyslexics". The key message was supported by the British Dyslexia Association which confirmed on its website at the time "multiple choice and psychometric tests can be very discriminatory for many dyslexic people, although not all."

Primarily, I believed the problems were due to the way the tests are structured; making them less appropriate for candidates with disabilities when compared to other forms of assessment. Their multiple-choice format can be a minefield for some dyslexics. Whilst identifying the right answer is often within a dyslexic's grasp, this style of recruitment makes it much harder to express knowledge in the

time allowed. I knew, that if I was going to stand a chance at becoming a solicitor, I needed to be transparent about my disability and use it as an opportunity to educate firms that were still using psychometric tests in the hope of bringing about a change in the industry.

The year that I successfully applied for a training contract at Browne Jacobson was also a year when psychometric tests were not required. The firm now offers an alternative to candidates who flag certain neurodiverse conditions. As the highest scoring candidate on my assessment day, I felt validated by the firm's flexible recruitment processes and that the playing field was truly levelled.

Have you felt comfortable informing your colleagues of your conditions?

Largely yes, but I must admit, as a junior, I was hesitant to be forthcoming when working with a new colleague or supervisor. I know what it feels like to be frustrated, embarrassed, and humiliated in the context of a disability. These are things we can carry from previous experiences. I preferred to demonstrate what I could do first so that no preconceptions could creep in on first impressions.

Disclosure of my disability has often been prompted by the wish to reclaim the narrative around dyslexia. When I reveal that I am dyslexic, I am regularly met by surprise. By that point, revealing my disability allows me to talk with other colleagues or supervisors about techniques that allow me to perform my best.

Browne Jacobson's receptiveness to my dyslexia and reasonable adjustments have been hugely important. It's much better to have a two-way conversation. Ultimately, I want to be the best I can be at my work, and for the clients I deal with, and at Browne Jacobson, I feel that their supportive and understanding approach means I can be the best I can be.

Tell us about your working day. How do you cope with your condition/s whilst carrying out your job role?

The difficulties I experience with my dyslexia relate to my processing speed and discrepancies in my short-term and working memory. These manifest in ways such as locking myself out of my computer due to forgetting the password and not being able to retain verbal instructions and keeping accurate, contemporaneous attendance notes.

My strategies include:

- Decluttering my workspace (both at home and my inbox)
- Minimising distractions / using noise cancelling earplugs or headphones
- Requesting written instructions
- Printing on green paper (which has become more difficult in lockdown)
- Using a green tinted overlay on my computer screen
- Taking a note of the instructions I'm given
- Using Dragon / automatic dictation software
- Using Read Write Gold software; and
- Recording meetings (with the permission of the attendees).

I also overcompensate in some areas such as organisation by updating colour coded spreadsheets to keep on top of deadlines.

Do you think your neurodivergent condition has contributed to making you a better legal professional? How?

For sure! Neurodiversity feels a bit like a superpower that allows me to see things differently, problem solve, think visually, recognise and pick out trends, and be creative. One of my core strengths is that I am emotionally sensitive to the world, and the diagnosis has allowed me to become extremely self-aware. With that comes a degree of emotional understanding and empathy with others.

If you could give your younger self some advice, what would it be?

Asking for help, whether it be from a teacher, tutor, friend, or careers advisor, doesn't mean that you are stupid or incapable. It means you are stronger than you know and, ultimately, the recognition of weaknesses and an ability to work with feedback will bring about success in time.

Is there anything else you would like to share?

I would advise anyone with a neurodiverse condition to not be afraid to look at what makes you different and your strengths. Be prepared to sell these qualities in applications and at interviews! There is a lot of power in becoming self-aware and having the confidence to communicate strengths and weaknesses. Not only are you being authentic (which will likely help you to feel more validated in your career), but you are giving others around you the opportunity to help you to achieve your best. I appreciate that this can be scary, especially at a junior level.



On the back of disclosing my dyslexia, I have seen some great practice from supervisors. I have benefited from timely feedback, fair management discretion considering my dyslexia, allocation of tasks that suit my strengths, and supervision that focusses on the result, rather than micromanaging the process I use to get there. People haven't always got it right, but disclosure starts the conversation.

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