

Time to talk

Stammering in the workplace

Stammering is thought to affect around one in 100 people of working age. Allan Tyrer looks at the impact it can have on employment and discusses what can be done to support people who stammer, both in recruitment and to meet their potential at work.

Dave Williams



PEOPLE who stammer sometimes have blocks, prolongations or repetitions in their speech. They know what they want to say but can have difficulty getting the words out.

Stammering is not just a speech problem, but also one of negative feelings and thoughts associated with speech. People often 'disguise' their stammering by avoidance, such as changing words or keeping quiet. How much a person stammers can vary greatly from situation-to-situation, and from day-to-day or over longer periods. Different people stammer differently, and in different situations, so one cannot make general

assumptions about 'people who stammer' not being able to take on certain roles. People who stammer are no less intelligent than others and think at normal speed.

Around 1% of the adult population have a stammer – about 380,000 people of working age. It is less common in women; something like 80% of adults who stammer are men.

'Stammering' and 'stuttering' are the same thing; the latter is the term used in the United States. Whilst on terminology, many prefer the term 'people who stammer' (PWS) rather than 'stammerers', because the

former is seen as acknowledging the whole person rather than defining them by the stammer alone.

A common misconception is that stammering is caused by nervousness or lack of confidence. In fact, recent research suggests that stammering has a physiological basis¹. Structural and functional brain differences have been found in PWS, and in some cases a genetic predisposition has been identified. That is not to say psychological factors are irrelevant – far from it. The degree of stammering, including whether a person stammers in a particular situation at all, may be influenced by emotions such as anxiety, or other factors such as tiredness.

AVOIDANCE

A key feature of stammering is avoidance or hiding behaviours. A lot of stammering is 'below the surface' – an 'iceberg' analogy is commonly used. Even when a person sounds relatively or even totally fluent, there may be feelings underneath such as fear, shame and humiliation, leading to avoidance behaviour. Many people employ 'tricks' to try not to stammer openly. They may substitute a different word, use 'fillers' – such as 'well' and 'actually' – stay quiet or avoid a speaking situation. Some may sound confused or hesitant, not very bright, or as not having much to say, through disguising the stammer. Sometimes, even friends and possibly a spouse may not know about the stammer – this is known as 'covert stammering' (or 'interiorised stammering').

Even where a stammer is not covert, very many PWS will have some degree of avoidance, and underlying feelings such as shame. Speech and language therapy will tend to try to encourage a person to be more open about their stammer, perhaps to talk about it with people and to stammer more openly. It is also likely to encourage a reduction in avoidance strategies, for example speaking up where the person would previously not have done so and going into situations they would previously have avoided. Some PWS may find that through getting used to previously feared situations they speak more easily in them.

Other characteristics sometimes found in PWS include a tendency to avoid eye contact, which may be misinterpreted, and also less developed social skills.

EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS

Many PWS will have experienced issues in education, both in the classroom and very likely bullying outside it. Research (so far unpublished) in Australia has found that the more severe the stammer the less likely a person is to go to university, for example. Apart from educational qualifications, PWS may be underemployed because of both negative attitudes of society towards stammering and their own attitudes about their speech and what they think they can achieve, which can itself

Case studies

- A firefighter won a discrimination case in Ohio, USA, where he was turned down for a job because he stammered in the interview⁵. The evidence established that his stammering was less of a problem when he was performing his duties as a firefighter than in everyday conversation, and did not interfere with his performance. He had extensive firefighting and leadership experience and had been rated as 'excellent' by his co-workers.
- The British Stammering Association website includes an article by an air traffic controller⁶. He was allowed to use synonyms for problem words; for example, 'location' rather than 'position'.
- There are teachers and lecturers who stammer⁷. One of the teachers is in a school for young people with behavioural difficulties and writes that while children sometimes tease, 'just as commonly, however, I understand that some students appreciate the expression of humanity in my stammer as a reflection of a real life lived, much akin to their own, often troubled, existences'⁸.
- Another remarkable example is a lecturer in Australia who stammers severely and was voted by students as the top lecturer at his university and 14th in Australia, out of more than 6,000 nominated. A peer review noted that his stammer had improved his teaching. The lecturer sets out some reasons for this and strategies he uses in an article on the British Stammering Association website⁹.

be influenced by social attitudes². In one UK study, 38% of respondents replied that choice of occupation was 'affected a lot' by their stammer, and for 46% it was 'affected a bit'³. The most common examples people gave were not choosing the career they wanted, avoiding jobs that involved telephone work or verbal presentations, and feeling they would not be promoted because of their stammer. There is also evidence of negative views on the part of employers and the general public towards stammering²; and in one international survey of PWS, 67.6% of those responding believed their capabilities had, at times, been misjudged by their supervisors⁴. Harassment in the workplace can also be an issue.

Both employers and PWS themselves may make assumptions about what a person who stammers can and cannot do. However, there are PWS succeeding in a wide variety of jobs, including management, sales and customer service. There are business leaders and senior professionals who stammer. There are PWS in jobs where prompt speech is particularly critical – it depends on the individual's abilities, since different people stammer differently (see the firefighter example in the case studies box above).

STAMMERING AS A 'DISABILITY'

Stammering will very often meet the definition of 'disability' for UK discrimination law purposes. In various cases (some cited below) a stammer has been held to meet the definition, or accepted by the employer as meeting it.

Resources on adult stammering

British Stammering Association (BSA)

- www.stammering.org
- national helpline: 0845 603 2001
- information for employers: www.stammering.org/employers.html

NHS speech and language therapy services

Preferably with therapists specialising in stammering. Contact details from BSA helpline. Other therapists are in private practice.

Courses, training and other resources

- City Lit – www.citylit.ac.uk/stammeringtherapy, a national centre based in London.
- courses using ‘costal breathing’ or neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) – generally not run by speech and language therapists. See BSA helpline or website.
- Talkcoach – www.talkcoach.co.uk, specialises in workplace training.
- altered auditory feedback equipment and software: www.stammering.org/electronic.
- self-help groups and resources: www.stammering.org/selfhelp.html
- public speaking societies: www.stammering.org/publicspeaking.html

However, while some PWS will identify themselves as disabled, many others choose not to do so. Some PWS believe, for example, that by using the term ‘disabled’ they are sending out a message that they are less capable than others, whereas in reality they are as capable as anyone else if given a little more time to speak. A practical result is that if asked by an employer whether they are ‘disabled’ (or even ‘disabled within the DDA definition’), the person may well say ‘no’. A monitoring form, for example, with that kind of wording is likely to significantly under-report PWS.

SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACE

Where an occupational health practitioner is seeking to support a person who stammers in the workplace, one area to look at is the work environment. It can make a big difference if stammering is accepted at work and the individual feels able to stammer openly without being penalised for it. Research with BAE Systems by two speech and language therapists, Anne Ayre and Louise Wright, showed that raising awareness among managers and colleagues could lead to changes within the environment and to a more positive and supportive attitude¹⁰. They have established a company called Talkcoach, which specialises in employment and stammering (and other communication disabilities), and programmes they offer can include training for managers and colleagues of a person who stammers (see box above).

It can be helpful, for example, for managers to

realise that PWS may turn down job or promotion opportunities because of concern about stammering. People who stammer might be encouraged – without being pushed too far, and hopefully on the basis that ‘it’s okay to stammer’ – to go for work and training opportunities that they might be avoiding, if this is something that they should like to do, it could include, for example speaking at meetings, greeting clients, and giving presentations. There is more on work environment, training and development in the British Stammering Association (BSA) booklet for employers, *Recruiting and developing employees who stammer*¹¹.

SPEECH THERAPY

Appropriate speech and language therapy in pre-school years has an excellent success rate in enabling a child to completely overcome stammering. An adult who stammers is likely to always have a stammer, but adults are often able to attain greater ease of speech and communication skills. (It is possible to be dysfluent and still have excellent communication skills¹².) At least as important can be non-avoidance – in other words, going out and participating fully in life. As outlined above, development of a person who stammers can lead to them using more fully the skills that they have, in more demanding situations, and having greater confidence to develop new skills.

Occupational health practitioners will rarely be experts on stammering. The key resource to find out what help is available is the BSA (see box on left). Amongst other things, the BSA can give details of the local NHS speech and language therapy service.

Sensitivity may be appropriate if suggesting a person should get speech therapy. The person has very likely already had therapy and may feel it did not help, or if it did they relapsed. They may read the suggestion as being: “if you don’t improve your speech you’re liable to be sacked”. Not only may they feel that more therapy will be useless, but they may start ‘trying to speak more fluently’ at work which is often counterproductive; the person who stammers may become more worried and conscious about their speech and of the need to ‘perform’, which can make the stammer more severe. Or they may avoid certain activities, for example by contributing less at meetings, so tending to drive the stammer underground. An employee, with a quite severe stammer and who worked in customer services, was told by her manager after she had been on a speech-therapy course: ‘It’s very good that you did the course, but you don’t have to. It’s fine if you stammer.’ She really appreciated this.

However, speech therapy or other approaches will often help if the person wants to work on their speech. Even if the individual feels they were not helped before, therapy will have changed and they may have changed. Also different people find different approaches useful –

they may not yet have found what works for them. Employers often allow paid time off for speech therapy or speech therapy courses, and may pay the cost of a course.

Therapy is not necessarily about 'getting fluent'. Different PWS will have different goals, which may change in therapy. A person may go into therapy hating the stammer and wanting to be rid of it, and then move towards accepting it, not avoiding situations, and stammering openly but with ways to help control it.

Some PWS are helped by altered auditory feedback (AAF). The person's voice is played back into their ear with a slight delay and at a different pitch. Access to Work grants can be available for these devices – though the person needs to try them out first to see whether they are helpful. There are also AAF software and 'apps' for computers or mobile phones, and a device aimed at landlines. It is preferable to have a speech and language therapist supporting the person who stammers in using AAF.

ADJUSTMENTS IN THE WORKPLACE

There are many adjustments that may help PWS. However, people are different, and it is important to discuss with the individual any problems they have and what would be helpful to them.

A person who stammers may be wary of asking for adjustments. They may have difficulty discussing and being open about their stammer, so employers initiating conversations on stammering should do so with sensitivity. Also they may not be used to people being willing to make adjustments for stammering, so it could be helpful to stress the employer's willingness to do what it can. The following are just a few examples of adjustments. (See www.stammeringlaw.org.uk/ra for further examples.)

PWS often find using the telephone particularly difficult. If the employer has a set script, such as what to say when picking up the phone, this could be adjusted to something the individual finds easier to say. It might be agreed that other people answer the phone, so only calls for the individual are put through to them. Other possibilities include allowing them to make phone calls in a quieter area or at a quieter time, and allowing some private phone calls to a friend, fellow course participant, or the BSA helpline to 'limber up' speech before making a more difficult call. AAF, as discussed above, is another option. PWS may also make more use of email.

Open-plan offices can be a particular issue. Some PWS find it more difficult speaking on the telephone if work colleagues can overhear. Ideas here include allowing use of a separate room for phone calls; if nothing else is available this could be the manager's office when the manager is out. The PWS might – always assuming they want this – be given a relatively isolated part of an open-plan office, such as a corner.

Meetings are another obvious area. It may help for the chair to discuss in advance with the person who stammers how to handle these. The practice of participants introducing themselves in turn round the table is often a particular problem – it may be easier for PWS to go first. Also a person who stammers may find it difficult to break in and speak at meetings; the chair might discuss with them in advance any arrangements to bring them in.

One person who stammers, rather than giving an oral presentation to meetings, emails the written material to attendees in advance and then answers people's questions on it at the meeting. Other techniques on presentations include adequate preparation, putting much of the information on PowerPoint slides so that pressure is taken off communicating it orally, or having a colleague help with speaking. Some PWS join public speaking organisations, like Toastmasters International or The Association of Speakers Clubs, to get practice and gain confidence.

As regards courses, in one tribunal case an employer was held, on the facts, not liable for breach of the reasonable adjustment duty in relation to a Business Basics course¹³. A person who stammers on this course had been allowed not to read out notes about himself and not to take part in a role play, but had not been excused from giving comments on issues arising from the role play.

RECRUITMENT

Again there is much one could say about recruitment and promotion but this article will pick out just a few points (further examples are available at www.stammeringlaw.org.uk/ra). This area could benefit from research on how best to reconcile concerns of recruiters and the needs of PWS, in order to develop good practice.

A key point is not to make assumptions about what a person can or cannot do if they have a stammer. As mentioned above, PWS are found in a very wide range of jobs and one needs to look at the individual's capabilities.

The most obvious adjustment is extending the interview time, which may involve having the interview last in a session so it can run on as required. It is also a good idea for interviewers to brief themselves on points to bear in mind when talking with someone who stammers. For example, it is preferable to maintain natural eye contact rather than looking away when someone is stammering. The BSA booklet gives more guidance¹¹.

However, that may not be enough. An issue pointed up in tribunal cases (eg *Yaqub v Calderdale Council*¹⁴ and *HM Land Registry v Wakefield*¹⁵) is that some PWS may give only limited responses at the interview, either because of the severity of the stammer, or through avoidance where the stammer does not sound severe. For example, the individual's responses may not give

CONCLUSIONS

- **Stammering** has a physiological basis, but can vary from one day or situation to another. Avoidance is often an issue
- **Issues** of therapy need to be approached sensitively; however, communication and taking on greater challenges can be helped by speech therapy or other approaches, and by a supportive environment. 'Trying to be fluent' is often counter-productive
- **Adjustments** can be beneficial including for phone calls, meetings, and open-plan offices. 'Altered auditory feedback' helps some people who stammer and may be eligible for Access to Work grants
- **Stammering** varies greatly between people, and does not necessarily exclude someone from any particular role – it is down to individual abilities. A person may be dysfluent while having excellent communication skills
- **Communication** problems in a job interview do not necessarily mean there will be similar problems in a particular work situation, even a stressful one

enough in-depth experiences and examples to put them on a level playing field with others. Examples of possible adjustments to consider include allowing written answers if the person wants that – at least three tribunal cases have looked at this, with varying results: *Yaqub v Calderdale Council*¹⁴, *Yaqub v Bradford Council*¹⁶, and *HM Land Registry v Wakefield*¹⁵ – and not marking the person down if they do not say something that is already in their application.

As graphically illustrated by the Ohio firefighter case⁵ above, one cannot assume that communication difficulties in a job interview will reflect how PWS will speak in a job situation, even in a more stressful or 'difficult' situation. (The Employment Appeal Tribunal did say in *HM Land Registry v Wakefield* that an employer was 'surely entitled to regard an interview as a valuable tool in assessing how a candidate for promotion may react in a more confrontational setting'¹⁵. However, this was not based on evidence addressing the point, which could be brought in a future case. See the BSA's view on the issue.¹⁷) Possible ways to assess oral skills required for the job include a specific skills test or looking at work history, though both have issues to watch out for.

Presentations are often required as part of the recruitment process and can obviously be an issue for PWS. Extra time is one possibility, but perhaps the person could produce a written piece instead. How far will oral presentations really be required for the job (after any reasonable adjustments) and in the actual job will the person have more time to prepare?

Stammering is a condition that is often misunderstood and indeed sometimes ridiculed. Whilst stammering may give rise to issues at work, there are PWS who are very successful in their careers. There is a great deal of scope to support PWS to reach their full potential in the workplace. ■

Allan Tyrer is a non-practising solicitor who stammers, and has a website at www.stammeringlaw.org.uk. He is also magazine editor and webmaster for the British Stammering Association. Any views expressed here are those of the author.

Notes

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- 14 *Yaqub v Calderdale Council (2003)*. Employment tribunal, 1806514/02. See: www.stammeringlaw.org.uk/cases/calderdale.htm
- 15 *HM Land Registry v Wakefield*. [2008] UKEAT 0530_08_1712. Summary at www.stammeringlaw.org.uk/cases/landreg.htm, which includes the employment tribunal decision.
- 16 *Yaqub v Bradford Council (2006)*. Employment tribunal, 1803090/05. See www.stammeringlaw.org.uk/cases/bradford.htm
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