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NCC Conversations: My life with Dyslexia

As part of our Inclusion and Diversity programme here at NCC Group, we introduced our NCC Conversations series to help us to drive dialogue around a number of important topics that our colleagues care about.

In September, we turned the spotlight to dyslexia as part of our focus on neurodiversity where Robin Southern, security consultant at NCC Group, wrote a blog on how dyslexia and short term memory loss impacted his childhood and helped him on his journey to where he is now.

We hope you enjoy Robin's blog as much as we did...

Some people think being dyslexic means seeing "wrods liek tihs". That's not always true. Dyslexia comes in many different shapes and sizes. Mine is quite mild, and mostly involves numbers.

Throwing things back 37 years, to when I was a very young child, my development was considered slower than usual. I learned to speak at a later stage, and it was found that my capability to form memories was quite poor.

In a bid to encourage me, my father used to sit us down and play memory games. This involved a set of cards, blank on one side with symbols on the other. Each time they were shuffled, I had to memorise the order of the cards and repeat them back to him.

It was only when I went to school, that I was officially diagnosed with dyslexia and poor short term memory. Because of this, I was taken out of some lessons to sit with a dedicated tutor who would help me with my reading. Consequently, this meant that I missed out on a number of vital lessons growing up.

When it was time for me to move into junior school, my parents and my teacher had agreed together that I hadn't developed as much as the other children, and therefore wasn't ready to move on. So, I stayed behind a year. Although being the oldest kid in the school and being the third fastest in racing definitely had its benefits!

When I moved to juniors, I skipped year three, and went straight into year four. Once again, I was with kids of my own age. I still had extra lessons, but with my poor memory, and dyslexia, I struggled to understand how to do division, or what the difference was between a noun and a verb.

At around this time, I was given my first computer for Christmas. A glorious Acorn Electron. I seemed to have an unnatural ability for a child of my age to work and understand computers. I learned to program quite quickly by copying code from books and modifying it.

My "dyslexia" had almost completely gone before I moved to secondary school. And although I could read fine, my poor memory and ability to focus

didn't help me much with my grades. That said, anything that involved technical or computer skills, I was able to master.

Thankfully, I passed secondary school, and was able to get into college. As with every teenager, you want money. So, I got a job at the local Tesco as a cashier. My dyslexia popped up again, but this time, with numbers. Sometimes I would read out numbers incorrectly, or get confused with symbols. I had to really concentrate when reading out the total cost, if I got distracted or flustered – it would come out wrong. At this time, I remember vividly, that I finally understood that seven had a different numerical value to eight. In time, I finished college, and got my degree in computing. Later I studied for my masters, then switched to physics.

About five years ago, my mother found out that all my life, I'd struggled with something called "Visual Snow". I assumed everyone had it! For me, when it is dark or when I close my eyes – my vision is covered in static noise like what you sometimes get from a TV. It is different from "eye floaters" or other eye phenomenon as it's to do with the brain. Another side-effect from the dyslexia/poor memory duo.

Fortunately enough, I have been hired by NCC Group.

Sadly, I must do the one thing I dislike the most, reporting. With 30 years of programming under my belt, and a dyslexia ridden brain, what I type out is often referred to as "word soup". Typically, I have to re-edit the paragraph a few times before it reads right – if it reads right. I get confused a lot between "a" and "an" as well as "they" and "the" and have to say the vowels out loud in order to figure out which one is right, I also struggle with putting too many commas in sentences.

Although my vocabulary knows all the "big fancy" words, I tend to repeat my sentences a lot with the simpler words, probably after years of training to get it right. Thankfully, I use the NCC VulnDB a lot to base the text on something that sounds more professional, mixing sentences from different findings so it fits. If I have to write out a finding from scratch, it takes me a long time.

I have also written a few pieces of software to help with my spelling, some of which I use daily. I have been looking into text prediction using markov chains trained against Vuln DB reports, to help me write better.

My poor memory still troubles me sometimes, if I'm extra busy, or there are distractions around me, I find it incredibly hard to focus on a particular task. Working from home over lockdown has helped, with less distractions going on – I can focus and remember things better.

If I'm doing a code review, I have a system where the moment I find something, I will create a text file to dump the code and file information, from there, I just type as fast as I can what my brain is thinking at the time. Of course, being a brain dump, I have to read it a few times for it makes sense again. Although I will remember the finding later on, the meaning of it and context, I will forget.

Typically, I will forget most of the day once it's over, apart from the more interesting bits. I remember almost nothing about my childhood and teenage years, and I have to keep photos around of some relatives to remember what they look like. When I get stressed or distracted, words or numbers can seem wrong, an example of this is the word "push".

Coding however – The dyslexia hasn't gotten into there. I am very good at that, and I am so thankful for that Christmas that I got my Acorn Electron.

For more information on our steering committee members for each of our four Inclusion and Diversity topic areas, and statements that set out our objectives, dedication and commitments to each cause, please visit:

<https://www.nccgroupplc.com/careers/inclusion-diversity/>

About NCC Group

NCC Group exists to make the world safer and more secure.

As global experts in cyber security and risk mitigation, NCC Group is trusted by over 14,000 customers to protect their most critical assets from the ever-changing threat landscape.

With the company's knowledge, experience, and investment in research and innovation, it is best placed to help organisations assess, develop and manage their cyber resilience posture.

With circa 2,000 colleagues in 12 countries, NCC Group has a significant market presence in North America, Europe and the UK, and a rapidly growing footprint in Asia Pacific with offices in Australia, Japan and Singapore.

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