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Study shows stronger links between entrepreneurs and dyslexia

By Brent Bowers

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It has long been known that dyslexics are drawn to running their own businesses, where they can get around their weaknesses in reading and writing and play to their strengths. But a new study of entrepreneurs in the United States suggests that dyslexia is much more common among small-business owners than even the experts had thought.

The report, compiled by Julie Logan, a professor of entrepreneurship at the Cass Business School in London, found that more than a third of the entrepreneurs she surveyed - 35 percent - identified themselves as dyslexic. The study also concluded that dyslexics were more likely than nondyslexics to delegate authority and to excel in oral communication and problem solving and were twice as likely to own two or more businesses.

"We found that dyslexics who succeed had overcome an awful lot in their lives by developing compensatory skills," Logan said during an interview. "If you tell your friends and acquaintances that you plan to start a business, you'll hear over and over, 'It won't work. It can't be done.' But dyslexics are extraordinarily creative about maneuvering their way around problems."

The study was based on a survey of 139 business owners in a wide range of fields across the United States. Logan called the number who said they were dyslexic "staggering" and said it was significantly higher than the 20 percent of British entrepreneurs who said they were dyslexic in a poll she conducted in 2001.

She attributed the greater share in the United States to earlier and more effective intervention by American schools to help dyslexic students deal with their learning problems. Approximately 10 percent of Americans are believed to have dyslexia, experts say.

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One reason that dyslexics are drawn to entrepreneurship, Logan said, is that strategies they have used since childhood to offset their weaknesses in written communication and organizational ability - identifying trustworthy people and handing over major responsibilities to them - can be applied to businesses.

"The willingness to delegate authority gives them a significant advantage over non-dyslexic entrepreneurs, who tend to view their business as their baby and like to be in total control," Logan said.

William Dennis Jr., senior research fellow at the Research Foundation of the National Federation of Independent Business, a 400,000-member trade group in Washington, said the study's results "fit into the pattern of

what we know about small-business owners."

"Entrepreneurs are hands-on people who push a minimum of paper, do lots of stuff orally instead of reading and writing, and delegate authority, all of which suggests a high verbal facility," Dennis said. "Compare that with corporate managers who read, read, read."

According to Logan, only 1 percent of corporate managers in the United States have dyslexia.

Much has been written about the link between dyslexia and entrepreneurial success. Fortune Magazine, for example, ran a cover story five years ago about dyslexic business leaders, including Richard Branson, founder of Virgin Atlantic Airways; Charles Schwab, founder of the discount brokerage that bears his name; John Chambers, chief executive of Cisco; Craig McCaw, the cellular phone pioneer; and Paul Orfalea, founder of the Kinko's copy chain.

Similarly, Rosalie Fink, a professor at Lesley College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, wrote a paper in 1998 on 60 highly accomplished people with dyslexia, from a Nobel laureate to a Harvard oncologist.

But Logan said hers was the first study that she knew of that attempted to measure the percentage of entrepreneurs who had dyslexia. Carl Schramm, president of the Kauffman Foundation, which financed the research, agreed. He said the findings were surprising but, he noted that there was no previous baseline to measure it against.

Emerson Dickman, president of the International Dyslexia Association in Baltimore and a lawyer in Maywood, New Jersey, said the findings made sense. "Individuals who have difficulty reading and writing tend to deploy other strengths," said Dickman, who has dyslexia. "They rely on mentors, and as a result, become very good at reading other people and delegating duties to them. They become adept at using visual strengths to solve problems."

Orfalea, 60, who left Kinko's - now FedEx Kinko's - seven years ago, and who dabbles in a hodgepodge of business undertakings, is almost boastful about having both dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

"I get bored easily, and that is a great motivator," he said. "I think everybody should have dyslexia and ADD."

He attributes his success to his difficulty with reading and writing because it forced him to master verbal communication.

"I didn't have a lot of self confidence as a kid," he said. "And that is for the good. If you have a healthy dose of rejection in your life, you are going to have to figure out how to do it your way."

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Danny Kessler, 26, also has dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. He founded Angels with Attitude, which holds self-defense seminars for women. He is a co-founder of Club E Network (www.clubenetwork.com), which sponsors "networking events," runs an online chat room for entrepreneurs and produces television shows about them.

He said he also had low self-esteem as a child, and now views that as a catapult into the entrepreneurial world. "I told myself I would never be a lawyer or a doctor," he said. "But I wanted to make a lot of money. And I knew business was the only way I was going to do it."

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