

Understanding ADHD Strengths and Impairments in the Workplace

Heidi Bernhardt RN

President and Executive Director CADDAC



ADHD is Not Always a Deficit

Some ADHD Traits Can Be Benefits:

- High energy
- Able to think out of the box / problem solving
- Creative
- Able to hyper focus
- Function well in a crisis
- Persistent



Impact on Job Performance

For others at least some of their ADHD symptoms result in impairments in the workplace.

How and if ADHD impacts job performance depends on many factors:

- The type and severity of symptoms
- The suitability of the job to an individual's strengths
- How successfully strategies are being used to offset any weaknesses



ADHD at Work

Since ADHD is a disorder that varies greatly between individuals, adults with ADHD can experience a few minor symptoms, many symptoms or most of the symptoms listed.

However:

- ADHD is a very treatable disorder.
- A variety or both medication and non-medication treatments for those with adult ADHD now exist.
- There is no magic cure or solution for those experiencing difficulties in the workplace.
- Taking time to assess impairments, implementing strategies and asking for accommodations when appropriate can be a significant part of becoming successful in a chosen career.



ADHD Symptoms

How They Can Impact Job Performance



Attention Dysregulation

Attention Dysregulation

- Inability to stay focused during tasks or meetings
- Becoming bored quickly – increasing inattention
- Difficulty switching focus – missed instructions
- Hyper-focussing – forgetting tasks or appointments
- Difficulty following lengthy direction and instructions – only partial instruction processed
- Poor listening skills – coworkers feeling ignored
- Inattention to detail – missing content and errors in reports



Distractibility and Forgetfulness

Distractibility

- External distractions – open office environments – unable to block out extraneous noise
- Internal distractions – own mind wandering

Forgetfulness

- Forgetting schedules, routines, due dates, or tasks
- Unable to remember commitments to supervisor or coworkers – employee seen as untrustworthy



Hyperactivity & Time Management

Hyperactivity

- Unable to sit in meetings for extended periods
- Constant movement, pacing, tapping, leg movement
- Unable to remain seated at desk for extended periods – wandering hallways

Time Management Impairments

- Under estimating time required to complete tasks
- Missing deadlines
- Getting to work on time



Organization and Procrastination

Organization Difficulties

- Difficulty staying on track of larger projects
- Easily overwhelmed with larger assignments
- Misplacing work related documents and materials
- Maintaining an organized work space

Procrastination

- Putting off unpleasant tasks until the last minute
- Late or rushed completion of assignments
- Delayed long term projects or excessive overtime to meet deadlines



Impulsivity

Impulsivity

- Committing to tasks and projects impossible to complete – unwanted as a team member
- Blurting out inappropriate or regrettable thoughts and comments – viewed as thoughtless
- Jumping into projects without a plan – loss of productivity
- Impulsively jumping from job to job – blaming employer and coworkers – lack of insight into own behaviours and impairments



Mood Dysregulation and Relationships

Emotional Dysregulation and Relationships with Coworkers

- Overly emotional to criticism
- Dwelling on perceived slights
- Easily angered and expressing anger inappropriately
- Unable to view situations as anything other than black and white
- Difficulty reading social cues
- Monopolizing discussions, interrupting or being overly blunt
- Making excuses for impairments – blaming others



Steps to Success

Assess Strengths and Weaknesses
Disclosing a Diagnosis
Requesting Accommodations



Assessing Strengths and Weakness

Those with ADHD are not best at assessing their own strengths, or impairments and resulting issues & situations.

Strategies that may help:

- Feedback from a co-worker
- Review copies of past job performance reviews
- Feedback from significant others or family members
- A professional evaluation from a career counsellor, therapist specializing in ADHD or an ADHD
- Assess strengths – which parts of the job do you excel at? What skills are others in awe of?



Questions to Ask

- What parts of your job are easy to accomplish?
- What parts of your job are a constant struggle?
- What issues have resulted in reprimands?
- What changes in environment could help with performance?
- Would more detailed instructions or supervision be of benefit?
- Are certain times of the day more difficult?
- Do certain leadership styles make a difference?



Disclosing a Diagnosis of ADHD

Pros

- Employer may gain more understanding of workplace behaviours – discourage mislabelling of employee as being lazy, irresponsible or uncaring
- Some employment situations require a disability to be reported before accommodations can be put in place

Cons

- May cause employee to be viewed negatively and increase stigma and misunderstanding



Disclosing the ADHD Diagnosis

- Remains a controversial topic and personal decision
- Many employees fear being seen as incompetent, making excuses or asking for preferential treatment
- Employer will need to be educated about ADHD as a medical disability to understand duty to accommodate
- A personal perspective on the benefits or impairments of ADHD will assist the employer's understanding
- Viewing accommodations as a means to greater productivity and a win to both employee and employer is the goal of disclosing



Alternative to Full Disclosure

- Meeting with supervisor to request minor changes in work environment to increase productivity
- Employee should start from a position of strength
- Use the term “I work best when....”
- Use specific examples of how changes will increase productivity – taping meetings will allow minutes to be more accurate and completed faster
- Do not refer to changes as accommodations unless the aim is disclosure



Before Requesting Accommodations

Employees should take time to consider:

- Specific strategies that could increase productivity
- Accommodations that could prove beneficial
- If the accommodations are reasonable – will they negatively impact other employees or the employer
- How accommodations will help to solve past issues with performance or discord with coworkers
- How to word the request from a position of strength



Conducting a Meeting with HR

- Assess the situation /access CADDAC's employer info
- Discuss how increased productivity can be a win/win
- Review symptoms and how they impact job performance
- Discuss which strategies might be most beneficial to implement immediately
- Discuss the possibility that several strategies and accommodations may need to be tried before the right accommodations or perfect mix is found
- Schedule a follow-up meeting to assess process



Tips for Employers

Assess Strengths and Weaknesses
Disclosing a Diagnosis
Requesting Accommodations



ADHD in the Workplace and Human Rights

ADHD and the Ontario Human Rights Commission

- The accommodation process usually begins when someone identifies they need accommodation due to a disability-related need¹.
- It is the responsibility of the person with the disability is to "inform their employers of their needs²

1. <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/minds-matter-report-consultation-human-rights-mental-health-and-addictions/10-duty-accommodate>,
2. <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/disability-workplace-roles-and-responsibilities-fact-sheet>



OHRC's List of Employer's Responsibilities

<http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/disability-workplace-roles-and-responsibilities-fact-sheet>

- Accept requests for accommodation in good faith;
- Request only information that is required to make the accommodation;
- Obtain expert advice or opinion where necessary;
- Take an active role in ensuring that possible solutions are examined;
- Maintain the confidentiality of persons with disabilities;
- Deal with accommodation requests in a timely way, and
- Bear the cost of any required medical information documentation



Tips for Employers

- Understand your legal responsibilities around accommodating disabilities in the workplace
- Educate your self about the disorder
- You may need to initiate the discussion of potential strategies to improve productivity
- Understand that disclosing their ADHD may make the employee feel very nervous, vulnerable and defensive
- If the employee discloses discuss their feelings about co-workers being informed
- Discuss which leadership styles the employee finds best
- Assess whether your own traits are a part of the dynamic



Workplace Accommodations

For Specific Impairments



Accommodations for Attention Dysregulation

- Time of day when most alert for difficult tasks
- Reminders (visual or auditory) to draw back "to task"
- Timer to define periods of concentration
- Mundane & boring tasks rotated with stimulating tasks
- Intrusive reminders for meeting and appointments
- Note taking for lengthy list of instructions
- Use of tape recorder during meetings
- Boring tasks delegated to other employees
- Limit continuous e-mail checking unless required



More Accommodations for Attention Dysregulation

- Scheduled blocks of uninterrupted time during the day where the phone is set on do not disturb and e-mail notification is blocked
- Manager/coworkers to provide a 5 to 10 minute warning when switching of focus required
- Work reviewed for details with manager or co-worker
- Manager and co-workers alerted to difficulties with listening skills – explanation that this is not due to rudeness, but is caused by a medical disorder
- Intrusive thoughts or ideas written down so they do not intrude on attention to task



Accommodations for Distractibility

- Flex-time to facilitate some less-distracting time at work – arriving an hour early
- Working at home part of the time – reports and detail work may be easier to complete while uninterrupted at home
- Noise cancelling headsets or white noise machines
- Use of private offices or conference rooms for periods for highly focused work
- Closing office doors
- Use of sound absorption panels
- Moving office or cubicle to lower-traffic areas



More Accommodations for Distractibility

- Moving inboxes outside of desk space
- Asking all employees to wear headsets when on the phone
- Use of space enclosures (cubicle walls) or face desk away from the line of traffic
- Organization and de-cluttering of work environment and/or redesign of employee's office space to minimize visual distractions – may require help of a professional organizer



5 ways to Focus at Work, From an Executive Who's Struggled with ADHD

- Take the time to look for a job that meshes with the way your mind works
- Whiteboards
 - list everything you need to do that day with timeline, even small tasks
 - small board for immediate responsibilities
 - large for long term responsibilities
 - When other tasks come to mind- add to large board and continue on with current task
- Keep anything that is distractible out of site



5 ways to Focus at Work, From an Executive Who's Struggled with ADHD Continued

- Structure your days
 - Pick a day or specific time for long term tasks – otherwise stick to immediate tasks
 - Find your optimum schedule and don't allow yourself to alter it except for emergencies
- Never multitask during conversations
 - No e-mails, etc.
 - Video conferencing and face t face discussions best
 - Listen for key points the person is making and write them down for a later summary and review
- Have someone else always holding you accountable

[Jack Kosakowski https://hbr.org/2017/09/5-ways-to-focus-at-work-from-an-executive-whos-struggled-with-adhd](https://hbr.org/2017/09/5-ways-to-focus-at-work-from-an-executive-whos-struggled-with-adhd)



Accommodations for Impulsivity

- Develop standard statements to fall back on when asked to commit to projects – need to check schedule
- Note taking of thoughts and potential points to make to avoid blurting out inappropriate or off-topic comments during meetings
- Partnership with a co-worker or supervisor to plan and organize larger projects
- Creation of a time line and list of duties to allow for continued reference
- Time to reflect accomplishments and discuss any continued issues will increase job satisfaction and discourage impulsive quitting



Accommodations for Hyperactivity

- Tasks that encourage movement breaks – walking to meetings / co-workers desk rather than using phone, using stairs rather than the elevator
- Built in structured breaks that allow for movement
- Exercise during lunch
- Taking notes during meetings
- Use of fidget toys, stress balls for intentional fidgeting
- Private workspace where employee will not disturb others by tapping, humming, or fidgeting
- Working from home



Accommodations for Organization

- Use a professional organizer to assist with desk and workplace environment
- ADHD Coach to assist with organizational strategies
- Color-coded system for files and projects
- List of daily, weekly and monthly routine tasks
- Use of “To do” list that can be checked off
- Mentor or co-worker to assist with organization
- Supervision with prioritization of tasks – scheduled bi-weekly meetings
- Assign new project only when previous project is complete, when possible



More Accommodations for Organization

- Limited number of projects worked on at one time
- Gantt or flow-chart charts on times lines for larger projects – especially useful for team projects
- Multitasking may be a strength or weakness – individualized specialized training for continuous juggling of repetitive tasks
- Minimize, streamline, automate, colour code, dictate or delegate paperwork whenever possible
- Remove shame for request of assistance with paperwork – this will prevent the situation from becoming overwhelming for everyone



Accommodations for Forgetfulness

- Immediate action on tasks or immediately written into day timer or on note pad
- Check agenda day timer at routine times a day
- All messages written in a binder and checked at scheduled times of the day
- Use or timers, alerts or beepers
- Follow-up of meetings or verbal instructions with an e-mail or hard copy
- Use of flow charts or cheat sheets for steps of tasks
- Limited use of post-its
- Co-worker as a reference



Accommodations for Procrastination

- Tasks suited to immediate response
- Closer supervision – biweekly scheduled meeting with supervisor to check on progress
- Built in reward system



Accommodations for Emotional Dysregulation

- Feedback from a trusted supervisor, co-worker, or friend to build awareness of monologuing, bluntness, interrupting, and other issues with social skills
- Assist co-workers to understand interrupting, social weaknesses and bluntness as a medical impairment rather than rudeness – apologize
- Assistance employee to view situations as other than black and white
- Breaks to cool down from anger or emotions overwhelming the brain – removal from the situation by going for a walk, coffee or lunch break, working from home for a day or two



More Accommodations for Emotional Dysregulation

- Preparation for formal meetings with a review of performance or criticism to ease employee into highly charged emotional situation
- ADHD Coach to teach social skills and how to pick up social cues
- Optional attendance at social activities
- Encourage all employees to model appropriate social skills
- Supervisory method to better fit the employee's needs



The Keys to Great Strategies

By John Tucker ADHD Coach

- They work for YOU
- They are tied to your strengths
- They take advantage of the resources available