

THE ADHD ADVOCATE

EMPLOYER'S HANDBOOK

A GUIDE TO
UNDERSTANDING
ADHD IN THE
WORKPLACE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ADHD in the Workplace - Part 1

ADHD - The Diagnostic Criteria vs Functional Definition 3

A. Interest-Based Nervous System. 4

B. Emotional Management and Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria 5

ADHD CHALLENGES 6

ADHD in the Workplace - Part 2

ADHD STRENGTHS 8

Contacts 9



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ADHD IN THE WORKPLACE - PART 1

ADHD is a neurobiological condition that is very much misunderstood and underdiagnosed. Fortunately, awareness of ADHD and its unique impact on the brain and associated behaviours are growing and neurodiversity is rapidly finding a place on the workplace agenda. However, a need for education about this unique condition and effective support is essential if employers want to engage and retain their employees with ADHD. This guide is intended to give employers a better understanding of ADHD so that employers are better positioned to not only support, but get the best out of these often very talented individuals.

Let's start with the three main types of ADHD as described by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual ("DSM-5"), which contains the diagnostic criteria for ADHD:

- 1 **Predominantly inattentive**
(re distractability/executive function issues/forgetfulness)
- 2 **Predominantly hyperactive/impulsive**
(re physical hyperactivity/excessive talking/impatience)
- 3 **Combined-type**
(a mix of both inattentive and hyperactive/impulsive)

The problem with the DSM-5 criteria is that it has never been validated for adults. It basically requires an adult to be functioning on the level of an untreated elementary school-aged child in order to meet the criteria. It doesn't take into account the emotional dysregulation element of ADHD or the situational variability of this unique brain wiring. This explains why so many employees with ADHD struggle to get a diagnosis and why those that do are not able to get the understanding and support that they actually need.

Fortunately, expert clinicians that truly understand ADHD in adults have come up with more functional experiential definition like William Dodson MP. William Dodson's description of ADHD certainly aligns with my own experience, both personally and professionally, coaching adults with ADHD both in and out of the workplace.



A. INTEREST-BASED NERVOUS SYSTEM.

According to William Dodson, individuals with ADHD have an "Interest-based nervous system" as opposed to an "Importance-based nervous system".

Employees with ADHD are basically "hard-wired for interest".

William Dodson believes that the performance, mood and energy level of individuals with ADHD are solely determined by the momentary sense of "ICNUP":

- Interest (fascination)
- Challenge (competition)
- Novelty (creativity)
- Urgency (usually a deadline)
- Passion (what's meaningful/brings joy)

This is essentially the fuel for the ADHD brain. Without these elements nothing really happens. This is of course quite a problem in the workplace when employees with ADHD are expected to stand and deliver consistently and on demand... not when they "feel like it".

Employees with ADHD are driven by "FOLI" (fear of losing interest). Boredom for these employees is like what kryptonite is to superman and they will seek to avoid it at all costs, preferring crisis and chaos to no stimulation at all. When engaged however, these employees are instantly energetic, positive and social.

Often *interest* wins over importance (to others), making it very difficult for employees with ADHD to deliver what is expected of them. 90% of jobs are based on second hand importance – essentially the employee is expected to prioritise and deliver on tasks their managers view as important. This is problematic for these bright and innate problem-solvers, who viewing the task as pointless or less important (in terms of impact/progress) struggle to engage.

It also makes decision making very difficult, as importance (to others)/priority don't organise or motivate these employees. This makes conventional systems of planning and organisation (based on importance and time) very challenging.



B. EMOTIONAL MANAGEMENT AND REJECTION SENSITIVE DYSPHORIA

In addition to the obstacles presented by their Interest-based nervous system, employees with ADHD also struggle with emotional dysregulation, in particular Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD) which is one of the most crippling aspects of ADHD and unfortunately the least known, particularly in the workplace.

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria ("RSD") as a concept was developed by William Dodson. Dr Hallowell describes it as ***"the painful syndrome of feeling acute and profound dejection at even the slightest perceived insult or "dis"*** and it is pervasive among individuals with ADHD.

It is not taken seriously in the workplace because it's not recognised as an official trait of ADHD. The DSM-5 (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) doesn't take into account RSD (or any type of emotional dysregulation) in the diagnostic criteria for ADHD. However, through my experience of coaching, practically all of my clients have reported experiencing RSD to varying levels. At times to such an extent that they become so mentally unwell that they have to either go on extended sick leave or quit.

RSD is characterised by the following workplace behaviours:

- **People pleasing**

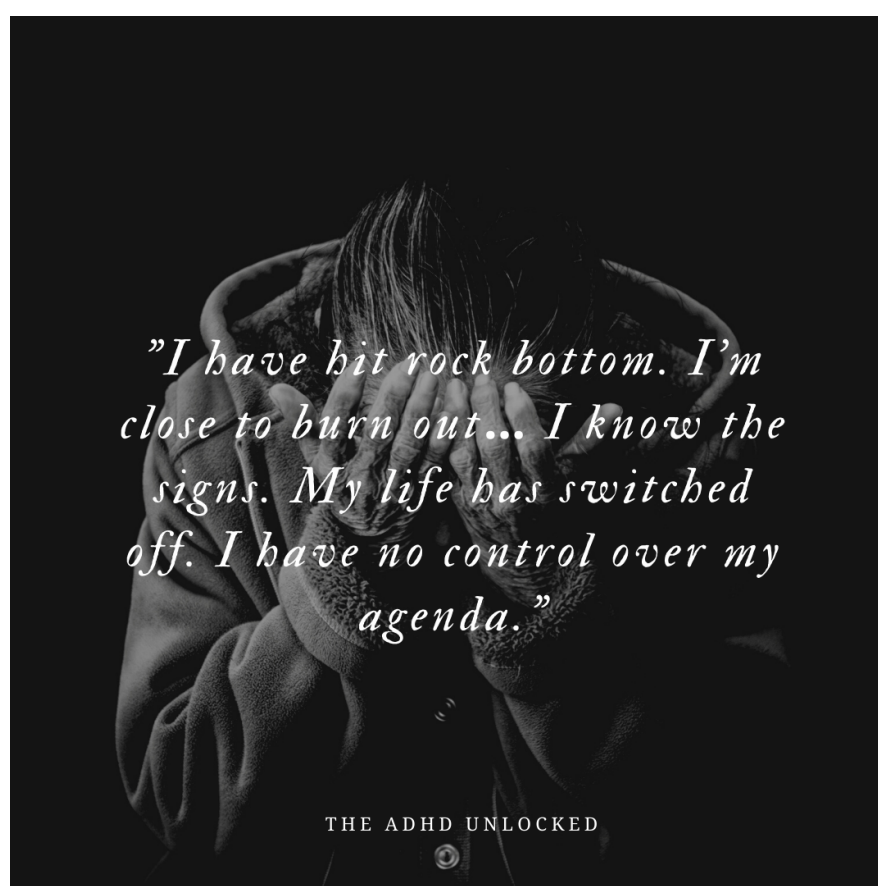
Employees with ADHD lose sight of their boundaries in order to please others. In the workplace this might include working late, taking on extra responsibilities, not delegating, stopping at nothing to meet unrealistic deadlines and not pushing back to unreasonable bosses/clients. Being so scared to upset the status quo employees will far exceed their remit to avoid upsetting anyone or being reproached. It often comes at the cost of burning out.

- **Avoidance**

The fear of failure is so great that employees will avoid anything that takes them out of their comfort zone including asking for a promotion or pay rise, speaking out in meetings, volunteering for the project or client that they want... anything that people do to progress and shine a light on themselves they will avoid. These employees keep their expectations small and themselves small in order to not fail or disappoint.

- **Aggression**

Some employees' sense of self is so delicate that they will stop at nothing to protect it from any perceived threat. They will use attack as the best form of defence, building their walls high and defending anything that even has the vaguest whiff of criticism. When their managers try to give them feedback on an area in which they could improve, they'll immediately retaliate and look to blame external forces. Everything feels personal and pointed.



ADHD IN THE WORKPLACE - PART 3

ADHD CHALLENGES

Here are the top 10 most common ADHD challenges that employees with ADHD struggle with on a daily basis inside and outside the workplace that adversely affect their performance and in some cases, prevent them from accessing work.

10 Lack of Sleep

Employees with ADHD come alive at unconventional times. Often in the evening they will get a burst of energy and feel inspired to take on a new project at home. They also struggle unwinding. This all contributes to a lack of sleep that often has a knock on effect, as lack of sleep exacerbates their ADHD challenges such as their executive function difficulties. It is important that employees with ADHD get the sleep that they need, otherwise they will struggle with less focus, more stress, agitation, impulsivity and more careless mistakes.

9 Managing Expectations and Time Blindness

Employees with ADHD are often not clear about their own expectations and as a consequence fail to manage others' expectations. They are also given to people pleasing and cannot bear to say no and disappoint anyone. They always feel that they need to prove themselves and will often go the extra mile. Add to that their time blindness and they end up over promising and under delivering. Too busy fighting fires, they struggle to keep their managers and clients updated with their progress. This unfortunately denies their managers the opportunity to help reduce their workload and manage their clients' expectations.

8 Difficulty delegating

Employees with ADHD can struggle to manage their own workloads, in part due to their executive function challenges but also due to their high standards and inability to say no. When they are forced to manage others, the cracks really start to show. To manage others effectively one needs to be clear and specific on what needs to be done and keep an eye on the timeline as well as the delegate. Often with no clear outcome, little and irregular communication, no process in place and difficulty breaking things down into manageable tasks, delegation just isn't possible. The problem is, there is only so much time (even less for these employees) and they can't do what they do best unless they delegate their low value low enjoyment tasks to others (that can do those things more quickly and easily).

7 Clutter

Clutter tends to follow employees with ADHD wherever they go. You can usually tell which desk belongs to these employees - its the one with the files piled up high, post it notes everywhere and pens littered all over the desk. When deadlines loom, the very last thing they focus on is clearing the paperwork on the desk. Life in the (home) office can feel like an uphill battle with paperwork the inevitable casualty. Finding those all important notes, files and documents for colleagues and manager can prove tricky and time consuming. Giving visible impression of disorganisation often adds to embarrassment and overwhelm.



6 Lack of Structure

Without a plan, to do list and timetable, employees with ADHD are given dangerous free reign to go off tangent, ignore what is required for the day and self-sabotage. They can struggle to focus even when they know what they are meant to be doing. They tend to fall down rabbit holes and pursue what they view as important and/or interesting at the expense of those tasks they have been assigned.

5 Not Responding to Emails

Employees with ADHD set such a high bar for themselves that when the fear of getting something less than perfect creeps in they tend to avoid the problem entirely. This further exacerbates the situation creating pressure and anxiety over a perceived form of simple written communication. Employees want to be able to deliver for their clients - to have the answer and the full picture. Rather than sending holding emails, they prefer to wait until such a time that they are in a position to deliver to their usually very high standard. In the meantime their client may be left waiting in the dark, or sometimes worse, left hung out to dry. Even when they are in a position to respond, they sometimes encounter difficulties putting things into words and will often draft overly long emails to avoid potential misinterpretation. Keeping it simple is anything but simple for them.

4 Inability to Set Clear Boundaries

Employees with ADHD are people pleasers. They crave recognition and approval. The lines of what is acceptable becomes blurred as they give more than others, working longer and harder to please and prove their worth. Bending over backwards, contorting themselves to fit in... Their imposter syndrome leads to weak boundaries and lack of 'self' promotion which not only hinders their career development but can often lead to them burning out from overworking.

3 Not disclosing their ADHD

ADHD is still sadly stigmatised. Many employees with ADHD fear that disclosing their ADHD will only serve to lessen themselves in the eyes of their supervisors and colleagues. They fear that they will be viewed as less reliable, less competent and even picked on or held back. This fear is not without basis. There is still a huge lack of awareness of ADHD in the workplace. Many of my clients have disclosed their ADHD in the hope of getting support for their challenges but instead have had more obstacles thrown their way. Disclosing ADHD is the route to reasonable adjustments and funding and eventually to defeating the stigma around this unique brain wiring.

2 Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria

Many employees with ADHD are so fearful and painfully aware of their potential for being rejected at any possible moment it becomes a self fulfilling prophecy. Looking for proof that they are 'not worthy' trips them up at every opportunity. In a competitive workplace environment where colleagues are pitted against each other to deliver targets, presentations and meet deadlines it can be a recipe for disaster. Often even the slightest whiff of competition or rejection can cause employees with ADHD to hit the self destruct button. Sadly too many of employees opt out because the pain of rejection is just too great.

1 Procrastination

The most common theme I encounter with my clients is "procrastination" - the inability to get started, to do everything but the thing that they are supposed to be doing. Often it is due to ambiguity around the task, too many ways of completing the task and/or difficulty breaking it down and identifying the first step. Perfection also paralyses progress. Mostly, the challenge stems from the employees' "interest-based nervous system" which does not align with the importance based systems that rule the workplace.



ADHD IN THE WORKPLACE - PART 2

ADHD STRENGTHS

Whilst ADHD is characterised by many challenges as detailed above, it can also be a superpower. ADHD is situationally variable. In the right situations where their ADHD is understood, challenges mitigated and strengths harnessed, employees with ADHD can thrive because of their ADHD, not in spite of it (often outshining and outperforming their neurotypical peers).

There are many talented and creative entrepreneurs, thought leaders, actors and musicians who all have ADHD - Emma Watson, Tony Robbins, Simone Biles, Justin Bieber/Timberlake, Solange Knowles - these are living proof that ADHD character traits lend themselves well to success. In addition to the many celebrities that have 'come out', we are now seeing CEOs, bankers, lawyers and doctors speaking out about the competitive advantages that can come with having ADHD, with many serving as mentors for those just embarking on their careers.

One of the most prevailing strengths of ADHD is **hyper-focus**. This is tied in with passion and interest. When employees' interest in a task or project is ignited, they become so hyper focused on what they are doing it would be unfathomable not to achieve what they set out to do, whatever that may be. They keep interest and see things through to the finish line, giving their 'all' to get there. Often they will go above and beyond what was expected because of the sheer joy and passion invested in the task. This is probably why so many individuals with ADHD are at the top of their industries.

The ADHD brain is wired on a different tangent which furnishes employees with ADHD with a greater ability to think **creatively** and offer **visionary** perspectives to business, problem solving and life in general. They are not held down by traditional constraints as they don't see them. Their minds are full of new and subversive ideas that aren't filtered by whether or not they might work. 'Why not' and 'just do it' are their mottos for exploration and new ideas. They often jump in head first with **unbridled positivity and conviction**. Henry Ford explains the reason why many ADHDers succeed in areas where many others fear to tread.

"Whether you think you can or think you can't, you're right."

Many employees with ADHD are stimulated by risk and change and are avid **problem-solvers**, thriving on the new and welcoming the challenge. They like the feeling of positive uncertainty that comes from **new ideas** and creations, truly believing that 'anything is possible'. These employees will often bring a **new perspective** and will always be willing to share their ideas for growth, always seeking to improve the status quo. **Innovative and out of the box thinking** are trademarks of ADHD and these employees are ever eager to be part of something bigger than themselves. These are the employees you want in a crisis, coming into their own in times of great pressure and need. Many employees with ADHD are **natural born leaders**, with strategic dispositions and an uncanny ability to make associations that others just don't see. They can often be the **"canaries in the mine"**.

Many employees with ADHD are **natural salespeople** with an unmatched aptitude for networking and inspiring others borne out of an **innate desire to connect and contribute**. These employees excel at winning clients over and securing new business. Never content to settle, when employees with ADHD get the opportunity to work in roles where they can focus on their high value and high interest tasks, unencumbered by their ADHD challenges, they thrive because of their ADHD, not in spite of it.

Investing time and resources in supporting employees with ADHD gives employers a competitive advantage.






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It is certainly no small feat to successfully navigate the workplace with ADHD. Hopefully you can now better recognise how ADHD manifests in employees with ADHD and you have a greater appreciation for the challenges they encounter everyday in the workplace.

When you know better, you do better, or in this case, when you better understand ADHD you can better support it. It can very much be a superpower in the right situations with the right support network.

Get in touch to see how I can help.

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