

ADHD in the Workplace

An Overview

Introduction

Many adults with ADHD perform their jobs extremely well and find that some of their ADHD traits: high energy, problem solving, creativity, and being able to hyper-focus, are significant benefits in their chosen career. However, for other adults with ADHD at least some of their ADHD symptoms will cause difficulties in the workplace.

ADHD is a very treatable disorder. A variety of both medication and non-medication treatments for those with adult ADHD now exist. Receiving a proper assessment and using multimodal treatments may be extremely helpful with: increasing focus and attention, decreasing distractibility, impulsivity and hyperactivity, and assisting with emotional regulation and organization. However, there is no magic cure or solution for those experiencing difficulties in the workplace.

The first step should be a thorough assessment of strengths and areas of difficulty. This may require the assistance of a trusted and insightful family member or friend, an ADHD coach, or someone in the human resources department of your workplace who is knowledgeable about ADHD. Once areas of need are pinpointed the implementation of strategies and accommodations where appropriate, may be required. Gaining an understanding about ADHD and implementation of simple strategies is often all that is required to increase job performance. In some cases additional accommodations are required, but these need not cause undue hardship for the employer nor inconvenience the employee or their co-workers.

How and if ADHD impacts job performance can depend on many factors:

The type and severity of symptoms

- ADHD symptoms may be very mild and not an issue on the workplace.
- Some symptoms, even when mild, may directly impact particular functioning required for specific tasks.
- Additional coexisting disorders, such as anxiety or depression, may also increase the impact of symptoms.

The suitability of the job

- Adults with ADHD may impulsively jump from job to job and career to career without adequately assessing the situation and reviewing all options.
- Sometimes finding a particular niche within a career can allow employees to succeed.
- Some ADHD symptoms can actually be beneficial for certain types of careers.

The implementation of strategies and accommodations to offset weaknesses

- The implementation of some well situated strategies may decrease the chance of requiring actual accommodations.
- Some trial and error may be required before successful strategies and accommodations are found.

Some ADHD Symptoms and How They May Impact Job Performance:

Note: Not all adults with ADHD will experience all or even most of these symptoms. The type and severity of how ADHD symptoms present is very individualized.

Adults with ADHD frequently have difficulty with staying focused during mundane and boring tasks, or lengthy meetings. They often have difficulty switching their focus quickly and can become hyper-focused (unable to break their focus) when required. Internal and external distractions can decrease job productivity and time management difficulties can result in being chronically late for the work day and meetings, as well as missed deadlines and incomplete assignments.

Other impairments such as difficulty following lengthy instructions, poor listening skills, inattention to detail, procrastination and forgetfulness can all potentially lead to a decrease in work quality.

Becoming overwhelmed and having difficulty staying on track when working on larger projects, a messy desk and misplaced work material may be the result of organizational impairments, common with ADHD. Impulsivity and difficulty with social cues and regulating emotions can lead to difficult relationships with coworkers and managers even though that is not the intent of the employee.

For a complete list of potential workplace impairments CADDAC has developed a package of information on ADHD in the workplace with employee and employer specific documents. This information can be found in our complete Adult ADHD Information package.

Disclosing an ADHD Diagnosis

The decision to disclose a diagnosis of ADHD is a very personal decision and remains a controversial topic. Due to the continued misunderstanding and stigma surrounding adult ADHD, employees may be very reluctant to disclose their ADHD. They may have experienced past unpleasant situations; being unfairly labelled as being lazy, stupid and unmotivated; being targeted as an unwanted employee; being misunderstood as a seeker of preferential treatment; and told that their ADHD does not exist and that they are just making excuses. If an employee chooses to disclose their ADHD it is possible that they have struggled in silence for some time before deciding to come forward, or they may not have learned that they have ADHD until recently.

It is very important that the employer understands ADHD as a medical condition which qualifies as a disability. It is also imperative that they understand their legal responsibilities.

Although situations may vary from province to province, a recent Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) report, “Minds that matter: Report on the consultation on human rights, mental health and addictions,”¹ has helped to clarify the duty of employers to accommodate individuals with mental health conditions.

It is important to note that the commission states, “The accommodation process usually begins when someone identifies they need accommodation due to a disability-related need.”² The commission continues to state that it is the responsibility of the person with the disability to “inform their employers of their needs.”³

The OHRC list of Employer Responsibilities⁴

- 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;

¹ <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/minds-matter-report-consultation-human-rights-mental-health-and-addictions>

² <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/minds-matter-report-consultation-human-rights-mental-health-and-addictions/10-duty-accommodate>

³ <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/disability-workplace-roles-and-responsibilities-fact-sheet>

⁴ <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/disability-workplace-roles-and-responsibilities-fact-sheet>

- Maintain the confidentiality of persons with disabilities;
- Deal with accommodation requests in a timely way, and;
- Bear the cost of any required medical information or documentation.

Responsibilities of Employee's with Disabilities

- Identify any accommodation needs that relate to their ability to perform job duties or participate fully in the workplace;
- Provide clear and sufficient information to support employment accommodation or return to work when required;
- Collaborate with your manager to developing an employment accommodation plan.
- Accepting an accommodation solution that meets your accommodation needs and treats you with dignity, even if the solution is not necessarily the one the employee would have preferred;
- Adhere to the accommodation plan, monitoring how well it is working, and advising your manager promptly about any difficulties encountered;
- Advise the manager promptly of any changes in health/disability status that may require changes in an existing accommodation plan; and

Potential supports for people with ADHD to seek independently

- ADHD coach to assist with the evaluation of impairments in the workplace and potential strategies and accommodations that could be implemented.
- Use a professional organizer to assist with desk and workplace environment.
- ADHD Coach to assist with organizational strategies.
- ADHD Coach to teach social skills and how to pick up social cues.

Information about a disability is personal and private and must be treated confidentially. Persons with disabilities are not required to disclose to information about the nature of their disability, unless specifically needed to better accommodate the needs of the person with disabilities.

Information about an employee's disability and/or accommodations should never be shared with anyone unless it is necessary and the employee has provided permission.

Brief List of Potential Workplace Accommodations and Strategies

PLEASE NOTE: This is a very condensed and non-specific list of accommodations that can be used in the workplace to address some ADHD impairments. It can be used as a reference for adults with ADHD and employers, however for a more thorough list of potential accommodations and strategies that address

specific ADHD difficulties please access the CADDAC ADHD Workplace Accommodations and Strategies document found within the Adult ADHD Information package. For more information please access Adults with ADHD will differ in the type and quantity of accommodations required. A few simple strategies and accommodations can often significantly increase both job performance and job satisfaction. A process of trial and error may be required to discover the best accommodations.

Attention Related Strategies

- Reminders (visual or auditory) to draw person back "to task". These may need to be intrusive to be effective.
- Defined periods of concentration, use of timers, and scheduled during times of most alertness.
- Strategies to decrease distractibility: noise cancelling headsets, moving cubicle to a quieter area, allowing closed doors or work time in a private workspace, and flex-time and working from home to access a quieter work environment.
- Boring tasks rotated with stimulating tasks, and less detail orientated work assigned.
- Note taking for lengthy instructions or use of audio recorder during meetings.

Activity Related Strategies

- Movement breaks: planned movement breaks, walking to meetings, picking up mail, getting coffee, walking to a co-workers desk rather than picking up the phone, using the stairs rather than the elevator.
- Use of fidget toys or stress balls for intentional fidgeting.

Time Management Strategies

- Use of electronic organizer and reminder alerts.
- Use of wall calendars or other reminders showing timelines and schedules developed and reviewed with team, co-worker or supervisor.
- Provide flexibility in hours and breaks, for example early arrival could mean additional time for breaks throughout the day, etc.

Organization Strategies

- Use of "to do" lists and daily, weekly and monthly tasks, colour-coded systems for files and projects.
- Increased supervision and prioritizing of tasks by supervisor and teamwork amongst coworkers, including planning meetings for projects.
- Limit number of projects worked on at one time and assign new projects when current one is completed.

- Minimize, streamline, automate, colour code, dictate or delegate paperwork whenever possible.

Memory and Procrastination Strategies

- Make logging of tasks onto electronic reminders mandatory and use of timers, alerts or beepers and charts or cheat sheets for tasks and instructions.
- Follow-up of meetings or verbal instructions with an e-mail or hard copy.
- Assign tasks suited to immediate response or provide closer supervision, possibly biweekly meetings to check on progress.

Emotion Regulation Strategies

- Feedback from a trusted supervisor, co-worker, or friend to build awareness of monologuing, interrupting, bluntness and other issues with social skills and assistance and to assist with the understanding of immediate current situations.
- Provide awareness and education to all employees regarding effective communication strategies among colleagues.
- Breaks to cool down from anger or feeling overwhelmed – removal from the situation by going for a walk, coffee or lunch break, or working from home for a day or two.

Web Sites Referenced for the development of this document:

- <http://www.webmd.com/add-adhd/guide/adhd-in-the-workplace>
- <http://www.healthypace.com/adhd/articles/top-ten-adhd-traps-in-the-workplace/adhd-in-the-workplace/> originally published <http://www.chadd.org/> with permission from the author Kathleen Nadeau.
- <http://psychcentral.com/lib/adhd-in-the-workplace-solutions-and-success/0001511>
- <http://gbr.pepperdine.edu/2010/08/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd-in-the-workplace/>
- <http://add.about.com/od/adhdinadults/a/Worktips.htm>
- <http://askjan.org/media/adhd.html>
- <http://www.additudemag.com/adhd/article/1497.html>
- <http://www.healthcentral.com/adhd/adult-adhd-251301-5.html>
- <http://www.additudemag.com/adhd/article/816.html>