

## Succeeding in the Workplace

The symptoms of AD/HD create special challenges for the adult in the workplace, just as they do for the child in school. To date, very little research has been conducted that provides adults with AD/HD empirically-based approaches to understanding and coping with workplace issues. Until scientifically-based guidelines are available, it may prove useful to follow the procedures commonly used by career counselors to guide individuals in selecting a job and coping with AD/HD on the job. This sheet will:

- offer tips for improving on-the-job functioning
- describe the rights of individuals under the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973
- provide guidelines for making career choices

The assistance of a career counselor or a psychologist, social worker, or other health care worker with career counseling training is extremely helpful in understanding and maximizing these factors. Some individuals, however, may be able to carry out the steps discussed in this sheet with the help of questionnaires, checklists, and suggestions given in the career counseling books on the reference list.

### Improving On-the-Job Functioning

Some adults with AD/HD have very successful careers. Others may struggle with a variety of challenges, including poor communication skills, distractibility, procrastination, and difficulty managing complex projects. Each individual with AD/HD has a different set of challenges. Therefore, it is important to consider your unique picture, as you go about designing strategies, accommodations and modifications for the workplace. Below are suggestions for coping with many of the symptoms or impairments associated with AD/HD.

**1. Distractibility.** Problems with external distractibility (noises and movement in the surrounding environment) and internal distractibility (daydreams) can be the biggest challenge for adults with AD/HD. The following strategies may help:

- Request a private office or quiet cubicle, or take work home or work when others are not in the office.
- Use “white noise” earphones, classical music or other sounds to drown out office noises.
- Work in unused space, such as a conference room, where distractions are few.
- Route phone calls directly to voicemail, and respond to them at a set time every day.
- Jot down ideas in a notebook to avoid interruption of the current task.
- Keep a list of ideas that come to you during meetings so that you can communicate more effectively.
- Perform one task at a time. Do not start a new task until the current one is done.

**2. Impulsivity.** Adults with AD/HD may struggle with impulsivity and temper outbursts in the workplace. Try the following strategies:

- Learn to use self-talk to monitor impulsive actions.
  - Work with a coach to role-play appropriate responses to frustrating situations.
  - Ask for regular, constructive feedback as a way of becoming more aware of how impulsivity might manifest in you.
  - Practice relaxation and meditation techniques.
- Anticipate the problems that regularly trigger impulsive reactions and develop routines for coping with these situations.

**3. Hyperactivity.** Adults with the hyperactive type of AD/HD often do better in jobs that allow a great deal of movement, such as sales, but if you have a sedentary job, the following strategies may help:

- Take intermittent breaks to do photocopying, go to the mailroom, or walk to the water fountain.
- Take notes in meetings to prevent restlessness.

- Move around, exercise, take a walk, or run up and down the stairs.
- Bring lunch — instead of going out to buy it — so the lunch hour can be a time for exercise.

**4. Poor Memory.** Failing to remember deadlines and other responsibilities can antagonize coworkers, especially when working on a team. To improve memory, try the suggestions below:

- Use tape recording devices or take copious notes at meetings.
- Write checklists for complicated tasks.
- Use a bulletin board or computer reminder list for announcements and other memory triggers.
- Learn how to use a day planner and keep it with you to keep track of tasks and events.
- Write notes on sticky pads and put them in a highly visible place.

**5. Boredom-blockouts.** Because of their strong need for stimulation, some adults with AD/HD become easily bored at work, especially with detailed paperwork and routine tasks. To prevent boredom, try the following tips:

- Set a timer to stay on task.
- Break up long tasks into shorter ones.
- Take breaks, drink water, get up and walk around.
- Find a job with stimulating responsibilities and minimal routine tasks.

**6. Time management difficulties.** Managing time can be a big challenge for adults with AD/HD. Here are some guidelines for improving time management skills:

- Use time-line charts to break large projects into smaller pieces, with subdue-dates.
- Reward yourself for achieving subdue-dates.
- Use watch devices with alarms, buzzers, planners or computer planning software.
- Program your computer to beep 5 minutes before every meeting on the calendar.
- Avoid over-scheduling the day by overestimating how long each task or meeting will take.
- See the What We Know #11, “Time Management: Learning to Use a Day Planner.”

**7. Procrastination.** Putting things off not only prevents completion of tasks, but also creates problems for others on the team. Here are some strategies for success:

- Break the task into small pieces, rewarding yourself along the way. (Rewards need not be grand; they might be a new CD, a long walk with your dog, dancing, or whatever you enjoy.) It may be helpful to have a coach or someone else to whom you can report and be accountable for achieving each piece of the task, until you learn to overcome your tendencies to procrastinate. See the What We Know sheet on coaching for more information on how a coach can help.
  - Ask the supervisor to set a deadline for tasks.
- Consider working on a team with a co-worker who manages time well.

**8. Difficulty managing long-term projects.** Managing complex or long-term projects may be the hardest organizational challenge for adults with AD/HD. Managing projects requires a range of skills, including time management, organizing materials, tracking progress, and communicating accomplishments. Try the following guidelines:

- Break projects up into manageable parts, with rewards for completing each.
- Strive to shorten the time allowed on a project to better utilize “sprinting abilities.”
- Ask a coach to assist you in tolerating longer and longer projects, a bit at a time.
- Find and partner with a co-worker who has good organizational skills.
- Look for work that requires only short-term tasks.

**9. Paperwork/details.** The inability to find important papers, turn in reports and timesheets, and maintain a filing system can create the impression of carelessness. If paperwork is a significant part of the job, try these tips:

- Make it a rule to handle each piece of paper only once.
- Ask an administrative assistant to handle detailed paperwork.
- Keep only those papers that are currently in use; purge the rest.
- Make filing more fun by color coding folders and using catchy labels.

**10. Interpersonal/social skill issues.** Individuals with AD/HD may unintentionally offend co-workers by interrupting frequently, talking too much, being too blunt, or not listening well. If social skills are a challenge, try the following strategies:

- Ask others for feedback, especially if there is a history of problems with colleagues and supervisors.
- Learn to pick up on social cues more readily. Some adults with AD/HD have a hard time picking up nonverbal cues that they are angering a co-worker or supervisor.
- Work with a coach to determine what types of settings often lead to interpersonal/social issues.
- Seek a position with greater autonomy if working with others is challenging.

See the What We Know #15, “Social Skills in Adults with AD/HD,” for more information on improving social skills. Consult the books on the reference list for additional suggestions.

### **The Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973**

Two federal laws — The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (RA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) — prohibit workplace discrimination against individuals with disabilities. The RA prohibits discrimination in three areas: (1) employment by the executive branch of the federal government, (2) employment by most federal government contractors, and (3) activities funded by federal subsidies or grants, including organizations receiving federal funding.

The ADA extends the concepts of the RA to (1) private employers with 15 or more employees, (2) all activities of state and local governments, including employment, and (3) “places of public accommodation,” including most private schools and higher education institutions.

It is important to understand that being diagnosed with AD/HD does not automatically make an individual eligible for protection or accommodations under the RA or ADA. The protections of these laws extend to individuals who meet four conditions:

- They are individuals with disabilities under the law;
- They are otherwise qualified for the position, with or without reasonable accommodations;
- They are being excluded from employment solely by reasons of their disability; and
- They are covered by the applicable federal law.

To be eligible for the protection offered by the ADA and RA, an employee must disclose the disability to the employer. The decision to disclose a disability to an employer or not can be a difficult one. On the one hand, an employer is not required to make accommodations unless the employee has disclosed the disability. On the other hand, discrimination often begins when the employee makes the disclosure. These factors must be weighed before making the decision to disclose. Reasons for not disclosing:

- If you do not need accommodations
- If you are performing well on the job
- If you feel that disclosing your disability will cause your supervisor and co-workers to discriminate against you

Reasons for disclosing:

- If you fear losing your job because you haven’t received the accommodations you need to succeed
- If you are about to be fired because of performance issues

It is possible to request accommodations without disclosing information about the disability. First, if possible, try to provide the accommodations yourself — by coming in early or staying late to avoid distractions, for instance, or by programming the computer to remind you of appointments. Second, frame requests to the supervisor from a position of strength, rather than bringing up the disability. For example, instead of saying:

*“I have a disability called AD/HD, which makes it hard for me to remember things and follow through,”*

it might be better to reframe from a standpoint of strength, by saying,

*“I work best when I use a tape recorder to help me remember everything new, until I get proficient.”*

Similarly, instead of:

*“I know that the Americans with Disabilities Act protects those of us with disabilities from discrimination, so I know that you will need to provide me with special accommodations,”*

it might be better to reframe from a standpoint of strength, by saying,

*“I believe my strengths are consistent with the essential tasks of this job. If I can take the time to review my notes in a quiet place before each meeting, I can assure you that I can excel at this position.”*

Read the What We Know sheet entitled, “Legal Issues for Adults with AD/HD in the Workplace and Higher Education,” for more information on ADA and RA.

### **Making a Career Change**

Sometimes, no matter how hard they try, adults with AD/HD find that their initial career choice does not play to their strengths, and it is necessary to make a change. The following categories reflect aspects of an individual that impact effective functioning on the job. Collect data about each of these categories as it applies to you. This data will permit you to see yourself as a unique, complete person, and to better evaluate the careers that match your characteristics.

**1. Interests (professional & leisure).** Since individuals with AD/HD work better in fields that interest them, it is important that they identify their interests. After the interests have been identified, a consultation with a trained career counselor, who can provide a list of occupations or jobs that correspond to their interests, should be considered. The list of occupations that correspond to the individual's interests will provide the basis for the steps that follow.

**2. Skills (mental, interpersonal and physical).** Identifying skills and accomplishments can reveal marketable skills that can be used in various work settings. Generally, skills fall into three categories: skills working with data, people or things. People do best when their skills correspond to the requirements of the job. Skills can be assessed through standardized tests or through checklists that trigger knowledge of success in past accomplishments.

For example, you might ask yourself the following questions:

1. What subjects were easiest for you in school?
2. What strengths do you think others see in you?
3. What skills do you possess that enabled you to succeed in something?
4. What strengths do you think teachers saw in you?
5. What things about your job performance set you apart from others?

In addition, using a skill word list provided by a career counselor or published in a career book may be helpful in identifying skills that may not have been considered important or considered at all.

**3. Personality.** What type of personality are you? Personality preferences can be measured by standardized testing or by checklists that force you to choose between two situations. Knowing personality

strengths can help improve work habits, increase career options, and achieve a more successful path to a career future.

**4. Values (work and leisure).** People value different things. It is generally agreed that people work harder and with more focus when the task at hand is in line with their values. Leisure values are also important, because a personal passion can often turn into a career. Career counselors and other professionals who work with career issues, or checklists in career books, can help isolate these values.

**5. Aptitudes (verbal, numerical, abstract reasoning, clerical speed and accuracy, mechanical, spatial, spelling, and language).** An aptitude is defined as the ability to acquire proficiency in a specific area. It often seems that these are innate, but this is not necessarily true. Aptitudes can also be learned. While a skill is a current ability, an aptitude is the potential to acquire a skill based upon natural talents or training.

Aptitudes can be formally assessed by a professional or by using informal checklists. When you understand what your strengths are, you can compare them to the requirements of any given job. *The Dictionary of Occupational Titles* and *The Occupational Outlook Handbook* are two sources for such information. Doing these comprehensive assessments ensures that you have a clear knowledge of the essential tasks of a job for which you are applying, and how your strengths match up with the requirements of the job.

**6. Energy patterns (Is there a pattern that's reliable?).** All jobs require differing amounts of energy. Are you a “*sprinter*” or a “*plodder alonger*?” While those are not real terms, they define the types of people who can either go through each day with the same amount of energy output, or sprint through a job, depleting their energies, and thus feeling “spent.” Some people have a pattern to their energy output, while others do not.

To figure out if there is a pattern to your energy output, keep an energy log for 1 or 2 months. Rate yourself on a scale from 1 (very low energy level) to 10 (very high energy level) three times per day — at the beginning, middle, and end of the day. Record these ratings in a log book or day planner (see the What We Know sheet entitled, “Time Management: Learning to Use a Day Planner”). Periodically review the log to see whether there is any pattern in energy level across the day, week, and month. If a pattern is not noticeable, then it will not be difficult to sustain energy at most jobs. However, if a fairly reliable pattern exists, then it may be necessary to learn how to harness energy to do difficult tasks at times when energy is high and do more “automatic” tasks when energy is low or depleted.

**7. Workplace habits (what is expected vs. how we measure up).** Job success often depends on personal characteristics, such as dependability, reliability, commitment, and attitude. Consult a career-related book on the reference list for a list of the qualities that employers most often look for in employees. Decide how you measure up to these qualities, and determine whether it is necessary to improve these workplace habits.

**8. A complete history of all previous jobs (useful for extracting valuable information).** People learn the most from their mistakes and successes. Look back and explore such things as:

1. What you liked most about each job
2. What you liked least about each job
3. The dates of employment (did you leave after a few months?) Look for patterns that might help to plan for a future career.

### Using the Data

After collecting this data, follow these three steps to maximize the chance of success and minimize the chance of failure:

- Read about the jobs you plan to pursue to get a reality check. The

Dictionary of Occupational Titles, Occupational Outlook Handbook, and related online sources can help give a realistic view of any given job and dispel any fantasies.

- Talk to others already doing the job through a series of informational interviews. These will allow you to open your eyes to reality and to “try the career on for size.” It's a good idea to speak to three to five people in a given career to get more than one viewpoint.
- Observe the job for an hour, a day, or a week, or in a volunteer position. This is the only way to pick up unspoken information, such as how hassled everyone might appear, how well-lit an area is, how calm people seem as they interact with each other, and a host of other almost subliminal factors.

When all of this information has been collected, the following questions can be answered:

- What jobs are a “good fit” with my personal strengths, and what jobs are a poor fit?
- What fantasies or false beliefs did I have about the jobs I used to think would work well for me?
- For the jobs that are a good fit for me, what supportive strategies, accommodations or modifications are necessary to maximize my success?

### Conclusion

The suggestions given in this sheet are commonly used by career counselors who guide adults with AD/HD in dealing with workplace issues. Such suggestions have proven useful for many individuals, but have not yet been subjected to scientific scrutiny. Research is needed to develop a scientifically-based understanding of the problems faced by adults with AD/HD in the workplace and to evaluate the effectiveness of the kinds of interventions suggested here.

### References and Resources

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### Web Sites

“The Americans with Disabilities Act: Civil Rights for You,” [www.ldonline.org/ld\\_indepth/adult/dale\\_brown\\_ada.html](http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/adult/dale_brown_ada.html)

Equal Employment Opportunities Commission, [www.eeoc.gov](http://www.eeoc.gov)

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