

# Managing professionals with ADHD - a whitepaper

Introduction	2
Intro to ADHD at work: the great, the difficult, the inconsistent	2
The great	3
The difficult	3
The inconsistent	3
So, how do you manage someone with ADHD?	3
What to know: The general	4
What is ADHD in adults?	4
ADHD: the myths and assumptions	4
ADHD: the facts	4
What to know: the specifics	5
Learning more about someone's particular brand of ADHD	5
<b>What to do: the general</b>	<b>6</b>
Management style	6
Risk of running out of bandwidth	7
Feedback	7
What to do: the specifics	8
Practical strategies support team members	8
Noise	9
Workspace	9
Distractions	9
Write things down	9
Clear admin procedures and workflow processes	9
Productivity	10
Time management	10
Difficult or disruptive behaviour	11
Summary	11
References	12

# Managing professionals with ADHD: How to manage and get the best out of team members with ADHD

## Introduction

Neurodivergence has gained mainstream attention in recent years. With mainstream awareness comes growing manager and employer awareness of team members with ADHD in their teams and organisations.

More people are discovering their symptoms fit the diagnosis and getting diagnosed as adults. And those diagnosed earlier in life feel more room to bring this up in a professional setting to advocate for themselves.

When you work with a team member/employee with ADHD, it's useful to have some background knowledge and some tools at your disposal to effectively manage them. It is good practice from a DEI perspective to support all your staff, including the neurodiverse members, so they have a satisfying work life and can progress their career. It is good for staff retention in a tight job market, and good for business as individuals with ADHD often provide extremely valuable contributions – some of it exactly because they have ADHD.

This paper offers useful background information and practical solutions and strategies to support you to manage your staff members with ADHD more effectively

## Intro to ADHD at work: the great, the difficult, the inconsistent

### The great

Having someone with ADHD on your team can be a fabulous asset. Their brain works slightly differently from neurotypical brains, so they bring diversity in thinking to the team, and probably enthusiasm, creativity and optimism. They come up with solutions nobody has thought of, if they are grabbed by a problem or a topic. They can be highly knowledgeable about niche topics, see patterns quickly, and produce an inordinate amount of work in a short space of time if they get in a space where they hyperfocus. Just to name a few examples.

### The difficult

You may have the sense that there is unfulfilled potential – you have the feeling they could, and even want to, contribute more, but it doesn't seem to happen. You are probably right.

Besides the sense of them not being as effective or as happy in their work as they could be, there are also some behaviours that are difficult in a work team/workplace such as:

- Lateness (in person or with deadlines),
- Impulsive responses, both in conversations - so they come off as somewhere between direct, rude or tactless - as in their actions - overpromising to a client, committing to unrealistic plans or saying 'yes' without having considered the ramifications
- Appearing inconsiderate, because their impulsivity leaves others feeling like they don't consider them, and/or colleagues have to pick up the ball they dropped.
- Because they work best when things make sense to them, anything that does not (policies, decisions, projects) may engender ongoing discussion, rather than a more helpful 'just get it done so we can move on to something else' attitude
- Disorganised to the extent it interferes with their output. Which isn't good for business of course and may also put pressure on their team

### The inconsistent

This can be the most challenging aspect of managing someone with ADHD. Sometimes stuff works, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes they do great. For no discernible reason, the next day/week/month, they don't. They may provide you with a bit of a conundrum when strategies that work well when helping others be more productive have no effect, work for 5 minutes or actually make things worse.

## So, how do you manage someone with ADHD?

There are several things that are helpful to know, and a number of strategies you can use. In the rest of this paper, I will walk you through:

- What to know: The general – What is ADHD in adults?
- What to know: The specific – Learning more about someone's particular brand of ADHD
- What to do: Strategies to support team members with ADHD

## What to know: The general

### ADHD: the myths and assumptions

There are some pretty pervasive stereotypes about ADHD. Generally the term invokes images of young boys who can't sit still and are very loud. ADHD can look like that in children<sup>1</sup>, but it almost certainly does not accurately describe your team member with ADHD. So if it isn't that, what is ADHD and what does it look like at work?

### ADHD: the facts

Essentially, ADHD is a condition that affects the brain; both the structure of the brain and the way messages are communicated are affected. ADHD is defined as 'a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development, as characterised by inattentiveness and/or hyperactivity and impulsiveness (DSM-5).

**Inattention** is about having difficulty with sustained attention, particularly on boring/repetitive tasks and managing interruptions; dreaminess; being easily distracted.

**Inhibition/impulsivity** is acting or speaking without fully considering the consequences.

**Hyperactivity** is a need for physical movement or having difficulty sitting still. In adults this can show itself as a feeling of restlessness, and fidgeting.

**Executive functioning:** More recently, research has shown that ADHD affects executive functioning<sup>2</sup>.

Executive functioning comprises the following aspects:

- short term (working) memory
- planning & organisation, including prioritising, problem-solving, time management, starting and finishing tasks
- inhibition (restraint) and emotional self regulation, such as not blurting out what you think and remaining calm when you are annoyed
- regulating attention: ignoring or managing distractions and focussing on boring or repetitive tasks, but also hyper focusing on a project to the exclusion of anything else that may require attention. The latter is obviously useful if harnessed the right way.

Some or all of these aspects may be present in someone with ADHD. Having ADHD does not mean lacking the knowledge, skills or understanding. But if you struggle with short term memory, planning, organisation and/or inhibition of impulses, it is much harder to get done what needs to be done. It requires a lot more energy than for someone with a neurotypical brain. So

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<sup>1</sup> Though often doesn't, and especially not in girls.

<sup>2</sup> The mental processes needed to achieve your goals and use your cognitive abilities effectively. It is also sometimes called self-regulation.

clever strategies and tools, reasonable accommodations and a supportive environment are essential to be effective at work, make career progress and have a work-life balance.

It is important to realise if you are a manager or colleague of someone with ADHD, those difficulties can make someone look to you like they are lazy, thoughtless or unwilling, when the person is none of these.

The second thing that is important here is this: if someone grew up with these difficulties and they have regularly been labelled as having a lack of motivation/willpower/care/fill in the negative, this can very much affect that person's self-esteem or capacity to hear feedback. Which can lead to defensiveness and/or responding badly to feedback.

## What to know: the specifics

### Learning more about someone's particular brand of ADHD

ADHD is different in different people, so to understand and support your team members, it's important to understand who they are and what their particular brand of ADHD is rather than assume you know what works for them based on generic information or past experience. Many people with ADHD function very well at work because they have figured out coping strategies to mitigate or resolve their difficulties. In fact, I don't know a single person with ADHD who hasn't intuitively understood how to handle something in a way that suits their brain. Examples are:

- being on time for everything, even if it is a coffee with friends, to avoid ever being late again for anything (reducing the amount of decisions to make)
- rewriting a reminder in a different colour so it looks different and catches their eye (creating novelty to attract focus)
- working on a project at the same time as a colleague, even if it is on completely separate parts of it (body doubling)
- asking a colleague to ask them about a task to be done on Wednesday afternoon when it's actually due on Friday (creating artificial deadlines and accountability)

As their manager or leader, it is important that you gain a sense of how their ADHD affects them at work. You can then support them to be more effective or progress towards their goals and in their career with more ease.

To do this, you should offer to have an open conversation, geared towards support and not performance review, and ask them about how they notice their ADHD affecting them at work and what could be helpful in supporting them. Then try these things out and evaluate and finetune. Ha, funny. While the above is absolutely correct, if you work with anyone with ADHD you already know things are seldom this straightforward. A difficulty with executive functioning can come with a self-awareness that develops slower than for neurotypical people. So knowing

what they need or what would be helpful is actually a really difficult question. Also because if their 'normal' is living with an ADHD brain, it is hard to know what would be a reasonable adjustment to ask for at work to level the playing field with their neurotypical colleagues.

I will backtrack a little: As their manager, you should definitely offer to have an open conversation, geared towards supporting them and not as part of a performance review. If they can indicate what would be helpful, you can work out how to implement these adjustments or strategies. If they don't know, or don't know enough, it is helpful to engage a coach that has experience with clients with ADHD to do this work with them.

Because everyone is different, and every team and workplace has its idiosyncrasies there is no one size fits all set of strategies to deploy when someone on your team has ADHD. Having said this, I will outline some strategies that are generally helpful to making a workplace more ADHD friendly. And the good thing is, this may well be good for your team as a whole.

Before we get into strategies for support, a side note on the HR-side of things:

Employees have no legal obligation to disclose they have ADHD. However, if they want to utilise reasonable accommodations that are not available to staff in general, it is clear they would need to do so. In some countries this means you can require proof of their diagnosis. Also, in some countries there is a disability law requiring employers to provide reasonable accommodation once a disability has been disclosed. Please make sure you ensure you are aware of applicable rules and regulations for your country and industry and follow them. If you have an HR-department, please check with them.

For the purposes of this paper, I'm going to speak as though your staff member has disclosed to you that they have ADHD and that they are wanting to improve their effectiveness (either their outputs, energy spent, or both), decrease disruptive behaviour or both of these things.

## What to do: the general

### Management style

This is what is most important. A supportive, trusting approach from a manager who understands that people don't need to feel bad to do better, but actually feeling confident and resilient is much more conducive for growth and improvement. So that means pointing out when things have gone well and giving positive feedback often (preferably written down, see below). Notice when they do well and how and point this out to them ('Hey, it worked really well when you said X. Did you notice that the client then did Y? That was really effective.'). This way you help identify strengths that they can build on and you engage in building a culture of positive reinforcement and support. This is good practice in general but especially so for your team

members with ADHD as it is a fantastic counterweight to anxiety they may feel, or the negative experiences with authority they may have had previously.

## Risk of running out of bandwidth

Many or, in my experience, all people with ADHD have intuitively developed coping strategies to deal with specific situations or life/work in general. This helps them be successful in their job and live fulfilled lives to the point others don't notice they have ADHD. There are times, however, when they can run out of bandwidth and at this point, things can fall apart. This can happen when:

- an extra challenge is added (a promotion or a change in responsibilities at work, a new manager, becoming a parent, going through menopause, relationship difficulties, having to look after ageing parents, a move, a bereavement) **and**
- the coping strategies were mostly intuitive instead of consciously applied.

The more aware they are of what they do to manage their ADHD, the more consciously they can add, adjust or vary strategies to suit their circumstances. And ask for additional support where needed. This makes it more likely they can keep themselves from running out of bandwidth, i.e. burning out.

Clearly this is most successful as a prevention strategy rather than a fire fighting approach (though it's never too late!). So in the course of working together it may be helpful to keep an eye out for strategies you notice them using, so you can point them out if they are open to this. However the most useful way to support them in this area is to engage a coach specialised in supporting professionals with ADHD.

## Feedback

While it is best practice to give plenty of encouragement and positive feedback, of course your team member with ADHD may need to be given some feedback to improve behaviour or performance at times.

While ADHD can be a reason for difficulties, it is never an excuse and constructive feedback is just as much part of working and learning as it is for anyone else. However, it is useful to know that many people with ADHD have grown up on the receiving end of lots of negative comments from authority figures. They may have been called lazy, clumsy, thoughtless, dumb and many other things, when in fact they were struggling with problems with organisation, memory, attention or regulation of attention or emotions.

It's unlikely that you (their current manager) are the cause of this, but you may unwittingly trigger defensive behaviour because they are reminded of how they were treated before when given

feedback. Of course, you are also not their therapist, so you are not responsible to fix this. But what you do want is your feedback/constructive criticism to be taken on board. The point of feedback is that someone can improve their behaviour and if they become very defensive, you are not achieving your aim. So this requires that you deliver your feedback in a considered, timely and accessible manner. Obviously, this is good practice with any team member, but even more essential with your team member with ADHD.

It is helpful to give solution focused feedback, which identifies the desired situation (what you would like to see (instead) and why that would be helpful/effective) and then allows your team member to identify how they can contribute to that situation, supporting them to come up with their own strategies and to use identified strengths or previously successful strategies

## What to do: the specifics

### Practical strategies support team members

It's helpful to look at any support you provide for ADHD as equivalent to appropriate accommodation for someone living with a sensory or physical impairment, rather than 'extra support'. You wouldn't expect someone with a visual impairment to perform well at work without their glasses. They may be able to do some tasks but they would end up squinting and take more time to complete tasks that involve reading, writing or anything to do with screens or fine motor skills. They would probably also have a bad headache at the end of the day. So they need their glasses. And their colleague who has 20/20 vision isn't treated unfairly by not being given glasses.

Making reasonable adjustments is about supporting your staff to go about their job slightly different from their teammates, so they can be more effective, or do their work in a way that better suits their brain. This leaves them with more energy or bandwidth, increasing their productivity, resilience or both. A coach can help with identifying and finetuning successful individual strategies to keep focussed/remain productive.

Below are some common difficulties and some complementary strategies to consider to support team members with ADHD at work.

#### Reducing noise and visual distractions

If noise and visual distractions are negatively affecting productivity, then noise cancelling headphones, or a private office can help. In an open office, sitting away from foot traffic and/or a cubicle that blocks visual stimuli can be helpful.

#### Visual reminders

Many people with ADHD do better when what they need to do is visible to them. This often results in them not wanting to tidy their desk/workspace because if it is in the drawer, they may



forget. (Ah! That's why their desk looks like that :-)) A whiteboard with projects or tasks in their field of vision may help with this.

### Manage distractions

This is about being interrupted by notifications, emails and phonecalls. Discuss what is the 'response requirement' in your workplace. Is it necessary to be very responsive and be continuously available and respond to emails within mere minutes? An hour? Or is checking email once, twice or 3 times per day enough? Not being interrupted by messages can help with focus and productivity.

Is it usual in your workplace that people chat at each other's workspaces? If so, maybe your team member with ADHD can work from home at times when they need to focus on a specific piece of work.

### Write things down

Because of difficulties with working memory, it is helpful to be able to go back and read what was agreed or which steps to take if an instruction was given. Having a written agenda for any meeting helps with preparation. For one to ones this does not have to be very formal, but knowing what the meeting is about will make it far more constructive. Often, my clients with ADHD also deal with anxiety, a sense of *waiting for the other shoe to drop* or imposter syndrome, so their manager asking for 'a chat' can send them into a tailspin, worrying what they have done wrong. An informal email with 'Hey, I'd like to have a chat to discuss X and I specifically want your thoughts on Y,' can prevent this.

### Clear admin procedures and workflow processes

It is really helpful to have a clear structure around all your admin procedures and workflow, including where to find documentation and forms, what actions are needed when, who is responsible and where to go with questions. This goes both for general company policies (anything HR related for instance) but also briefing and project management documents and ongoing work that needs to be kept up to date with. Larger organisations often have this pretty well sorted, but if you are in a smaller organisation, it may come to light that your structures could do with improving. The right structure will prevent, catch, and fix mistakes and forgotten admin tasks.

### Scheduling around 'productive brain times'

Scheduling. People with ADHD are often more productive at certain times in the week or the day. And different tasks require different types of focus. Being able to schedule meeting time and focus time based on when your brain most effectively does either, can be a big help for productivity. This is true for most people, not just for those with ADHD

For instance, maybe for you writing a report requires some uninterrupted time to focus, ticking off small admin tasks can be done in the 15 minutes before a meeting and a project meeting is stimulating enough in itself so it doesn't really matter when that happens. For someone with ADHD, adjusting scheduling to 'productive brain times' can be really useful in increasing productivity (or being as productive while expending less energy. This may look like: no

meetings in the morning to do project work, project meetings immediately after lunch (to make the best of the after-lunch-dip), and phone calls in the afternoon, as well as smaller tasks. Or all team- and project meetings on 2 days, so the rest of the week there is more space to consider 'productive brain times'.

### Body doubling

Working with others can really help productivity. This can be as simple as working on a joint project where tasks are divided and a deadline set.

A specific ADHD strategy is called 'body doubling'. It essentially means working on individual projects at the same time as someone else. This works as follows:

- the duration of the session is decided - say, 2 hours,
- each individual indicates what they are planning to accomplish in that time -for instance: 'I'm going to set out the draft for a project plan and write the first page' or, 'I'm going to answer these 4 emails.'
- At the end of the session everyone reports how far they got. This is also useful for people who don't have ADHD but who have difficulty allocating focus time in their busy diaries.

### Task swapping.

All jobs have less attractive aspects. But for someone with ADHD, some parts of the job may cost an inordinate amount of energy. Especially repetitive, boring tasks. They may suit someone else in your team better. And this person may be really happy to offload something else in return that suits an ADHD brain much better. Want to swap a 10 minute admin task for cold calling a potential client? Yes please! Checking the ordering on a spreadsheet to spot mistakes for some time consuming market research? Great.

### Time management strategies

For many people with ADHD, time mostly consists of 'now' and 'not now'.

So deadlines far into the future are less meaningful than for others with a regular sense of time. In practical terms this means they have to rely more on external measures to keep track of time than the internal clock most people use. This means using reminders, notes, alarms and apps to keep track of the approaching deadlines and related work. As their manager, it is helpful to have a conversation with your employee on what they need. Of course you don't want to be reminding them all the time, as that would be incredibly annoying for both parties. So maybe they manage well enough themselves or maybe they share accountability with a team member.

Good practice is to:

- set specific deadlines (not: 'send me that report when you have time for it' – it will get forgotten. But 'I'd like it on my desk by ...')
- require regular project updates. They serve as artificial deadlines, and avoid finding out too late that things have fallen behind. Discuss the frequency though - what's great for one may feel like micromanagement for another. And specify what the information is that

you require. This avoids them spending an inordinate amount of time thinking about, worrying and writing elaborate updates because they are unsure what it is you need.

- give reminders when you are waiting for something. Don't assume disinterest. It may just have fallen off the radar.

### Managing difficult or disruptive behaviour

Tact and navigating boundaries can be difficult when impulse control doesn't come naturally.

If your team member has a tendency to react impulsively or tactlessly, and the company environment is supportive, they may be able to identify a colleague they like to act as a sounding board, so they can discuss an approach for a difficult or emotionally charged conversation before diving in. If your team member is hesitant or unlikely to get a positive response from within the team, it is better to provide the team member with a coach to work on changing some of the less helpful behaviour. In that case, discuss goals for coaching with your team members, providing them with clear examples or behaviour goals.

If your team member has a tendency to respond too quickly in writing, you can suggest a 24-hour holding folder for email. They can write the email they want to write, and if it pertains to a situation where they are frustrated, angry or annoyed, they can put it in the folder for 24-hours, at which point, they read and adjust if necessary before sending it.

All of these strategies give you ways to start supporting your team members right away. Obviously, don't try to implement them all at once. And definitely discuss with your team member which one(s) they think will help them the most, or would be easiest to implement first.

## Summary

Your team members with ADHD have valuable contributions to make to your team. They can help you be more flexible, innovative, can offer great in-depth expertise and build excellent relationships. Managing them can be somewhat confounding at first, as not all your usual strategies or advice work for them, resulting in you needing to flex your management/leadership style.

This paper offers strategies to do just that: learn about ADHD and their particular brand of it. Working with your team members, figure out what they need to be successful in your organisation. Are there parts of the job that just don't suit their brain and it's better for them, your team and the business if that is acknowledged and accommodated? Are there areas where they need support to do better or work more effectively? Sometimes it's not the output that changes but rather the energy required to achieve the same outcome is less. This increases resilience, gives a better work-life balance and improves the ability to take on challenging tasks. All of which are positives.

Supportive relationships are key. Encouraging engagement in development and coaching to find and further develop strategies will support team stability and career progression. Put yourself in a position where you can do this. If you would like some support on how to set this up in your

organisation or a conversation on how to implement strategies for a particular staff member, I'd be happy to help. You can contact me at [coaching@judithklerks.com](mailto:coaching@judithklerks.com)

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