

An employer's guide to ADHD in the workplace

If you are reading this, it may be because you are employing, or considering employing, someone who has told you that they have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Or perhaps they have symptoms and ADHD has been raised as a possible cause for them.

This guide aims to answer the many questions that you may have about ADHD: **What is ADHD? How will it affect my employee and on the rest of the team and organisation? What can I do to support them?** Not everyone with ADHD will need extra support in the workplace, and those who do may need only small changes – known under the Equality Act 2010 as ‘reasonable adjustments’ – to help them to work effectively. Most of these will cost little or nothing to implement.

People with ADHD often talk about lack of support from their employer as a reason why they may end up leaving a job. However, with support, understanding and some small changes to capitalise on their strengths and talents and get around difficulties, they are likely to be a great asset to your organisation.

Many people with ADHD are noted for strengths such as:

- Ability to ‘hyperfocus’ on things they are interested in
- Willingness to take risks
- Spontaneous and flexible
- Good in a crisis
- Creative ideas – thinking outside the box
- Relentless energy
- Often optimistic
- Being motivated by short term deadlines – working in sprints rather than marathons
- Often an eye for detail

Remember: Everyone with ADHD is different, and the condition affects different people in different ways. People with ADHD have the same broad range of skills, interests and intelligence as the rest of society. It’s important to communicate openly with your employee so that you can find out what support would help them most and ask them any questions you may have.

What is ADHD?

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition affecting brain structure and neurotransmission: the way in which messages are communicated around the brain and different areas of the brain are activated.

ADHD is thought to be caused by a complex mix of environmental and genetic factors, but is a strongly hereditary condition. ADHD is present from childhood, but an increasing number of adults are now being diagnosed with ADHD for the first time, having been 'missed' when they were younger and the condition was not as well understood as it is now.

ADHD has three core symptoms which affect people with it to different degrees:

Inattention Difficulties with concentration, short term and working memory
Difficulties with planning and getting started (activation)
Difficulty with organisation and losing things
Easily distracted by small things which others wouldn't notice

Impulsiveness Acting or speaking on the spur of the moment without thinking through the consequences.
Difficulty controlling emotions

Hyperactivity Whilst adults with ADHD are usually much less active than children with ADHD, they may still have symptoms such as restlessness and the need to tap or fidget. Some people are diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, without hyperactivity: this is particularly the case for girls and women.

Whilst not a core symptom, many people with ADHD have problems with sleep. This can have knock-on consequences for getting up and out to work in the morning.

It is thought that around 2.5 – 4% of the adult population would benefit from treatment for ADHD¹, but in 2017 fewer than 1 in 1000 adults in Scotland were taking medication for ADHD².

ADHD can be diagnosed on its own, but often comes alongside a number of other associated conditions. These include sensory difficulties (being over- or under-sensitive to sights, sounds and other sensations), dyslexia, dyspraxia (coordination difficulties), tics, and autistic spectrum disorder. Some (but by no means all) people with ADHD also develop mental health difficulties such as anxiety and depression.

How is ADHD treated?

ADHD is a lifelong condition and cannot be 'cured' – but it can be successfully managed. Many people with ADHD find their symptoms improve with medication – but this only works for as long as the medication is in the body. The main side effects of the most commonly used medications (stimulants) are appetite loss and difficulties with sleep. ADHD medication must be started and kept under review by a consultant psychiatrist.

People with ADHD may also benefit from counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy, as well as education about the condition and coaching to help them manage day to day activities. Unfortunately these treatments are not as widely available in the UK as they should be³.

What types of jobs suit people with ADHD?

Bearing in mind that everyone with ADHD is unique, there are as many jobs for people with ADHD as there are people with ADHD! However, in general, jobs which play to the strengths of people with ADHD provide:

Jobs which provide

- Good fit with individual's interests and skills – boredom and low interest will make focus much more difficult
- Structured work day
- Opportunities for movement
- Stimulation – reaction to incoming demands
- Regular and fairly immediate feedback

NOT jobs which feature

- Long periods working in isolation
- Monotonous and repetitive tasks without variation
- Need for high levels of concentration to manage risk (e.g. industrial safety monitoring, long distance driving)¹

How can people with ADHD be supported at work?

ADHD, if its impact on the individual is significant, can be seen as a disability under the 2010 Equality Act – and therefore employers have a responsibility to protect employees and potential employees from discrimination and harassment, and to make reasonable adjustments to assist them to do their jobs. But beyond the legal

¹ By law, people with ADHD must tell the DVLA if their ADHD affects their ability to drive safely and ask their specialist if they are not sure. The DVLA may request additional information from a specialist and / or require them to take a driving assessment before making a decision on whether their license is affected.

obligation to offer support, doing this will help the person with ADHD to perform to their very best and this is good all round.

The number one way in which employers can support employees with ADHD is to find out about the condition and show understanding and a reasonable degree of flexibility in relation to the difficulties which it can cause. Examples of this might include:

- Agreeing a 15 minute start and finish time window, rather than a rigid fixed start time with sanctions for being slightly late
- Allowing the employee to delegate non-core aspects of the job which they find particularly difficult to complete, such as completing paperwork / timesheets – which otherwise might make the whole job unachievable.

Reasonable adjustments which employers might make to help people with ADHD include:

Modifications to the work environment

- Visual prompts – e.g. wall charts for routines, checklists, post-it notes for reminders
- Physical reminders – e.g. laying out everything needed for tomorrow at the end of today, labeled 'homes' for storing tools
- Larger computer screens so everything is visible (reduces burden on memory)
- Visible clocks, allowing / encouraging use of alarms and timers
- Reducing distractions:
 - Allow headphones with music or ambient noise, or ear plugs
 - Own space if possible, with reduced level of distraction

Modifications to working and management practices

- Offer increased supervision / frequent check-ins and feedback (e.g. daily or weekly planning and progress meetings with line manager)
- Tasks broken down into clear, bite size steps
- Give instructions and meeting notes in writing rather than verbally
- Operate a buddy system for tasks to help maintain focus
- Allow regular movement / stretching breaks:
 - Pomodoro working (25 mins work + 5 mins break, with longer break after 4 Pomodoros)
 - Scheduled breaks during long meetings / activities

Allowing useful technology

There are a number of apps which can assist people with ADHD and related difficulties. However, these are not a 'magic bullet' and the wrong app can just put an extra burden on memory – so the key is to talk to the employee about what would help them within their particular work context and try things out. Potentially helpful apps include:

- **To do list reminders / scheduling apps** (e.g. Todoist, Wunderlist)
- Aids if reading and writing are a problem
 - **Text to speech software** (e.g. Captivoice.com)
 - **Speech to text software** (e.g. Google Docs Voice Typing, Apple Dictation)
- **Blockers** to eliminate distractions from social media / smart phones during tasks (e.g. Cold Turkey)
- **White noise / ambient noise apps** (e.g. Coffivity, Focusatwill)
- **Note taking apps** (can be as simple as notes function on phone)

Accessing coaching

People with ADHD may benefit from regular sessions with a work coach who can help them to develop their organisation and time management skills and strategies. Access to Work funding can sometimes be used to fund this (see <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>)

For a list of ADHD trained coaches see <https://aadduk.org/help-support/coaches/>. Some coaches are happy to provide support remotely over telephone / Skype.

Talking to your employee needs to be more than a one-off conversation. Try to build a relationship where they feel they can trust you, and you can both talk about any concerns. For example, you could arrange a quarterly meeting to talk about how their ADHD is affecting them and how any reasonable adjustments you've agreed on are working for them and for the organisation.

Confidentiality and the rest of the team

Most people with ADHD don't have to tell their employer about it, so deciding to reveal their diagnosis will have taken courage. Many people are afraid they will be seen as less capable or as troublesome – especially given the stigma that surrounds ADHD. They may fear that ADHD might affect their career progression – or even that they could lose their job as a result. It's important to recognise this, and to provide your employee with the reassurance and the support they need.

You should take care to ensure that any information your employee shares with you about their ADHD remains confidential. Therefore:

- Do not discuss their ADHD with other team members, unless they have said you can.
- Do not discuss their ADHD with them where other people may find out, such as in an email that could be passed on, or in an open-plan office.
- If your employee has an occupational health assessment, clarify with them exactly who can see the report.
- If you have documents discussing your employee's ADHD, make sure they are kept secure.

Your employee's ADHD can also have an impact on other members of staff.

As the employer, it's your responsibility to ensure any impact is handled sensitively, and not ignored, while also respecting your employee's confidentiality. You may want to discuss with your employee whether they want to tell colleagues about their ADHD. If other members of staff know why they are being allowed greater flexibility or other adjustments, such as use of headphones, they may be more accommodating.

Where to go for more information

For more information about your duties as an employer, you can contact The Equality and Human Rights Commission (if you are in England, Scotland or Wales) at <https://equalityhumanrights.com>

Other useful reading and viewing about ADHD (click each for links):

- Royal College of Psychiatrists of Scotland Guidelines on adult ADHD, 2017
- Professor Thomas Brown – half hour video introduction to ADHD
- CHADD suggestions for self- managing ADHD in the workplace (American but relevant)
- NHS Lothian Self Help Resource for Adults with ADHD
- ***Delivered from distraction: getting the most out of life with Attention Deficit Disorder*** by Dr Edward Hallowell and Dr John Ratey (one of the most respected books for people with adult ADHD, written by someone with it himself)
- ***Fast Minds: How to thrive if you have ADHD (or think you might)*** by Craig Surman and Tim Bilkey

References

1. Faraone SV, Biederman J. What is the prevalence of adult ADHD? Results of a population screen of 966 adults. *Journal of attention disorders*. 2005;9(2):384-91.
2. Medicines used in Mental Health 2004/5 - 2016/17. NHS Scotland Information Services Division (ISD), 2017 October 2017.
3. O'Regan F, McConkey M, Ellis Logan P, Lloyd T. A Lifetime Lost, or a Lifetime Saved. ADHD Foundation 2017.

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To provide comments or feedback on this guide please email info@scottishadhdcoalition.org

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