

## **Career Choices and Workplace Challenges for Individuals with ADHD**

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Remarkably, although work life dominates the waking hours of most adults, little research has focused on ADHD as it affects workplace functioning. As so often is the case, clinical experience precedes research that can quantify and validate clinical observations. In this chapter, I'll share observations and experiences over many years of clinical practice, addressing workplace issues of young adults and older adults with ADHD.

### **A strong working knowledge of workplace issues is essential in treating adults**

Very few psychologists who treat adults with ADHD have been trained or have extensive experience in addressing the career or vocational issues of their clients. Career issues are viewed as the specialty of master's level "career counselors". A doctoral level psychologist would typically refer their client to such a counselor if career issues related to ADHD needed to be addressed.

But for a psychologist who treats adults with ADHD to be unable to help their client to make a career selection that is compatible with his ADHD, or to help them identify and change ADHD-related problems in the workplace is the equivalent of a child psychologist who didn't address a child's academic functioning. While there are certainly educational advocates and educational specialists who may be referred to, the typical child psychologist knows far more about educational/academic functioning related to ADHD, and has much interaction with teachers, tutors, school placement specialists and school personnel in the process of treating a child with ADHD. The psychologist reviews report cards, makes recommendations for IEP's (Individual Educational Plans), confers with teachers and tutors, and works with parents to develop improved patterns around completion of homework and long-term academic assignments.

As a psychologist who shifted from a focus on ADHD in children to working with adolescents, young adults, and older adults, I quickly became aware that many of the challenges of living with ADHD in adulthood relate to workplace functioning. A psychologist is far better equipped than a career counselor to help an adult with ADHD understand his workplace challenges from a brain-based perspective as well as to help him make choices and find solutions that are consistent with his particular neuro-cognitive strengths and weaknesses. And yet, few, if any of us have received in-depth training in doing career assessments, much less in treating adults with ADHD in a workplace context. This chapter is intended to provide an overview of the approach that I have gradually developed over the course of more than twenty years in my specialized ADHD-focused clinical practice.

### **The "old" view of ADHD in the workplace**

One of the first, classic, and highly respected books on ADHD in adults by \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, had little to say about work issues, but most was negative. The image they painted was that adults with ADHD were typically

underemployed, often unemployed, and moved frequently from job to job. There continue to be many adults who fall into this category, however few of them are likely to seek treatment as adults for a variety of reasons. Many young males with ADHD and learning disabilities are unemployed due to incarceration. Poor judgment and impulsivity often results in jail time for young men with little education and few employment opportunities. Others struggle along in low-paying jobs with no health benefits and cannot afford treatment for ADHD. Still other young adults, although diagnosed with ADHD as children, no longer view themselves as needing treatment and may have resented being “required” to take medication or being placed in “special education” classes during school years.

### **A broader view of ADHD in the workplace**

The adult seeking treatment for ADHD in adulthood functions at a much higher level. In my practice I have treated many professionals with ADHD – physicians, attorneys, computer specialists, scientists, and business consultants, among others. Many adults, by virtue of high IQ and less severe ADHD, are not severely impacted by ADHD until the demands of academic or career demands increase to a level beyond their ability to cope.

Many mental health professionals might question the validity of an ADHD diagnosis for someone with a graduate or professional school education. Sadly, a number of clients who later consulted me, reported that a psychiatrist or psychologist had told them that they “could not possibly have ADHD” because they had done well in school or had a professional position. The reality, however, is that the incidence of ADHD among highly intelligent, highly educated individuals is significant, and involves significant disability – for example the physician who was unable to pass her medical boards despite repeated trials; a physician who was forced to close his medical practice (after many years of post-graduate medical training!) because he was completely overwhelmed by the organizational demands of his work; numerous doctoral candidates who never earn their degree due to an inability to organize and complete their dissertation, and the very bright accountant who was fired from several jobs due to his lateness, boredom and extreme procrastination patterns in a career for which he was ill-suited.

### **How does ADHD “look” in adulthood and how does it impact employment?**

Most clinicians have been taught about the “holy trinity” of ADHD, i.e., hyperactivity, impulsivity, and inattention. As children grow from childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood, levels of hyperactivity and impulsivity tend to lessen while problems with inattention and distractibility continue. A larger and perhaps more challenging set of ADHD-related symptoms come to the foreground – related to the complex set of cognitive abilities clustered under the term “executive functions.”

While executive functions such as organizing, prioritizing, planning, persisting, re-evaluating, and anticipating are certainly areas of weakness for children with ADHD, we rarely focus on these as much as the more visible and difficult behavior patterns typical of children with hyperactive/impulsive type ADHD. Expectations begin to change

in middle school, where children are expected to become more independent and better organized, and it is often at this juncture that bright children with ADHD begin to experience stress and ADHD patterns become more obvious.

This pattern continues on an upward trend through adolescence and into young adulthood, where the demands for independent functioning may become overwhelming. For adults with ADHD, the patterns which are most problematic directly affect workplace functioning. Poor time management skills result in late arrival at work and in repeated missed deadlines. Problems with organization result in cluttered desks, misplaced paperwork, and difficulty with scheduling and prioritizing tasks. Working independently, and working on long-term complex tasks are especially challenging for those with ADHD.

As a result, the adult who seeks consultation from a clinician regarding ADHD-related problems is much less likely to report that their major issues relate to hyperactivity or impulsivity (though these continue to pose difficulties in adulthood) and more likely to talk about feeling that the management of their daily life, both at work and at home, feels overwhelming and out of control.

### **Neuro-cognitive Psychotherapy – a brain-based approach to the treatment of ADHD**

Because ADHD is clearly a neurobiological disorder, (some would argue that all psychiatric disorders have a neurobiological basis), any treatment approach needs to be “brain-based” – that is, whether we are treating a child experiencing behavioral or academic problems, or an adult experiencing workplace or interpersonal problems, effective treatment must begin with an understanding of the dominant neurobiological factors that underlie functional difficulties – in other words, “brain-based” treatment.

I have written in depth (citations) about neurocognitive psychotherapy and refer the reader to these for a fuller discussion of these approaches. In the context of focusing on workplace issues in psychotherapy, a briefer introduction to these concepts is in order.

Neurocognitive psychotherapy is an approach that borrows from a number of other treatment models and cognitive behavioral psychotherapy, cognitive rehabilitation techniques. The clinician is encouraged to conduct the therapy session with the cognitive challenges of ADHD in mind – such as forgetfulness, a tendency to stray off topic, need for structure and direction, and difficulty with independent goal setting and follow-through. In some ways, the clinician needs to take on multiple roles, at times attending to the emotional issues of low self-esteem, demoralization, and ADHD-stress-related anxiety; at other times functioning more like a coach, making concrete suggestions, assigning “homework” to be accomplished between sessions, and engaging in active problem-solving with the client; and interwoven throughout, the clinician needs to keep in mind the ongoing difficulty with focus and structure, using techniques such as allowing the client to tape record the session for later review or encouraging the client to take detailed notes during the session.

### **Conducting a career assessment**

The assessment process described in this section is the most complete assessment that I conduct. In many cases, such a comprehensive assessment, with its inherent cost, is

not necessary. Before discussing instances in which I would recommend a less comprehensive assessment, I'll describe the full assessment process.

A good career assessment needs to take many diverse factors into account: the individual's cognitive strengths, gifts and talents; the individual's cognitive challenges (either learning disabilities or areas of relative weakness); the individual's interests, personality type, goals, values, and limiting circumstances. A full history of all previous employment is essential as well. Let's consider each of these individually.

### **Assessing cognitive strengths, gifts, and talents**

In a general sense the same set of tests designed to measure IQ and academic achievement can be used to identify both areas of strength and areas of weakness. In the case of a young adult, particularly a young adult who seems to have little sense of career direction or interest, a very specific set of tests called the **Highland's Ability Tests (check exact name and give citation)** can be extremely helpful. This is a battery of tests that can only be administered by specific franchised testing centers. The Highland's battery was initially developed by the Colgate Palmolive Company for in-house use in personnel selection. It consists of ?? separate and highly diverse tests designed to measure a very broad range of specific abilities or talents. The test battery is designed to identify an array of "clusters" of ability that have been linked, through extensive research, to success in a variety of career categories. Unlike the standard career interest tests, the Highland's battery does not identify specific careers that would be a good match for the individual's strengths, but rather identifies categories of careers. One of the great advantages of the Highland's battery is that it focuses on strengths, as opposed to IQ or academic achievement tests that often elicit anxious or defensive reactions in individual's being tested. To learn more about the Highland's battery, the reader can go to \_\_\_\_\_.

### **Assessing areas of relative cognitive weakness**

Because adults with AD/HD very often have other types of learning challenges, a standard psychoeducational or neuropsychological battery can be very useful as part of a career assessment. If the individual has already undergone such testing within the past several years, and is able to make a full report of test results available to the clinician, it is rarely necessary to undertake a second evaluation. IQ testing, academic achievement testing (such as the Woodcock-Johnson battery), memory testing, and tests of executive functioning are often useful tests to include in such an assessment.

### **Assessment of personality type and values**

The Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI) can be a very useful addition to a career assessment. In my experience, an intensive MBTI training workshop is highly useful in making this deceptively simple test reveal the full range of information that it can provide. Otherwise, clinicians often refer to brief, simplistic descriptions of "type" that are available in numerous books on the MBTI, and only gain a fraction of the career-related information that can be gleaned from a well-interpreted MBTI.

The MBTI is useful in helping the individual consider many aspects of his personality and his value system that may not readily be related to career choice, but which have a major impact upon the level of satisfaction and success that an individual is likely to attain if a career choice is made that is compatible with personality type. The

MBTI is a self-assessment tool and is only as useful as the individual's self-assessment is accurate. It focuses on the inter-relationship between four major parameters:

- **E-I** Extroversion - Introversion
- **S-N** Concrete – Abstract (i.e., interested in things or ideas)
- **T-F** Logical/analytical – Empathic/intuitive
- **J-P** Structured/order-seeking – Flexible, freeform

These four parameters combine to create sixteen “personality types” that have been studied and matched with career choices and career satisfaction. An excellent MBTI “primer” is *Please Understand Me* by \_\_\_\_\_.

### **Assessing Interests**

A standard interest test such as the Strong Interest Inventory can be very useful as a way of matching the client's interests with those of people who have been successful in a variety of fields.

Once these various types of assessment have been completed, it becomes the task of the clinician to carefully interweave the results for the client so that job selection and/or career direction can take into account his strengths, his interests, his values and personality type, his areas of weakness, and the pattern of ADHD symptoms that seem to have the greatest negative impact upon job performance. In addition, although very little has been written about this concept, it is important that the clinician also emphasize those aspects of ADHD that may work as strengths in particular jobs and/or careers. (cite Lynn weiss and thom Hartmann)

### **Helping Young Adults Make ADHD-friendly Career and Job Choices**

When working with a young adult, his or her worklife lies ahead. This is an ideal time to help a young adult reach a sophisticated understanding of himself – not over-emphasizing ADHD issues, but helping them fully participate in the evaluation, understanding that their interests, preferences and strengths may have more to do with a good career match than their ADHD does.

Most often a young adult, or his parents, enter the career assessment process asking what the “best” jobs are for those with ADHD. It becomes the task of the clinician to reframe the focus of the career assessment. Each young adult comes to the task of selecting a career with a very complex set of traits that all must be considered if a good choice is to be made. An emphasis upon strengths and preferences, accompanied by a plan to reduce or minimize ADHD challenges, will lead to a much more satisfactory career choice than will a career choice made by over-focusing on ADHD-related problems.

### **FOCUSING ON CAREER CHOICES WITH YOUNG ADULTS**

The choice of one's life work is a critical choice that will have a huge impact upon the quality of life of an individual with AD/HD. As such, just as a clinician would help a young adult carefully explore relationship issues and the choice of a life partner, clinicians should also help a young adult with AD/HD carefully explore career options as

he or she goes through the process of selecting (or changing) a college major or goes through a job search.

A thorough AD/HD-focused career assessment for a young adult with ADHD is an excellent investment in his or her future. Oddly, despite the enormous and rising cost of a college education, the choice of a college major and the related choice of career focus is often left to the young adult with little or no intervention on the part of parents or psychotherapist. And yet few young adults are equipped with a sophisticated understanding of themselves, much less with an adequate understanding of the many factors involved in a particular job or career.

### **Guiding a young adult in career selection**

“What do you want to do with your life?” is probably one of the most daunting questions any adult, young or old, may face. Any many choose their career direction by default – doing what their mother or father did before them. Or happening into a job after school years are ended with relatively little reflection on what suits them best. A lucky few have such narrow, focused interests that they’ve “always known” what they wanted to be.

When a young adult has AD/HD, the factors influencing a good career choice are much more complex. Not only does he or she need to consider all of the issues we must all consider:

- What kinds of jobs are available at the time I’m searching;
- Am I willing to move to another part of the country to find a job;
- Do I have the credentials to get my foot in the door?
- What kind of lifestyle do I want?
- How important is money? Personal time?
- What careers are a good match with my values and interests?

Adults with AD/HD have other issues that will greatly affect the outcome of their choices. Very often, adults with AD/HD are more sensitive to a variety of sensory stimulation which means that the physical environment of the job is more critical for them. Executive function issues make handling details, complex multi-step tasks, and paperwork more challenging. Those with hyperactivity are much less suited to a desk job that allows little movement throughout the day. Boredom typically has a greater negative impact on those with AD/HD.

- How much stress will this job entail?
- How much structure and guidance will I receive?
- How much paperwork is involved?
- Will I be expected to work on long-term assignments with little supervision?
- Am I expected to be a self-starter?
- Will I be required to sit at a desk and concentrate for long hours?

On the plus side, many with AD/HD are great at generating new ideas. Some adults with AD/HD who fall more toward the hyperactive end of the continuum have characteristics that make them well-suited to being in a fast-paced career such as being an entrepreneur.

Some have good people skills in addition to high energy and would do well in a career in politics, sales, marketing, entertainment, or television. Others with AD/HD have a strong need for a creative outlet and are drawn to work in design, film-making, web design, or some other aspect of the visual arts.

## **Differentiating between a “career” and a “job”**

### **Assessing the level of workplace change that is needed**

When an adult client seeks a consultation about workplace problems related to ADHD, the first issue that a clinician should address is the level of change that is needed. Does this client need to focus on:

- Identifying and addressing problems on the current job?
- Changing employers while seeking a similar job?
- Seeking a different type of job within the same general career path?
- Changing careers altogether?

In other words, what are your client’s options and what are the least costly solutions in terms of time and money?

The type of career assessment outlined for individuals who are trying to select a career is not necessarily appropriate or useful in working with an adult who is already trained in a career path. My rule of thumb when a client approaches me seeking career consultation related to ADHD is to begin with the least costly option – i.e., looking for ways to improve the client’s situation in his current workplace.

### **Assessment of current workplace functioning – defining problems, seeking solutions**

The first consideration in a career consultation should be to understand the multiple factors involved in current workplace difficulties. Whether a client with ADHD seeks to remain in his position for an extended basis, or will be there short-term while considering other options, it is important to focus on helping the client to understand how ADHD factors are related to the current problems and to seek ways to decrease stress and improve the current situation. While the client may only want to focus upon leaving his or her current employment, there is much to be learned in carefully evaluating current and past employment history. Through this process much can be learned that will contribute to a more informed, ADHD-friendly job choice in the future.

ADHD-related job problems can fall in a number of different areas:

- 1- Poor match between the individual’s strengths and weaknesses and the requirements of the job.
- 2- Poor match between the individual and his or her supervisor.
- 3- Interpersonal difficulties related to ADHD that contribute to conflicts with co-workers or managers.
- 4- Job is under-stimulating due to lack of interest, lack of variety, lack of opportunity for creativity or change.

- 5- Job is frustrating due to lack of opportunity for physical movement – i.e., an adult on the hyperactive end of the ADHD continuum in a desk job.
- 6- Executive functioning difficulties related to ADHD (poor time management; difficulty with detailed paperwork; forgetfulness; difficulty meeting deadlines; disorganization; difficulty setting and following priorities; tendency to over-commit; tendency to greatly under-estimate the time required for a project, etc.) that lead to poor performance review.
- 7- Changes within the company that have led to increased stress, increased work expectations, and/or decreased administrative support.

The first task for the clinician is to guide the client through an analysis of current job problems, helping the client to consider many different aspects of the job that may contribute to current problems. Often, a client may be fixated upon a particular problem such as a feeling that the supervisor only emphasizes the negative aspects of their work performance and ignores positive work efforts. “The only thing my supervisor ever talks about is the fact that I’m often a little late to work. She completely ignores the fact that I stay late most evenings and actually put in more than my 40 hours per week.”

A job analysis is often more complete and accurate if it is guided by the clinician in a structured way. A good first place to start is to go through the list outlined above.

First, assist your client to think about her strengths and interests and how much she feels she is able to use them in her current job. Explore areas of challenge or weakness as well. The clinician should always keep in mind, especially for adults who have not had a full neuropsychological test battery, that undiagnosed learning disabilities frequently accompany ADHD. It’s important to explore issues of reading speed, reading retention, spelling, and writing ability.

Ask about her relationship with her immediate supervisor. Does she feel understood, appreciated, and supported? Does she like and feel liked by this supervisor? Or does she feel criticized, micromanaged, ignored, or under-supported by the supervisor? It can also be very useful to explore relationships with past supervisors during this discussion. What are the characteristics of supervisors with whom you’ve worked well in the past?

Educating your client about ADHD and the many ways that it can impact job performance and job satisfaction is often part of the clinician’s work when focusing on career issues during treatment. The clinician may want to refer to my book *ADD in the Workplace* for a more detailed discussion of ADHD tendencies that can lead to interpersonal conflict on the job or performance problems on the job.

ADHD traits that may lead to interpersonal difficulties include a tendency to miss or misinterpret non-verbal social cues (such as when another individual no longer desires to continue the conversation or when well-intentioned teasing is not well-received); distractibility and inattention that may be interpreted as lack of interest; a pattern frequently interrupting others when they are speaking; or a tendency to emotionally over-react with anger or frustration.

Other ADHD traits can be misinterpreted by co-workers or supervisors as poor motivation. For example, chronic lateness when arriving at work, not completing forms and paperwork in a timely manner, or chronically missing deadlines.

The cluster of executive function challenges often associated with ADHD in adults can lead to numerous difficulties. Impulsivity can lead an employee to agree to tasks before they have carefully considered whether they have overcommitted and will be unable to fulfill their promise. Restlessness and hyperactivity may lead an individual to frequently leave his or her desk, finding excuses to roam the halls, run errands, or strike up conversations rather than working productively. Memory difficulties can lead an individual with ADHD to be seen as unreliable when verbal requests are repeatedly forgotten. And patterns of procrastination, so common among adults with ADHD, can lead coworkers and supervisors to see the employee with ADHD as immature, unmotivated, or worse, attempting to manipulate others into doing work for them. Difficulties with planning and organization can frequently play a role in poor workplace performance. An employee with ADHD may avoid beginning a challenging task because they have difficulty with organizing the task and knowing where to begin. Rather than prioritizing, an employee with ADHD may impulsively jump from task to task with little follow-through and task completion. And general messiness, that so often accompanies ADHD, is not only a very public display of disorganization, but also greatly increases the challenge of keeping track of and completing the multiple tasks the job requires.

A final area of job exploration that is critical to understanding how ADHD impacts job performance is the aspects of their employer and their job that may exacerbate ADHD traits on the job. For example, a badly organized supervisor, a company that is down-sizing and has eliminated administrative support staff, a company that is under-staffed and requires frequent over-time work, or a company in transition in which job expectations, regulations, and chain of command are in flux.

This structured exploration with your client becomes the basis for identifying problem areas that then need to be prioritized and addressed. As the task of prioritization is a typical area of challenge for adults with ADHD, this very task is one in which you should assist your client. Asking structured questions is often very helpful. For example, you might ask your client to think about what issue at work is most troubling for them, and then ask them to consider what problem area might be the top priority for their supervisor. These identified problems are often quite different. For example, your client might feel that getting control of cluttered desk and workspace is a top priority; or that reducing demands for overtime work would be the most direct way to reduce stress and ADHD symptoms. The supervisor, however, might be more concerned about chronic late arrival at work, or about lack of follow-through with paperwork. Together, you and your client can begin to create an action plan, prioritizing the problems that should be addressed, and then developing strategies to deal with these problems.

The therapist should use a brain-based approach, as always, in working with his adult client with ADHD, providing guidance, structure, and direct suggestions as problems and

solutions are discussed. For example, the clinician may strongly suspect that the client is in danger of being placed on probation for poor job performance while the client with ADHD may have missed the danger signs and remain focused on his or her own frustrations in the workplace. In such an instance, the clinician might suggest that a meeting with the supervisor should be a top priority action – to let the supervisor know that the employee with ADHD is aware of job performance shortcomings and is taking active steps to correct them.

It is critical that the clinician be aware that many adults with ADHD are poor at judging how much they can take on at one time. While the client may want to impulsively try to address multiple issues simultaneously, the clinician (using a brain-based approach) can remind the client of her ADHD tendency to take on too many projects and be unable to complete them. The clinician might then make a concrete suggestion about which strategy to attempt initially, and how to decide when it is time to tackle another ADHD workplace challenge. This sort of structuring is a brain-based intervention that should be used repeatedly to assist the client to make realistic goals, stay on task, and achieve success, one step at a time.