A hand in a dark suit sleeve holds a folded US dollar bill against a bright blue sky with soft white clouds. The sun is visible in the background, creating a lens flare effect. The text is overlaid on the upper right portion of the image.

# *Optimizing Your Earning* **POWER**

*For individuals with AD/HD,  
capitalizing on strengths is key  
to on-the-job effectiveness*

BY NANCY A. RATEY, ED.M., MCC

**A**lthough many people believe that there are careers specifically suited to people with attention-deficit/hyper-activity disorder (AD/HD), if individuals with the disorder take the time to find out what they like to do and where their strengths lie, they can find a job and career that is specifically suited to them. Just like someone without AD/HD, individuals with the disorder need to take the time and effort to find what works for them.

Some adults with AD/HD may find certain office jobs compatible, but not everyone needs to work in an office. For some individuals this could mean finding a job where they can move around a lot or travel, such as a letter carrier or salesperson. For others it could mean owning their own business, and for some it could mean the structure of a nine-to-five job. It's up to the individual to discover where he or she can optimize his or her AD/HD and find happiness and thrive! But the best news is, it's possible and achievable.

### Asking for help

Sometimes it takes an outside individual, such as a mentor, close friend, career counselor or coach, to help people identify their interests, skills and strengths. For example, "David" had been fired from or quit countless jobs in the past. It wasn't until he acknowledged and accepted that he had problems keeping a job that things changed. This time around, he was prepared and was confident. What made the difference? David asked a close friend to help him identify where he was going off course.

Through discussions with his friend and reflecting back on his past jobs, David realized that his previous jobs as a salesman weren't the right environment for him. He had little to no contact with co-workers, which was something he needed

to feel supported and motivated. His friend had him make a list of what he wanted from a job, what he was good at and liked and what parts of his past jobs he didn't like. By the end of this process more possibilities were apparent to David. If he had not taken the time to acknowledge he was struggling and had he not asked for help, he would have impulsively taken the first job offer and repeated his same mistakes.

Whether you thrive in a fast- or slow-paced environment, working in teams or alone, or working in partnership with a coach, a trusted advisor or a friend can help you to slow down, take stock, and identify areas of strength and weakness. By doing this type of personal inventory, you can begin focusing on what careers are a good match for you. Once you have done this the next step is to create strategies to bridge any potential gaps. The questions asked by an external person can help you generate your own creative solutions. Seek out accountability with others wherever possible. Practice using the strategies that work for you until they stick.



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### Questions to ask yourself

Here are some helpful questions that can help you understand the best environment for you.

- If I could have any job in the world, what would it be?
- What would I be doing in that job? Does it accentuate my positives?
- What tasks and responsibilities would come easily to me?
- What would the work environment look like?
- How do I handle details?
- Would I have difficulty sitting still for extended periods of time?
- Do I prefer working in teams?
- Is a noisy environment too distracting?
- Do I work better in my own office? In a cubicle? Outside?

Here are examples of the issues you might face and self-coaching strategies that can help you, no matter where you are in the job or career process.

### The job search

Many people fail before they even start because they don't know where to start the job search, they get overwhelmed or they don't have the organizational systems in place to properly track leads and follow through.

Here are some effective job search strategies:

■ **Create a plan and break down the steps.** A plan is the key to a successful job search. Create realistic targets and goals. Break them into steps to make them more doable. For instance, "I will send out 15 applications per week and make 10 phone calls." Listing and marking each of the steps on a timeline helps with follow through.

■ **Develop organizational systems.** Track what jobs you apply for and who you have talked to for each job. Develop and stick to an organizational system. Create a job-hunt notebook. Place the newspaper ads and printouts from the Internet job postings in the notebook so you can refer to the qualifications when recruiters call you for interviews, and have a place for notes for each job listing.

The job interview can make or break the deal. It's important to arrive on time, to come prepared and to wear the right clothes.

■ **Maintain motivation.** The job hunt process can be discouraging. It's easy to run out of motivation and lose hope. Seek the support of a coach, career advisor or friend. Having someone looking out for your interests without judgment is critical to bolster confidence and maintain motivation.

### The job interview

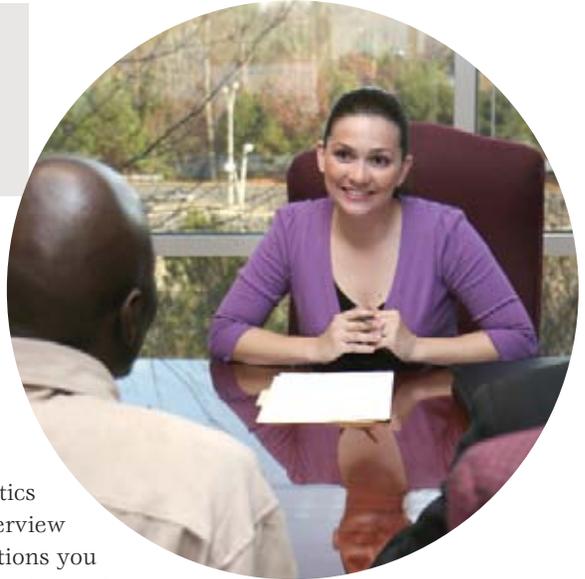
The job interview can make or break the deal. It's important to arrive on time, to come prepared and to wear the right clothes. Many of these things are exactly what people with AD/HD struggle with and are what get people fired. Do all you can to make sure you don't fall into the traps of the past.

Here are some strategies for effective

job interviews.

■ **Prepare and practice.** Don't wait until the last minute for directions and blow the interview because you got lost. Make a list of things to prepare for the interview, including logistics and a list of potential interview questions as well as questions you might ask the potential employer. Consider conducting a mock interview with your career advisor or a friend.

■ **Identify the job culture.** Often subtle things such as the work culture are difficult for people with AD/HD to determine. Visual cues



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can help you understand the culture of an office. When you go to the interview, look at what people in the company wear. Do they dress casually or in business suits? Is there a standard uniform? Would you be working with a lot of people or in a more solitary environment? Ask yourself, "Is this the right environment for me?" This can help to slow you down, pay better attention and be aware of details you might otherwise overlook.

■ **Create a good match.** Understand what the essential functions of the job are. This is critical to a good match. Generally the most important skills are listed first in job descriptions.

Write out the top five skills required and visualize yourself performing these eight hours a day, five days a week. Ask yourself: "How do I feel?" "Will I enjoy this?" "Can I do these easily?" "Will I need help performing one or more of these tasks?" If your skills match the top five, chances are it's a good match. Present and focus on these skills during the interview.

■ **Foster on-the-job success.** On-the-job success will depend on your ability to know and understand where your weak spots are, as discussed above. It's up to you to bridge the gaps. If a job is not a right match for you, it is important to recognize that and be prepared to self-evaluate and change jobs.

Other reasons people with AD/HD might fail on the job front have to do with arriving late, not completing tasks on time, not following directions or not fitting in with co-workers.

To combat these issues takes time and energy—and, most of all, vigilance. People with AD/HD all too easily forget what happened in the past and repeat the same mistakes over again. Create accountability with as many external "coaches" (friends, mentors, trusted colleagues) as possible to make sure you are using the strategies you set up for yourself and are staying the course.

### **Strategies that work**

Once you land a well-suited job, performing well is a continuous challenge. Here are some

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strategies to help you keep that job.

■ **Be proactive.** More often than not, individuals with AD/HD forget what their weaknesses are. They may get to work late, fail to complete projects on time and have difficulty staying organized.

Identify the pitfalls you are prone to and then establish accountability and frequent communication with a superior, colleague or mentor. Have them act as your external memory, reminding you when you get off track. Ask for feedback on a regular basis; don't wait until the yearly review.

■ **Maximize your environment.** Once you have identified your challenges, it is important to create external reminders to meet these obstacles. Use your environment—post notes to yourself as reminders; use electronic aids; and use others, such as assistants, co-workers or friends, as “coaches” to help you build the necessary reminders and guardrails to keep you on track.

■ **Think strategically.** Prevent emotional crisis. Be proactive and think ahead about workplace challenges. Identify where your emotional triggers are, and plan ahead for them. If you know transitions are hard for you, take steps to ease into them. The key here is planning ahead. By asking yourself a series of questions like the ones that follow, you can start to think strategically about how to solve long-standing dilemmas and ease stress.

What barriers will get in my way?

How can I overcome these barriers?

What has worked for me in the past?

■ **Divide tasks into doable parts.** Procrastination and lack of follow through are two major struggles for individuals with AD/HD. Anxiety can rise if you find the size of a task intimidating. Break projects into manageable parts and make a list, outline or timeline for each discrete part to be completed. This will help in a variety of ways: It will get you started without realizing it, and it will make your abstract ideas more tangible. This process provides a way to break the project down into smaller steps while inherently building structure for yourself.

After this first division, take it one step fur-

ther. Go back and try to make smaller, more manageable deadlines for the project. Set up an accountability schedule. It might be helpful to enlist the help of an external person such as an assistant, supervisor, coach or friend. This will free you up from the anxiety of “floating” endlessly while constantly worrying about an abstract project that has “shut you down.”

Develop a system of rewards for task completion. For example, give yourself a special dinner and watch your favorite television show when you get home after completing a difficult assignment. It is important not to allow yourself to have the reward if the task is not completed.

■ **Set start and stop times.** Part of procrastination is initiation. Set firm start and stop times to work on projects and stick to them. Use alarms and reminders to help you.

■ **Create accountability.** Create accountability with others in the work environment (with or without them knowing). For example, ask your supervisor or colleague if you could have them look over a draft of your report the week before it's due. This will force you to get started on it early, and the pressure of this deadline will provide you with a milestone to work toward.

■ **Focus on social skills.** Taking lunch breaks with colleagues, being social when appropriate or going to company gatherings are critical; these small group interactions show that you are a team player and involved in your company. More often than not, getting absorbed in work overrides the importance of this in our minds. Schedule lunches on a regular basis, ask a colleague to stop by your desk on his or her way to lunch, or ask your assistant to buzz you at noon. Make it a priority.

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*Doing things like saying “good morning,” stopping to say “hello,” shaking a hand, asking how someone is, looking someone in the eye and giving a smile are priceless and important for building work relationships.*

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*If you feel the job is not a good match for you, you find yourself struggling or feel that you need an accommodation, seek out expert advice sooner rather than later.*

for building work relationships. Learn and practice small talk. Take time to observe the “social ones” in your office, watch their body language, and listen to how they talk and what they talk about.

■ **Seek assistance.** Ask a trusted friend, advisor or coach to help you process your particular struggles. This will help to strengthen your social skills and improve your understanding of, and maneuvering around, office politics. Ask him or her to help you anticipate some of the social issues that will come up, then think about how you will react ahead of time and practice scenarios.

■ **Match communication styles.** Prepare for meetings ahead of time. Know the agenda and take yourself through a thought process about what kind of meeting it is. Make sure you match your communication style. Is it a meeting for reporting progress on projects? Or a brainstorming meeting? Both require different communication styles. For a reporting

meeting, short sentences that contain factual data are required. In brainstorming sessions, open-ended, free-flowing and creative ideas are more appreciated.

If you feel the job is not a good match for you, you find yourself struggling or you feel you need an accommodation, seek out expert advice sooner rather than later. While these tips will not guarantee you will get or keep a position, they can provide a solid step in the right direction and minimize the obstacles that your AD/HD may pose. ■

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