

# Accommodating AD/HD in the

Distractions may be a fact of modern life, but they do not have to derail the ability of those with AD/HD to be productive employees.



# Workplace

by Robin Bond, Esq., SPHR

COMPUTERS, FAXES, PRINTERS AND OTHER OFFICE machines provide an endless symphony of sound in today's workplaces. Phones ring. Pagers beep. Text messages arrive. E-mails appear, and instant messages interrupt. Sometimes there is background music, and there is always noise from traffic outside the cubicle. And then there are the people. The atmosphere of the modern office is rarely a place of quiet contemplation nor is it particularly conducive to concentration. For those with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD), those workplace conditions may make it impossible to succeed.

AD/HD is now the second most commonly diagnosed mental health condition in this country, second only to depression. An estimated 2 to 4 percent of adults in the United States have the disorder—a significant portion of the workforce.<sup>1</sup> Individuals with AD/HD can experience short attention spans, easy distractibility, impulsiveness, forgetfulness and restlessness. Yet these same workers may have high energy levels coupled with enhanced creativity and problem solving skills and a seemingly incongruous ability to hyper-focus on a task.

## Personal Strategies for Employees with AD/HD

- Keep your desk clean and organized.
- Use a daily planner.
- Track tasks with a "to do" list or a white board on your desk, and reprioritize assignments frequently.
- Think positively and try to avoid being impulsive.
- Take a "time out" if you feel frustrated.
- Be early for work and work-related functions.
- Take notes at meetings.
- Exercise during breaks.



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Competitively successful employers realize that to do more with less, they must maximize the creativity and productivity of *all* their workers. Employee turnover is expensive and detracts from profitability and efficiency. Both employers and employees can learn to accommodate a condition like AD/HD and create a “win-win” environment at work that maximizes the strengths of those with AD/HD and minimizes the weaknesses.

Often workers with AD/HD merely need some extra help and effective management to cope with the myriad distractions of an office. At the same time, the employee must assume responsibility for taking control of his or her behavior and meeting the employer’s reasonable expectations.

The key to success, from the employer’s perspective, is to be a strong manager who brings out the best in people and builds teams whose members have complementary skills. Studies have shown that without effective management, employees with AD/HD tend to have high turnover rates. A recent Roper poll of adults identified as having AD/HD showed that they held 5.4 jobs over the past 10 years compared to 3.4 jobs for adults without AD/HD. Only half of adults

with AD/HD are employed, compared to 72 percent of adults without the disorder.<sup>2</sup>

Poll any group of adults with AD/HD and it is likely most will have a horror story of having been fired after identifying their condition to a boss. The disorder carries an unnecessary stigma, and many bosses are only too willing to dismiss what they perceive as a potentially unproductive employee. They may steer away from hiring one in the first place. However, the reality is that most AD/HD accommodations are both quite inexpensive and helpful to *any* employee—not just those with the disorder. For many people, asking for reasonable adjustments to deal with workplace distractions in the normal course of business is less risky than asking for the same things and calling them “disability accommodations.” A more productive approach would be to use the term “reasonable business adjustments,” as most employers are receptive to removing office distractions to boost productivity.

In the event that removing office distractions does not work, the employee should consult an employment attorney and AD/HD coach to determine if a disability under the law exists in his or her case, strategize—if appropriate—a way to bring the disability to the attention of the company and request reasonable accommodations necessary for the job.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against “qualified individuals with disabilities” in job application procedures; hiring; firing; advancement; compensation; job training; and other terms, conditions and privileges of employment. The ADA’s application is widespread, as private employers with 15 or more employees, state and local government activities, employment agencies, labor unions and all “places of public accommodation” are covered under the ADA.

Although AD/HD is not specifically listed as a disability under the ADA, court cases have held that AD/HD can be a disability if the employee can prove all four elements of the test for a disability (see sidebar on page 42). Employers are required to engage in an interactive dialogue with an employee seeking accommodations for a disability; however, the employer does not have to lower the performance standards for a job due to the employee’s disability. The bottom line is that the employee with AD/HD has to take a significant amount of responsibility, both in making the accommodations work and with his or her performance (see sidebar on page 42 for suggestions).

The huge potential economic impact of AD/HD makes it imperative for employers to develop aware-



**What can employers do to accommodate employees with AD/HD?**

- Give instructions clearly—both orally and in writing.
- Provide structure in long-term tasks, such as checklists and deadlines.
- Offer frequent and specific feedback on performance.
- Provide extra clerical support.
- Reduce distractions by placing the employee in a cubicle or office away from high-noise areas.

**Examples of successful AD/HD accommodations**

- An employee with AD/HD was very sensitive to visual and auditory distractions. Her employer provided her with a cubicle away from the office machines and heavy traffic flow and gave her ear plugs to help eliminate distractions
- An attorney with AD/HD used a white board to prioritize tasks, was given a personal data assistant (PDA) and colored folders and met frequently with her supervisor to stay on task.
- A manager with AD/HD was provided with a software scheduler/organizer, a dictation machine, and extra secretarial support to help with project organization and time management.
- A counselor with AD/HD who was bothered by noise was provided with a phone light in lieu of a ringer, a white noise machine and extra soundproofing.

**Elements to be proved in a disability claim:**

1. You are *an individual with a disability* under the law.
2. The disability you have *substantially limits* (major degree of impairment) a *major life activity* (work).
3. You are qualified to perform the *essential functions* of the job.
4. You can perform these *essential functions* with or without *reasonable accommodations*. ■

ness and educational programs to help managers identify behaviors that could be indicative of AD/HD. Managers can then be proactive in providing appropriate management interventions without needing to ask if the person has AD/HD or needs disability accommodation. These programs can also function as a helpful tool to educate those suffering from AD/HD to realize the potential source of their problems and to seek professional help for it.

Distractions may be a fact of modern life, but they do not have to derail the ability of those with AD/HD to be productive employees. Even employees without AD/HD can exhibit symptoms associated with the disorder due to the multi-tasking and sensory overload of daily living. Employers and employees should work together to harness the creativity and energy of those with AD/HD, keep them employed, and at the same time increase the odds for improved corporate productivity and profits. ■

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**References**

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