ADD Issues in the Workplace

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

- Identifying and addressing problems on the current job?
- Looking for a similar job with a different employer
- Seeking a different type of job within the same general career path?
- Changing careers altogether?

In other words, what are your 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 for career consultation related to ADHD is to begin with the least costly option – i.e., looking for ways to improve working conditions in the current job.

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 you seek to remain in your position for an extended basis, or will be there on a short-term basis while considering other options, it is important to focus on understanding how ADHD factors are related to the current problems and then to seek ways to decrease stress and improve the current situation. While you may only want to focus upon leaving your current employment, there is much to be learned in carefully evaluating current and past employment history that will assist you in making a better choice of future employment.

ADHD-related job problems can fall into 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- Under-stimulation due to lack of interest, lack of variety, lack of opportunity for creativity or change.
5- Frustration 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 (poor time management; difficulty with

detailed paperwork; forgetfulness; difficulty meeting deadlines; disorganization; difficulty setting and following priorities; tendency to over-commit; tendency to under-estimate the time required for a project, etc.).

7- Changes within the company that have led to increased stress, increased work expectations, and/or decreased administrative support.

First - undertake a careful analysis of current job problems. Consider many different aspects of the job that may contribute to current problems. Often, an individual may be focused on their own frustrations and be less aware of their supervisor's concerns. "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."

Your job analysis will probably be more complete and accurate if it is guided by a clinician in a structured way. A good place to start is to go through the list of possible problem areas outlined above.

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?

Second, turn your attention to your strengths and interests and how much you feel you arecursorable to use them in your current job. Explore areas of challenge of weakness as well. Keep in mind, especially if you have not had a full neuropsychological test battery, that undiagnosed learning disabilities frequently accompany ADHD. Think about issues such as your reading speed, reading retention, spelling, and writing ability. If you experience problems in these areas, testing may be very helpful as part of your ADHD career counseling.

Learn as much as you can 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 reader 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 of 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 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.

Explore how "ADD-friendly" your current work situation is. Some jobs are inherently ADD-unfriendly - for example, a badly organized supervisor, elimination or severe reduction in administrative support, under-staffing, frequent required over-time work, unclear and frequently changing job expectations, and unclear lines of authority.

Putting it all together

The structured job exploration outlined above becomes the basis for identifying problem areas that then need to be prioritized and addressed. Prioritization is often difficult for adults with ADHD, so it may be most helpful to prioritize your tasks with your ADHD clinician who can ask you structured questions to guide you in setting priorities.

Try to look at your work performance from other points of view. For example, consider what issue at work is most troubling for you, and then consider what problem area might be the top priority for your supervisor. These identified problems are often quite different. For example, you 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 your stress and ADHD symptoms. Your supervisor, however, might be more concerned about your chronic late arrival at work, or about your lack of follow-through with paperwork.

Together, you and your clinician can begin to create an action plan, prioritizing the problems that should be addressed, and then developing strategies to deal with these problems. So, before reaching a decision to change jobs or careers, engage in the hard, but valuable work of analyzing and problem-solving on your current job. Your efforts will pay off whether you improve your current situation and remain at that job, or whether you ultimately decide to make a change.