

Managing ADHD Employees Who Are Underperforming

People with ADHD bring many strengths to the workplace. But they can also face setbacks. When managers find an ADHD employee underperforming, they should approach these issues with care and consideration. ADHD is a protected characteristic and a disability under the Equality Act 2010. In this post, we'll try to provide some inspiration on the best ways to approach this subject.



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What is Adult ADHD?

Adult ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects the executive functioning of someone's brain. ADHD is an acronym for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Symptoms include problems with attention and hyperactivity, but the condition is not limited to these symptoms.

The subtypes of ADHD such as inattentive, hyperactive-impulsive, and combined have different presentations in work situations. And they can impact task management, organisation, and productivity. People with ADHD may also experience Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria and have difficulties with emotional regulation. Present in around 5% of the adult population, ADHD is a clinical neurodivergence, which affects a person's behaviour and health.



Challenges for ADHD Employees in the Workplace

People with ADHD face a variety of challenges in life and at work. Without a clear understanding of the condition, finding an ADHD employee underperforming can leave managers frustrated, confused, and annoyed. ADHD staff may face judgements for being lazy, making careless errors, or not thinking things through. These symptoms may be affecting many people since ADHD UK suggests 2 million people have undiagnosed ADHD.

Let's summarise the key challenges that diagnosed or undiagnosed people with ADHD may face in the workplace.



Focus, Concentration, and Organisation

People with ADHD have a difference in brain chemistry that can result in them lacking the usual levels of attention or being in a state of hyperfocus. In practice, this can manifest as 'overfocusing' when they're interested in a topic or finding their mind wandering if they don't have an interest. This can result in missing details, struggling to stay organised, and devoting too much time to a particular thing at the expense of others.

Task, Decision, and Mental Paralysis

The expression 'analysis paralysis' very much applies to people with ADHD. Whether it's too many tasks or decisions, they can become overwhelmed. Because of this, people with ADHD have 10% higher rates of work absence compared to peers. And, when they're in a state of overwhelm for too long, people with ADHD can experience a range of symptoms:

- Procrastination and problems with task completion
- Insecurity and self-doubt
- Continual scrolling on phones or surfing websites



Sensory Overload and Overstimulation

When they're expected to work in busy, fast-paced environments with loud noises and harsh lighting, managers may find an ADHD employee underperforming. People with ADHD can have problems filtering out sensory inputs, and use up energy processing more information. For neurotypicals, filtering tends to be easier. Those with ADHD can find sensory inputs too much and may become overstimulated, exhausted, and distracted by too much information.

Adhd Meltdowns and Burnout

For people with ADHD, struggling with concentration, overstimulation, dysregulation, and mental paralysis is exhausting. Because of this, ADHD meltdowns and burnout symptoms are common. People with ADHD need to be able to handle stressful emotions and avoid situations where they feel unable to cope. If they can't, they may feel out of control and experience an ADHD meltdown.



Symptoms can include:

- Irritability and restlessness
- Binge eating or drinking
- Social isolation
- Emotional outbursts
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According to the US-based Attention Deficit Disorder Association, [over 90% of adults with ADHD will experience burnout](#) symptoms. But, it's important to note this can lessen when individuals receive appropriate support.



Challenges for Employers

Let's take a closer look at how an ADHD employee underperforming can manifest for managers.

Low Productivity Rates

Constant mental noise, background distractions, and feelings of emotional dysregulation can lead staff with ADHD to go into a freeze state. When overwhelmed, this form of mental paralysis can present as inaction. Witnessing an ADHD employee underperforming in this way can appear like an inability to meet targets and deadlines. In reality, the person with ADHD may need time to remove distractions, regulate their emotions, or find other ways to manage symptoms.

Difficulties Communicating

Various communication issues can arise from people with ADHD. Impulsivity can give rise to staff with ADHD interrupting colleagues or finishing sentences without due regard. Staff who have inattentive ADHD may struggle to listen or stay on topics they find uninteresting.



Others can find it difficult to convey what's in their head and be unaware of the consequences of their actions. All types of communication issues can lead to the sense of an ADHD employee underperforming.

Strained Relationships

Managers may sense an ADHD employee underperforming because of differences in brain chemistry. This may increase frustration for their managers if they make careless mistakes, unusual decisions, or struggle with time management. In these cases, a combination of a lack of proper attention combined with emotional dysregulation may lead to an ADHD employee underperforming. Team members may also grow frustrated and find it difficult to work with ADHD colleagues without strategies in place to manage behaviours.

High Turnover Rates

Researchers have found that people with ADHD have higher stress levels and struggle to manage absences compared to neurotypical peers.



Studies reveal that 20% of workers with ADHD had one or more sickness absence days in the past month compared to 10% who didn't have ADHD. Managing stress levels, sick days, and undiagnosed or undisclosed ADHD can lead individuals to move on from employers who can't provide the necessary support or flexibility.



How to Manage Someone With ADHD

If a staff member chooses to disclose they have diagnosed or undiagnosed ADHD, some initial steps managers can take include:

- Remember that ADHD is common and affects up to 5% of adults in the UK. Plus, 2 million people remain undiagnosed.
- Acknowledge their bravery for disclosing their ADHD and empathise with their struggles.
- Identify and make note of the key challenges they face.
- Ask if they had any previous workplace adjustments or alterations made in their other roles.
- Recognise their need for support or adjustments, whether they're working from home, in office environments, or both.
- Offer flexible working arrangements to give staff with ADHD a sense of empowerment.
- Offering reasonable adjustments like breaking down tasks, using productivity tools, and taking short breaks can make a significant difference for people with ADHD.
- Don't make assumptions about an employee's abilities based on their condition. Keep information confidential and do not disclose or discuss the condition with other team members.



ADHD in the Workplace Rights UK

There are several legal points to be aware of when it comes to addressing an ADHD employee underperforming:

ADHD is a Disability Under the Equality Act 2010

This means employees have the right to request reasonable adjustments and accommodations and not receive any form of discrimination. They also have a right to privacy, if they choose. Because disability discrimination claims have increased by 30% in recent years, it's important to note these legal obligations and adhere to them.

Reasonable Adjustments

Staff with ADHD should receive Reasonable Adjustments to their working environments. Some examples include:

- Reduce distractions: examples include noise-cancelling headphones or quieter working areas.



- Provide visual prompts: Post-it notes, wallcharts, and checklists can all help individuals with ADHD to absorb information.
- Give written instructions: People with ADHD often respond best to written instructions which help to supplement verbal instructions.
- Break tasks down: Smaller tasks can help to reduce overwhelm.
- Offer regular check-ins: Give people with ADHD a chance to air their concerns.

Ensure Equal Opportunities

To avoid potential discrimination claims, it's important to avoid any assumptions about ADHD or someone's symptoms. Managers should check Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion policies for inclusion. They should also make sure any HR or hiring and training staff is inclusive. Any type of professional development should be appropriate for people with ADHD.



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