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Distracted Talent

How to recognize and support ADD in the workplace

Premium content from San Antonio Business Journal by Dan Goddard

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Talkative, personable and brimming with good ideas, [Matthew Egan](#) has all the qualities of a natural salesman, skills that have enabled him to create a \$1 million SEO consulting firm, Image Freedom. In earlier jobs, these qualities often got him promoted to management, where he floundered with paperwork, meetings and organization.

While serving in the U.S. Air Force, he said his gung-ho, outgoing personality got him promoted to unit leader, which turned into a disaster when Egan, who has Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), had trouble following simple marching commands.

"It was difficult; I really struggled," Egan says. "I had trouble comprehending that someone in authority was giving me a command, such as 'turn left,' and I had to do it right then. It took me a while to process it, which threw off the whole unit. The feeling was, 'He's bright, he's funny, he has lots of good ideas, let's make him a leader.'

"But then my responsibilities changed and it became all about the organizational details, and that's something I'm not good at. With ADD, it's hard to stay on a single topic, you're easily bored and distracted, ideas keep popping into your head. People tend to think you're a jerk, you're ignoring them, but it's just that my mind works differently than most people's."

ADD in adults is linked with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in children, but adults rarely exhibit the bouncing-off-the-walls symptoms of hyperactivity, which tends to decline with age.

Adults with ADD have problems with procrastination, inattentiveness and an inability to stay on task that can lead to failure to attend to details, make deadlines, reply to e-mails and to finish projects. Estimates of adults with ADD range from 2 to 4 percent

of the population, though psychiatrist [Ariel De Llanos](#) of Focus & Balance, LLC, says he believes the incidence may be as high as 10 percent because many cases are undiagnosed.

“Diagnosis is difficult and must be based on observed behavior and personal history,” De Llanos says. “I believe I am the first psychiatrist in the area to use the Test of Variables of Attention (TOVA), a computer test that measures attention span. It’s not approved by the FDA, but I do think it is a valuable tool in determining if someone has ADD.”

It’s an objective test and — after prescribing drugs for the ADD — I can use it to measure a patient’s before-and-after results. I also ask my patients to decaffeinate, to give up coffee, because I think adults with ADD tend to overuse it. Adults with ADD often self-medicate, which leads to substance abuse. We help them to clean up their system so they can function more effectively.”

Common drugs prescribed to relieve the symptoms of ADD include Ritalin, Adderall and Dexedrine, though there is no known cure. Diet, exercise and better sleep habits can help as well. De Llanos says adults with ADD are often “go-getters” and can make excellent employees if their condition is understood.

“I think many of the people behind Microsoft and Google have ADD,” De Llanos says. “You see it in IT people who won’t listen to you too long and constantly jump from topic to topic. They are good at multitasking, but they can come off as not being interested in you.”

[William H. McBroom](#), an independent licensed social worker, says adults with ADD develop coping habits that can mask their condition, such as making daily lists of things to do.

“They are bright people, but they can’t hold a thought,” McBroom says. “So they learn ways to compensate. When they realize that their behavior is wrong, they self-correct. I know a woman who sets aside time every day to make lists, clean her desk and take care of other little details. But she has to force herself to do it, unlike someone with an obsessive compulsive disorder.”

The person with ADD knows they aren’t well organized, so they become hyper-organized. They tend to function better when they are self-employed, rather than being part of a regimented system. But they can learn how to manage a big company if they have the administrative support.”

Egan says he delegates record-keeping and other detail-oriented tasks of his job to an administrative assistant.

“I look for employees who will be a good fit with me, but not all of them have been,” Egan says. “I tell them up front that they’re working for a boss with ADD and that has

its rewards and problems. My crazy ideas are what keep the lights on around here, but I am continuously fighting organizational issues. I'm proud of the company I've created and it took a lot of drive and know-how. Instead of fighting with my boss all the time, I made my own job so I can never be fired."

Dan Goddard is a San Antonio-based freelance writer.

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