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ADHD at Work

Exploring How Work Design Shapes Occupational Functioning in Adults with ADHD



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Same person, different day

What changes when the work changes?

Struggling to start



- Repetitive work
- Unclear priorities
- Fear of judgement

"I felt really crap because... honestly, I've been trying my best."

Able to focus and deliver



- Stimulating work
- Clear goals
- Support from others

"I was able to just… lock in for a few hours a week and get it all done."

The problem

What we know

- ADHD is linked to differences in attention, executive function, emotion regulation and work outcomes.
- Many adults with ADHD also perform highly.

What remains less clear

- Why the same person thrives in one situation and struggles in another.



Research Question:

How do ADHD symptoms and work design interact to shape occupational functioning?

(Fuermaier et al., 2021; Hotte-Meunier et al., 2024; Lasky et al., 2016; Lauder et al., 2022)

Methodology



Critical Incident Technique

Incident

↓

ADHD symptoms

↓

Actions

↓

Outcomes

(Flanagan, 1954)

SMART Work Design

(Parker & Knight, 2024)



Stimulating

- variety, challenge, problem solving



Mastery

- role clarity, feedback



Autonomous

- control over decisions, methods and timing



Relational

- support, meaningful connections



Tolerable

- manageable demands, competing pressures

Participants



Preliminary Sample

16 Adults with ADHD

38 Average age

(Range 26 – 58)

2025

75% Female

2027

healthcare, education, professional services, construction and mining

Emerging patterns



The Work

Stimulating + Tolerable

Attention looks different when work is stimulating vs repetitive



The Task

Mastery + Autonomy

Planning looks different when tasks are clear vs ambiguous



The People

Relational

Strain looks different under support vs judgement

Across all three: The hidden effort of performing well

The Work

Engagement depends on the work itself

Attention and emotion regulation moved with how stimulating, interrupted and demanding the work was.

Low-stimulation work

- Hard to start and sustain, delayed starts, Drift, avoidance

Meaningful, urgent, complex work

- Concentration, motivation, effectiveness

Interruptions as a trigger for frustration



Jemima (28) on low stimulating work:

“I can do that tomorrow. And then.. I just keep kicking the can down the road if I've got something more interesting to do”



Felicia (30) on complex work:

“Crisis is my jam”



Barry (35) on interruptions:

“The way I describe it is like, it's like imagine going cold turkey off a drug, but the withdrawals only last two hours”

The Task

Autonomy helped when the task was clear, and became a problem when it was not.

- **Unclear goals and shifting priorities:** planning demands before work could begin
- **Undocumented processes:** remembering how, not just what
- **Clear goals and structure:** independent action
- Autonomy worked when it came with structure



"It was unclear what I needed to do. My priorities weren't very clear. And I wasn't doing well at putting my hand up and saying, look... I need help."



*“We have no documented processes...everything just is supposed to happen by ******* osmosis… If I go to write the steps of a process out.... I can't think of the steps”*



"I don't like structure, but I need structure."

The People

Expecting to be judged led people to hide difficulties instead of asking for help. After mistakes occurred, support shaped whether strain escalated or resolved.

Anticipated judgment reduced help-seeking



No, no, I don't ask anyone for help. Because I just don't want to be seen as someone who needs help."



"Something as simple as an e-mail reply, I'll sit on it for days because I want to make sure I'm not going to get in trouble for it."



“making sure I don't make mistakes... because I don't want an excuse for them to fire me.”

When mistakes happen…



Diesel spill

Barry

Attention lapse caused site shutdown

Supported by managers

”The org couldn't have handled it any better..”

Initial stress, anxiety, and catastrophising reduced quickly and recovery occurred



Clerical Error

John

Attention lapse caused a delay in order

Criticism and blame from others

"Sorry is not good enough."

Ongoing guilt, anxiety, and rumination

Anticipated judgement discouraged help-seeking. When errors occurred, supportive responses reduced strain, while criticism intensified it.

The Hidden Cost

Good performance often hid substantial effort and recovery costs.

What others see

- Competence
- Productivity
- Diligence

VS

What participants described

- Cognitive effort → Monitoring attention, Rechecking, Building compensatory systems
- Emotional effort → Masking frustration, Managing anxiety, Perceived judgement
- Recovery → Exhaustion, Difficulty switching off, Rumination after work



I'll think, hang on, what am I missing? (if) I send it now...is the timing right?... how's it going to be? ... people don't see that. People say, "Why can't you respond to that e-mail?" It's not that simple….Don't you realize? It's the end of the world at my end… people aren't seeing the extra effort I'm going through to try to make sure I don't upset them"

What this suggest for employers

Small design choices could reduce cost without reducing performance.

SMART domain	Difficulty it was linked to	Possible lever
Stimulating	Attention, task initiation	Match people to meaningful, varied, challenging work
Mastery	Planning, memory	Clear goals, priorities and documented processes
Autonomy	Initiation, prioritising	Autonomy with structure and regular check-ins
Relational	Emotion regulation, help-seeking	Psychological safety, so that asking for help is not a risk
Tolerable	Attention, emotion regulation	Protect focus from avoidable interruptions; allow recovery after intense work

2027

“if every 2 weeks, my boss just called and was like, where's your head at?"

Back to where we began



Work design shapes how adults with ADHD perform and what it costs them

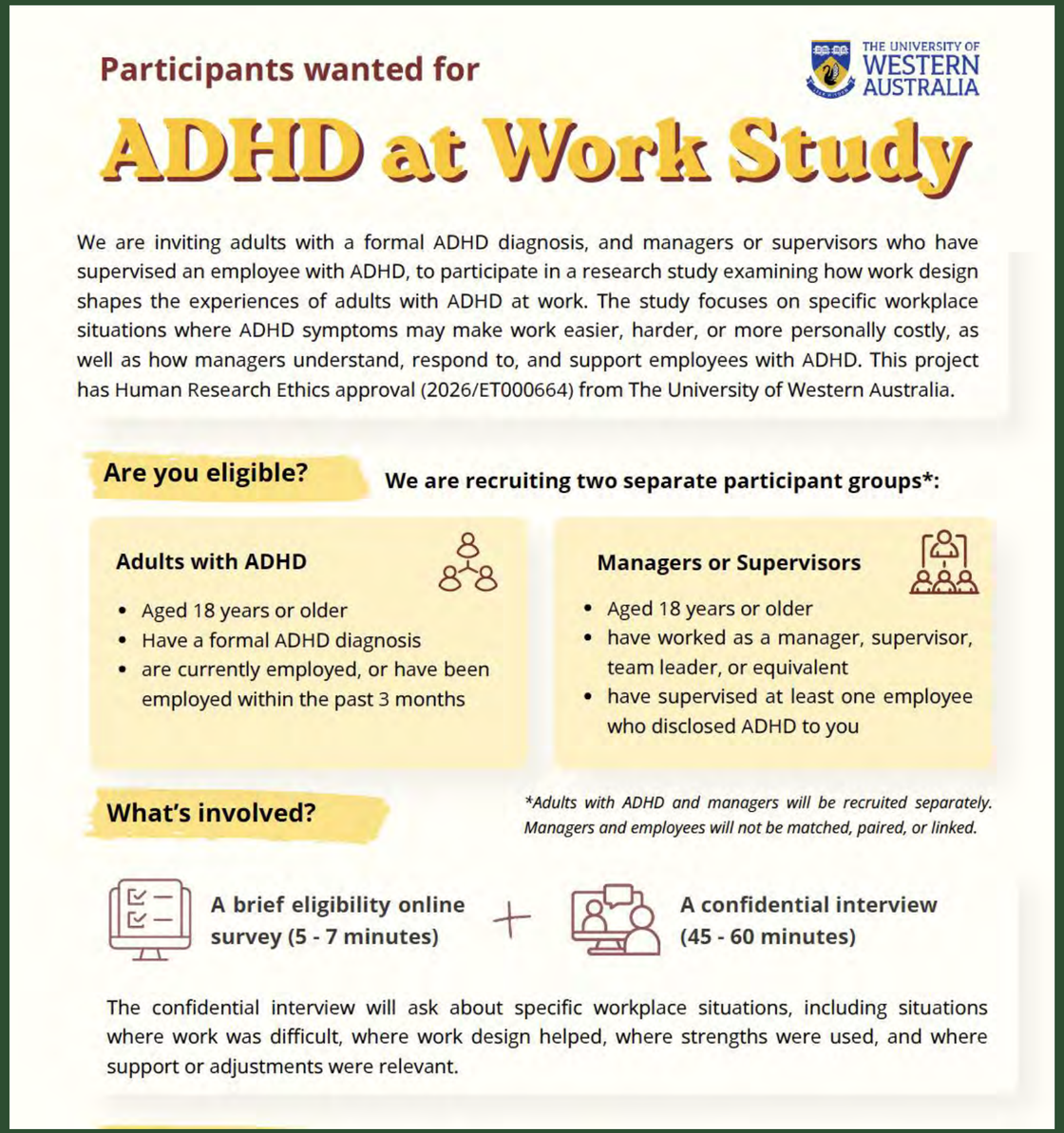
- Same person, different work design, different outcome
- Work design shapes performance and its cost
- Preliminary: 16 accounts, analysis ongoing, retrospective accounts of incidents

Next steps: Continue interviewing participants, (and managers). complete analysis; examine strain, engagement and commitment; design a diary study and test the pattern across people and over time.

Thank you

Let’s connect

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Participants wanted for

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

ADHD at Work Study

We are inviting adults with a formal ADHD diagnosis, and managers or supervisors who have supervised an employee with ADHD, to participate in a research study examining how work design shapes the experiences of adults with ADHD at work. The study focuses on specific workplace situations where ADHD symptoms may make work easier, harder, or more personally costly, as well as how managers understand, respond to, and support employees with ADHD. This project has Human Research Ethics approval (2026/ET000664) from The University of Western Australia.

Are you eligible? **We are recruiting two separate participant groups*:**

Adults with ADHD

- Aged 18 years or older
- Have a formal ADHD diagnosis
- are currently employed, or have been employed within the past 3 months

Managers or Supervisors

- Aged 18 years or older
- have worked as a manager, supervisor, team leader, or equivalent
- have supervised at least one employee who disclosed ADHD to you

What’s involved?

**Adults with ADHD and managers will be recruited separately. Managers and employees will not be matched, paired, or linked.*

A brief eligibility online survey (5 - 7 minutes) + **A confidential interview (45 - 60 minutes)**

The confidential interview will ask about specific workplace situations, including situations where work was difficult, where work design helped, where strengths were used, and where support or adjustments were relevant.

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Benefits

By sharing your experiences, you will help improve understanding of ADHD at work. Your insights may identify work conditions that increase difficulty, reduce difficulty, support strengths, or create hidden costs. The findings may inform future research, workplace support, and manager guidance.

How to participate

To take part, scan the QR code or click the link below

https://uwa.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_d7sdgOgmhe3fA7I

Contact: Gregory Lawson (Lead Researcher) | gregory.lawson@research.uwa.edu.au

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