



BY DAVID COHEN  
For Workplace News

Every once in a while we have an “affliction of the moment,” a new “celebrity disability.” It may not be a popular point of view, but I believe it’s time we stop focusing on the disability and start focusing on the capability of the individual. Let me explain what I mean. A few years back, while teaching a program for human resources professionals at Queen’s University’s School of Labour Relations, a participant asked me if I would sign a copy of my book, *Inside the Box*, for her three boys. When I asked her why, she said it was the story I relayed about my learning disabilities. She wanted her three boys, each of whom had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), to know that you can make it in spite of your difficulties and that you don’t have to allow the “system” to hold you back.

I felt for her sons and I empathized with their situation. I was lucky. When I went through the education system as a child, we didn’t have classifications like ADHD. Instead, my various teachers assumed I was either

## Can I have your attention? or, “The Little Engine That Could”...

smart and lazy, rambunctious and in need of attention, a slow learner, or someone who just marched to a different beat. In fact, they were all right. But my parents did not accept that I couldn’t learn. So with great patience, and many visits to different medical professionals, they discovered a couple things about me. I had amblyopia, or a lazy eye, and I needed “remedial” reading help.

I attribute my academic and professional success to my parents’ unwavering commitment to ensuring that I act like “The Little Engine That Could.” I learned, with their persistent help, that I would only make it over the hill if I took my time, found my own path, and soaked up as much love, patience, and support as needed along the way.

How does ADHD fit in as a workplace issue? We associate the affliction with school-aged kids who are overmedicated underachievers lost in their own world. Until recently, it was argued that ADHD was not seen in adults — as if it magically disappeared by the age of consent. But in the workplace, ADHD is beginning to draw attention as a significant concern.

One Massachusetts General Hospital study observed that adults with ADHD hold more jobs over their work years than

those without ADHD, and only half of ADHD adults are employed compared to 72 per cent of the general adult population. Moreover, ADHD sufferers lose 11 days every month of productivity, costing themselves \$8,900 in lost income per year. What’s more, employees with ADHD are often accused by managers of being lazy, not caring about the quality of their work, and of missing details, deadlines, and meetings. They are observed in the workplace to get distracted easily, to have trouble getting started on a task, and to change their minds too frequently.

The scientific data reinforces what many of us know from personal experience. ADHD is a serious medical condition causing significant lifelong hurt. We can no longer dismiss it as a made-up condition or give it special status as something children “grow out of” when they get older. So what’s a company or a manager to do?

We know that there are medications, cognitive behavioral therapies, and coaching that can create routines, structures, and systems to help ADHD adults set priorities and manage their time and minimize organizational problems. And yet, too often, the individual with ADHD is written up as a “bad” employee. It’s not hard for a manager to gather enough

evidence and make the paper trail with HR in building a case for dismissing an ADHD employee with cause.

The hypocrisy, however, is that employees with other problems recognized as legitimate (such as drug or alcohol abuse, or family and marital issues) get treated very differently. Despite their poor productivity and difficulties with focusing and meeting deadlines, due to those non-work-related conditions, such employees are often offered employee-assistance programs and provided with care, support, and understanding in many different ways.

Is there a lesson here in our approach to dealing with disabilities? Speaking from experience, and remembering my own upbringing, I understand the degree to which care, support, and understanding make all the difference. People with ADHD are high-functioning. They can graduate from high school and university, compete for advanced degrees, and achieve success in their careers. It is time that companies that value people and believe in respect do a better job supporting ADHD employees who have much to offer in terms of being gifted, talented, energetic, and highly creative.

Growing up, there were things I was good at and things I needed to be very careful about. I learned how to excel at my strengths and minimize my weaknesses. I was never diagnosed with ADHD as a child, because we had no such classification, and it was only the support of my parents that helped me make it. There were critical moments, such as the

time a teacher suggested I leave regular school and apply myself to vocational training. But I often think I was lucky, because an official condition might have provided my teachers and myself with an excuse to give up. The psychiatrist who finally diagnosed me with ADHD as an adult was shocked that I had no indications in my academic record of being a troubled student. Instead, I finished university, earned two master's degrees, a teaching certificate, and a doctorate in education. I've also written two books, raised a family, and founded a business. Has it always been easy? You'll have to ask my loving, caring, supporting wife and two sons that question.

My psychiatrist says that in the treatment of ADHD, medication is 75 per cent of the therapy solution, but a willingness to engage and make the therapy work is the hardest part of the journey. For me, the key was that my parents focused not on my disability but on my capability. I think that with a similar switch in mindset, corporations could revolutionize their attitude toward employees currently classified with any number of disabilities. With the right support, caring, coaching, and strategy a "troubled" employee with a tremendous amount to offer can be turned into The Little Engine That Could.

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