

ANALYSIS OF ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD) IN THE WORKPLACE

*William (Bill) J. Carnes, Colorado Technical University, 2606 Wapiti Road, Fort Collins, CO 80525,
970-420-1127, wcarnes1@mscd.edu*

*Madison W. Holloway, Department of Business, Metropolitan State College of Denver, PO Box 173362,
Campus Box 78, Denver, CO 80217, 303-556-2804, hollowam@mscd.edu*

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore some elements of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) that could help managers optimize the performance of their workers. The authors explore the symptoms of ADHD and compare them with McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y management theory. Adults with ADHD might appear to their managers to be unmotivated, careless, reckless or unreliable. Similarly, Theory X assumes workers are lazy, have little ambition, dislikes work, and must be forced to put forth effort. [18]. Therefore, Theory X managers may view many ADHD adults as Theory X workers. Theory X supervision reinforces the employee's Theory X behavior.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores some elements of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) that could help managers optimize the performance of many of their workers. Adults with ADHD experience many of the complications and inconsistencies associated with the disorder, and they may not receive an accurate diagnosis of the disorder until later in life. Often, they reflect back over their childhood and early adulthood and see where ADHD was both a hindrance to their success. Reflections on some personal experiences, as well as the opinions of some of the experts in ADHD research, provide a means of identifying difficulties in the work environment for adults with ADHD. Although we all experience difficulties with sitting still, time management, and completing tasks, it is worse for the ADHD adult. In fact, many times ADHD interferes with one's ability to function at work, or in other social settings. [8]

BACKGROUND

Adults with ADHD have lived most of their lives not knowing what is wrong with them, especially, those adults not diagnosed during childhood. They encounter difficulties in all facets of their lives and are sometimes unable to understand some of the problems they face. Without the ADHD diagnosis, these adults think there is something wrong with them, but since they do not know what that might be, they go along with the prescribed flaws others assign to them; that they are unmotivated, careless, reckless, unreliable, etc. However, it is neither laziness nor lack of motivation that hinders these adults. Adults with ADHD live in constant turmoil because of the way their brain functions. They have difficulty organizing work, sustaining attention, avoiding distractions, and with memory. [2] [3] [5] [6] [9] [13] [15] [21] However, under certain circumstances, their brain functions as clear as a bell, which only adds to their confusion. They question themselves, *Why does my brain work sometimes, and sometimes not?* Because of the inconsistency associated with chronic ADHD impairments, parents, teachers, employers and mental health professionals, also experience confusion and may see these contradictory behaviors as the flaws previously mentioned in the above paragraph. [23 p.10] Brain functioning is not something that the individual can choose to turn on or off.

DISCUSSION

An overview of the characteristics and symptoms of ADHD are available in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association, Edition IV (DSM-IV). [4] ADHD has many characteristics defined by varying sources and is generally believed to be an inhibition in executive function, at least partly, located in the frontal lobe.

Goldberg [16] asserts that in the past, the frontal lobes were not linked to any particular function; but in recent years, research found the frontal lobes to be instrumental in executive function. It is also evident that those who study ADHD believe that the criteria and diagnostic agents are ever evolving or being recognized. Russell Barkley [5] determined that ADHD is more an inhibition of behavior than of attention because of its links to hyperactivity, impulsivity and distractibility. Therefore, he suggests a name change from ADHD to *Behavioral Inhibition Disorder*.

Goldberg found that because of the various types of ADHD, we would continue to make studies in determining and treating the disorder as we learn more about the frontal lobes and their connections. [14] Thomas Brown echoes these opinions, referring to the executive functions as the *management functions of the mind*. These functions regulate one's ability to perform daily tasks. ADHD adults have chronic impairments in these functions. [10]

ADHD and Motivational Theories

While ADHD is not a new phenomenon, there is little recognition of ADHD as a significant contributor to organizational behavior or motivational theories. Although he did not portray them as having ADHD, George Still mentioned ADHD symptoms in medical literature in 1902 when he described a group of children as being hyperactive, impulsive and inattentive. [31, p. 4] [3, p. xvi] ADHD has been primarily looked at as a childhood disorder that disappeared in early adulthood; primarily, because of the dissipation of symptoms in adulthood. More recently, however, with the diagnosis and validity of adult ADHD, it is now considered to be a lifespan disorder. [6] [9] [11] [12] [16] [17] [22] [24]

ADHD Issues

There are several issues that may affect the ADHD adult in the workplace including: short attention span, intolerance of routine, difficulties with memory, distractions, hyper-focusing, hyperactivity, impulsivity, time management, difficulty with follow through, problems with organization and paperwork [20, pp. 30–41]

Organizational Behavior Theory

McGregor relates that Theory X assumes that managers perceive that the average employee is lazy, dislikes work, tries to do as little as possible, has little ambition and wishes to avoid responsibility. [19] [18] [7] Theory X managers perceive employees to be reactive. Because of these assumptions, managers would need to supervise employees constantly, telling them what to do and when to do it. Otherwise, the employees would accomplish nothing throughout the day. The attitudes of managers influence his or her behavior, and the manager's behavior also influences employee behavior, reinforcing the manager's attitude and behavior. [1]

In Theory Y, however, McGregor asserts that managers perceive that employees want to perform and enjoy participating in activities that contribute toward organizational success. [19] [18] Theory Y managers perceive employees to be proactive. Therefore, if employees perceive the work to be rewarding, the manager will not have to supervise very closely at all. Because of their commitment to the organization, the employees will exercise whatever self-control is necessary to meet the organizational performance levels.

The question then arises as to whether or not employees do fit the Theory X model. We question this for three reasons. First, it is important to understand that Theory's X and Y are management philosophies, not behavioral theories. Second, the term Attention Deficit did not appear in the DSM until 1980. At that time, DSM-III acknowledged Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), distinguishing between two types of ADD: with hyperactivity and without hyperactivity. This was an important step in diagnosis and treatment because the disorder acknowledged the attention deficit and it was no longer viewed as a childhood disorder. [5] Lastly and as previously mentioned, ADHD was primarily perceived to be a childhood disorder that disappeared in adulthood. More recent studies; however, show the validity of its existence in the diagnosis of adults. [24] [9] [17] Many times, an individual's diagnosis of ADHD may not occur until later in life. Not only did ADHD continue from childhood into adulthood, but also adults with no prior diagnosis as having ADHD are now receiving the diagnosis as having it. We can then infer that adult workers who appear to be lazy, irresponsible, etc. may have a different condition for being so, other than Theory X.

This analysis leads to two assumptions; first, that people do not start out wanting to be a "screw up." Rather, they would prefer to be successful at whatever it is they are doing. Second, since McGregor conducted his studies prior to the DSM's recognition of ADHD, that his studies might have included adults with undiagnosed and untreated ADHD.

With these two assumptions in mind, we can speculate that some of the employees and managers that McGregor asserted fit the Theory X model might in fact be adult workers with undiagnosed or untreated ADHD. Therefore, when we have an employee who appears to be unmotivated, lazy, careless, reckless, or unreliable we automatically assume that the employee fits the Theory X model and supervise him or her accordingly. Consequently, the Theory X supervision reinforces the employee's Theory X behavior.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides an understanding of ADHD and its impact on the individual within the work environment. It is important to understand that ADHD can affect the organization at all levels. This paper also shows how current organizational behavior theory fails to address the issue of ADHD. This paper indicates a correlation between organizational behavior theory and ADHD. By understanding how ADHD affects the individual, managers can better supervise these employees, regardless of whether the employee is in an entry-level position, or at a higher level within the organization. In addition, managers may be able to use strategies designed for ADHD employees—for their entire workforce—and generate more positive organizational results. This assertion requires further study and a bridge between Organization theory and Behavior theory at a different level than has previously been spanned.

REFERENCES

Please contact the author for a list of references.