**When A Hidden Learning Disability Holds You Back**

**Strategies to Overcome Insecurities About Learning at Work**

**Do you see yourself in this person?**

Twelve-year-old Joe frustrated his teachers. He had difficulty focusing on his work. He preferred to socialize with the students sitting next to him rather than getting his work done. He paid attention to the teacher for about 10 minutes and then was off gazing into space. He struggled to remember what he’d been taught and more importantly he couldn’t seem to implement what he learned to complete his work or pass tests.

“Joe is intelligent and wants to do a good job, but he just does not apply himself, especially when he’s required to learn information that he thinks is boring,” one of his teachers wrote.

Fast forward to 35-year-old Joe, who is a source of frustration for his boss. Joe has difficulty focusing on his work. He prefers to socialize with his colleagues rather than getting his work done. Continual learning is required in his job to keep up with current regulations and industry specs. When attending a training specifically required to update his skill set, he’s observed staring off into space.

He has the opportunity to use the company’s learning management system as an alternative option, yet he procrastinates and does not complete the modules in a timely way. Even when he does get through the learning modules, he struggles to remember what he’s been taught and, more importantly, he can’t seem to implement what he’s learned to complete his work.

“Joe is intelligent and generally motivated to do a good job. He just doesn’t apply himself when required to upskill,” his boss writes.

Seeing a pattern here?

Adult Joe has many of the same problems he did as a boy. He is aware that he’s struggling at work. His career has just about stalled. He’s struggling with anxiety and depression. And he doesn’t know what to do about it.

Before we go farther, let me mention that Joe is a real person (I’m just not using his real name) who I coached. He was referred to me by his boss — who, like Joe’s teachers in school, saw a bright, hardworking person that balked at completing certain tasks required for career progression.

After talking to Joe and getting a sense of his personal history, his career goals and what he perceived as his failures, I had a suspicion. “Joe, have you ever been evaluated for a learning disability?” I asked him.

After getting assurances from me that his boss would not be told about anything we talked about in the coaching session, Joe admitted that he was diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia when he was a boy.

As an adult, he thought that he had outgrown his impulsiveness, disorganization, and trouble focusing. “I figured, once I got done with school I would never have to deal with it again. I honestly thought I grew out of it. I mean, I went to college and graduated with a four-year degree. And now I have my dream job. But I just don’t want to do any more learning,” he told me.

**The Hidden Disability**

Like many adults, Joe has a hidden learning disability. He learned to manage it somewhat during his school years, and was able to keep it unknown to his peers and his bosses. Except when faced with challenges like having to learn new information in a text-heavy LMS curriculum.

A [2006 study](https://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/ajp.2006.163.4.716?url_ver=Z39.88-2003&rfr_id=ori%3Arid%3Acrossref.org&rfr_dat=cr_pub%3Dpubmed&) found that 4.4 percent of U.S. adults — about 14 million people — have been formally diagnosed with ADHD. Only 10.9 percent of those diagnosed are receiving treatment. And considering how many children are diagnosed with ADHD — 9.4 percent, [or 6.1 million](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/adhd/data.html), in a 2016 study — the number of adults with ADHD may be far underreported.

Other learning disabilities like dyslexia, dyspraxia, auditory processing disorder, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, language processing disorder, non-verbal learning difficulties, and visual perceptual/visual motor deficit are a lifelong challenge.

Many adults with learning disabilities do their best to hide them. They may choose jobs and careers that are less challenging. Or, they muddle through a job that they thought would be fun and filled with opportunity, hoping no one realizes they are having trouble with some aspects of the job.

**The Bright Side**

Joe, like many adults with a learning disability, has many positive qualities that outshine the challenges he faces. He’s empathetic to his coworkers, he’s a great team player, and he finds creative solutions to many problems — all of which earn him high scores on his performance review each year.

While adults with learning disabilities have fewer resources available to them than school-age children, there are still ways for Joe to better [manage his ADHD](https://www.helpguide.org/articles/add-adhd/managing-adult-adhd-attention-deficit-disorder.htm) and [dyslexia](https://www.readandspell.com/us/working-with-dyslexia).

And recognition of undiagnosed ADHD and other learning disabilities in adults is improving as more attention is paid to the issue.

Joe’s hidden learning disability was stopping him from pursuing key career development opportunities. But it wasn’t too late to take steps to ease his anxiety about learning — in fact, adults of any age can benefit from working with a professional to manage their disability.

Further, Joe’s disability had some protection under ADA requirements. He could inform key people in the company — including HR and his boss — about his challenges and the need for accommodation. I knew that he was nervous about doing so: [Not every company handles this well](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/10/smarter-living/disclose-disability-work-employer-rights.html), and many people with disabilities find themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to advocate for themselves, while worrying about possible repercussions of revealing their disability.

How companies react to an employee’s disclosure of a disability is a topic I’ll discuss soon.

For Joe, the outcome of our coaching was positive. He had a close relationship with his boss and colleagues and, when he finally approached his boss and revealed his learning disability, the reaction was positive and supportive. HR immediately offered him LMS courses that better accommodated his dyslexia. His boss began looking for resources to help him better manage Joe’s career development. Because the company knew that Joe had experience and valuable interpersonal assets, they were more than willing to help get him past the learning hurdles that had unintentionally been placed in his way.

**Sources:**

* <https://www.differentbrains.org/5-tips-dealing-adult-adhd/>
* <https://dialogical.net/blog/adhd-statistics/>
* <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/adhd/data.html>
* [https://www.helpguide.org/articles/add-adhd/managing-adult-adhd-attention-deficit-disorder.htm#](https://www.helpguide.org/articles/add-adhd/managing-adult-adhd-attention-deficit-disorder.htm)
* <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/10/smarter-living/disclose-disability-work-employer-rights.html>

Copyright © 2013 Susan Fitzell & Aim Hi Educational Programs, LLC. First published March 14, 2013.

#####

Susan Fitzell, M. Ed, CSP, is a nationally recognized presenter, author of nine books for teachers, trainers, and parents, an educational consultant, and CEO of Aim Hi Educational Programs, LLC. As an independent consultant and coach, Susan offers the personalization, continuity, and consistency necessary for true change in any organization. She works side by side with teachers, school administrators, and business leaders as a coach and trainer, employing Brain Power strategies that take learning to the next level.

For more information, visit Susan's website at [www.susanfitzell.com](http://www.susanfitzell.com/).

**Permission to Reprint**

Aim Hi Educational Programs  
PO Box 6182  
Manchester, NH 03108

1. Permission to reprint articles by Susan Fitzell, at no charge is granted with the agreement that:
   * The article bio be included following each article used.
   * One copy of the publication in which the article is published be provided to Susan Fitzell.
   * A fee per article will be expected for articles published without the closing bio and contact information; $300.
2. Permission is also granted for reasonable:
   * Editing content and industry specific example exchange.
   * Length.
   * Article title change.
3. Electronic publishing of articles must include a live, click-able link to http://www.susanfitzell.com

Any questions, please email to [sfitzell@susanfitzell.com](mailto:sfitzell@susanfitzell.com).