

Finding Joy on the Job

A focus on strengths and passions lead them to career success. Learn how you can shine at work.

by Blythe Grossberg, Psy.D.

In the world of work, attention-deficit disorder can present some daunting obstacles to success. It's not easy to set and meet goals if there is a constant struggle to focus, set priorities, and avoid distractions that others easily tune out. How can you get things done if you can't get out from under your own desktop clutter? How do you follow through on critical projects if your mind automatically moves on to something else?

No wonder workers with ADD often fall short of expectations - their own and those of the boss.

But the struggle with deadlines or organization is only half of the story. Because, in addition to creating obstacles to job success, ADD confers some significant assets - enthusiasm, extraordinary creativity, an entrepreneurial spirit, and, of course, the boundless energy for which ADDers are known. Workers who learn to capitalize on these strengths do very well, indeed.

In this article, we'll meet three people who - by dint of hard work, openness to new ideas, and help from others - overcame ADD-related setbacks to forge productive, satisfying careers. Their names have been changed, but their remarkable stories shine through, serving as inspiration for every ADDer who has ever struggled to make a go of it on the job.

KATHERINE **From Struggling Student to Top Attorney**

If you saw Katherine L. now, you'd never guess that this articulate 40-something lawyer almost dropped out of high school. Growing up in a working-class area of Los Angeles, Katherine struggled in school. Her reading and memory were poor, and she was terribly restless. Teachers were unable, or unwilling, to help. "No one thought I could do much of anything," she says. "I got bored if I sat longer than 30 minutes."

After receiving her high school diploma, Katherine started working as a hairdresser. She spent several years hopping from job to job, and then enrolled in a local community college, where her academic struggle resumed. Finally, at the urging of one of her professors, she got evaluated for learning problems and was told that her disability had a name: dyslexia.

Following her diagnosis, Katherine started allotting more time for the reading and writing required for her courses. Her grades improved. In fact, she did so well that she was able to transfer to a four-year college. She aced the LSATs, and, with the help of its disabilities office, got into a prestigious law school. Soon thereafter, she was diagnosed with ADD and started taking a stimulant.

Despite the medication, Katherine feared that she would flunk out. After class each day she made a beeline home, where she spent hour upon hour studying. The extra study time helped. So did substituting books on tape for ordinary textbooks. In addition, she began making PowerPoint presentations that summarized the readings. That helped improve her comprehension.

After graduating from law school, in 1998, Katherine won a grant that allowed her to develop a program that provides legal services to ADD and LD children. Today, she helps hundreds of low-income families get services for their kids - the kind of help that she had been denied. In addition to her work at the center, Katherine runs workshops about the legal rights of kids with disabilities.

What's the secret of Katherine's success? Medication helped, of course. So did her ADD-friendly study strategies. And Katherine was savvy enough to recognize that she'd do better in a job that was more - rather than less - demanding. (That's often the case with

ADDers.) She initially considered paralegal work but doubts that she would have been able to keep all the paperwork organized. Being a lawyer suits her, she says, because "it's more big-picture than details. Law fits into the way I think, on five levels at the same time. I created the program and a job for myself. I can do 10 things at once, and I make it fun."

As soon as a case is assigned to her, Katherine breaks down the workload into discrete steps. That keeps her from feeling overwhelmed. "There are procedures I have to follow to get things done," she explains. "I have to start projects in enough time, and I can't take a shortcut." She still burns the midnight oil - but only because that's when her office is quietest.

Katherine continues to struggle with reading and writing. But she manages, with the help of a Kurzweil 3000 device, which reads aloud legal briefs - as well as with the help of colleagues, who proofread her briefs.

Katherine is passionate about work, and she gets a big charge out of helping children. "It's inspiring for a kid who has issues to find out that I graduated from law school after nearly flunking out of high school," she says.

GLEN **Having It All in Honolulu**

For the past three years, Glen P. has earned a good living as a massage therapist. The Honolulu resident says the work is far more rewarding than his previous jobs, which included being a waiter and an executive at a property-management firm. "When I do massage, I have 100 percent positive feedback from every client interaction," he says.

Glen has always enjoyed giving massages, ever since he first tried it some 15 years ago. But until recently, his life outside work was a mess. "When I wasn't doing massage, it all fell apart," Glen recalls. "I was losing things - my appointment book, phone, wallet - and it got to be very disruptive."

Glen was afraid he might have a brain tumor. But a doctor identified the problem as ADD. "The diagnosis gave me hope," Glen says. "I had the energy to do something about it." He

started taking a stimulant, and, although he has mixed emotions about drug therapy, he calls the medication "a tool that enables me to learn and use new behaviors."

One problem Glen faced was burnout: He was on call day and night for 27 days a month - and he hadn't had a vacation in years. Glen was also grappling with a desperate financial situation. "I had a boom-and-bust practice," he says. "I was as much as 12 months behind in my insurance billing, and I had nothing to put in the bank after doing six massages per day. That was discouraging."

With the help of New York City-based coach Jennifer Koretsky (ADDManagement.com), Glen revamped his scheduling and billing systems. Six months later, he felt less stressed, and his insurance reimbursements had risen 50 percent. Given his improved cash flow, he felt secure enough to spend time relaxing at the beach and to take a yoga class. He even allowed himself a month-long idyll in Italy - an indulgence he's continued every year since. "I now know that if I send each of my clients a postcard from Italy, my business will go right back to where it was when I return," he says.

"I used to have a paper calendar," explains Glen, "but I could never find it when the phone rang." To solve the problem, he bought a PDA and started making full use of its calendar feature, color-coding his appointments so he could tell at a glance which sessions took place in his office and which required travel. The PDA has proved useful in another way: to record Glen's frequent flashes of inspiration. "Before, by the time I got to my pen and pencil, the thought was gone," he explains. "So I started writing in my Palm Pilot, which I always have on hand."

The changes have helped Glen experience a feeling that he gives his clients: bliss. "In massage, client and therapist focus on the same thing for an hour - it creates an amazing synergy," he says. "Now I have even more emotional energy at the end of the day than I did at the beginning."

DANIEL **Success - After 34 Different Jobs**

In the two years since he hung out his shingle as a grant writer, Daniel G. has enjoyed remarkable success, winning \$3.5 million for various community organizations. But Daniel's career path has not been a smooth one. "My working life has been like wandering in the desert," says the 43-year-old resident of the rural Southeast.

That's putting it mildly: Before becoming self-employed, Daniel tried 34 different jobs, including salesman, administrator, janitor, press helper, and landscaper. What made him keep switching jobs? Boredom, mostly. "I got the feedback in my old jobs that I was good at starting things but not at finishing them," he says. "Being a self-employed grant writer is a way around that, because there are defined projects with a defined life to them."

Around the time he struck out on his own, Daniel read *Driven to Distraction*, by Ned Hallowell, M.D., and John Ratey, M.D. He realized at once that he had many of the traits described in the book. He consulted a doctor and, sure enough, was diagnosed with ADD. Daniel had always considered it something that affects only children, but he began taking a stimulant and found that it helped him focus. He also started to ponder his work habits - the good and the not-so-good. "My lack of follow-through had always bothered me," he admits. "I felt like it was a moral failing. I didn't know that ADD was the reason I got bored so quickly."

Now Daniel is convinced that ADD makes him a better grant writer. "Having ADD helps you make connections between things other people wouldn't see," he says. "I'm constantly scanning the environment, and I always notice opportunities for business." Like Katherine, Daniel enjoys seeing his work translate into tangible benefits for the community. "It's not just about dollars," he says. "My work has to be in line with my values."

With the encouragement of his ADD coach, New York City-based Bonnie Mincu, Daniel starts each workday by writing down his goals. At first, he says, he was too optimistic about what he could accomplish. That led him to take on too much work - and to miss critical deadlines. Bonnie helped him pinpoint how much time to allot to various tasks. She also taught him how to break multi-step projects into their component parts and to predict the roadblocks he might encounter. His improved "time sense," as Bonnie calls it, helps him avoid

taking on too many projects at once.

In addition to Bonnie, Daniel employs someone to help maintain his files. And each Saturday, Daniel meets with his "accountability partner," a friend who helps keep his career on track. "I'm honest with him, telling him about my failures and pointing out where I need to grow," Daniel explains.

Daniel says that one of the best aspects of self-employment is being able to juggle his schedule. The goal is to take advantage of the times of day when his concentration is at a peak. As he puts it, "I've finally given myself permission not to start work at 8:00 a.m." He often works late at night, when the quiet helps him focus. When he gets stuck on a particular problem, he goes for a run. If he has a "eureka moment" while running, he speaks into the tape recorder he carries with him. When he gets home he transfers his thoughts to paper so he can act on them.

In addition to his tape recorder and a PDA, Daniel uses Mindjet mind-mapping software and an Invisible Clock, a gadget that beeps or vibrates at preset intervals. "I play 'Beat the Clock,'" he explains. "I tell myself I can do a task for 15 minutes, and then I start the clock. Once I get started, I usually stay at it. I kind of trick myself."

Daniel is now working to secure a grant worth more than \$1 million, and he doesn't plan on slowing down anytime soon. "I'm stimulated by learning," he says, "and grant writing is like being in school - you're learning all the time."

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