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## ADHD – unleashing brilliance in the workplace

### Exceptional qualities of ADHD people

Look for creativity and drive and you are likely to find somebody in the ADHD spectrum. Many great people such as Henry Ford, Walt Disney, Winston Churchill, Leonardo de Vinci, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, John Lennon, and Agatha Christie all had classic ADHD characteristics.

Canadian research found that ADHD adults are nearly four times as likely to be entrepreneurs as their non-ADHD counterparts. But British and American research also shows that their jails are full of people in the ADHD spectrum.

Our view is that ADHD is a set of exceptional qualities that can give organisations a competitive edge – but with challenges. This article considers how to unleash the talent in ADHD colleagues.

### What is ADHD?

ADHD stands for 'Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder' and is a label for people with chronic inattention, impulsivity, and/or hyperactivity. Recent research is focused on a gene that appears to be a major cause of ADHD.

The gene is common occurring in about 20% of New Zealanders. It shows up as ADHD behaviours in about 7% of New Zealand children of whom about half continue to have ADHD characteristics as adults.

The gene has a fascinating effect. It increases the brain's activity in the modes used for creativity, meditating, hypnosis, relaxing, daydreaming and lucid dreaming. But it also reduces the brain state used for being awake, alert and processing information - especially when faced with tasks! So people in the ADHD spectrum use their creativity and intuition to tackle tasks rather than being focused and analytical.

This is the secret to their brilliance, as well as the cause of their inability to fit into classrooms and orderly workplaces.

Bizarrely too much slow wave activity can cause hyperactivity because the brain seeks external stimulation to compensate for the lack of internal stimuli. This is why some ADHD people are inattentive and dreamy, others hyperactive, and others are both.

It also points to why adrenaline can take over creating fight or flight behaviour. The frontal lobes of the brain simply don't make the executive judgments to put the adrenaline away.

Discussions on ADHD usually highlight the problems but there are just as many bounties. The same characteristic can be viewed as a strength or a challenge like two sides of the same coin:

<b>ADHD Strength</b>	<b>ADHD Challenge</b>
Highly energetic	Hyperactive
Action oriented	Doesn't stop to think
Entrepreneurial/intrapreneurial	Unmanageable
Intrinsically motivated	Hard for others to motivate
Passionate	Intense
Self directed learner	Won't follow rules
Creative	Unfocussed
Imaginative	Forgetful
Problem solver	Impatient with routines
Great in a crisis	Creates crises
Strong initiative	Not a team player
Work under pressure	Chronic lateness
Adventurous	Dangerous
Humorous	Over the top
Characterful	Mood swings
Courageous	Ignore consequences
Hyper focused if interested	Distractable if not interested
Uninhibited	Uninhibited
Optimistic	Ignores issues
Loves new ideas	Easily bored
Copes with uncertainty	Disorganised
Insightful	Discounts others views

There are some new labels emerging that acknowledge the strengths and challenges of ADHD. 'Latent Entrepreneur Personality Type' reflects that 50% of entrepreneurs are in the ADHD spectrum. Countries like New Zealand were founded by such enterprising people and the gene pool is well rooted in New Zealand - across all cultural groups. The term also suggests that ADHD is an end to a spectrum like being tall or short. It is neither a deficit nor a disorder.

'Hunter Genes' suggests the gene may have been dominant when we were hunter gatherers. Attention deficit can be viewed as noticing everything. Rather than filtering out everything but the task at hand, the hunter is aware of all of the possible food sources and threats around. But when the hunter sees the prey, he becomes intensely single focused and energised. In ADHD people this shows up in their intent focus on things that interest them, a characteristic that drives entrepreneurs on when others would have given up.

'DaVincis' is an upbeat label borrowed from a man who almost certainly would have scored highly on the tests for ADHD. For the remainder of this article I will refer to DaVincis to describe people in the ADHD spectrum.

For many DaVincis, life is a genuinely dangerous experience. Being constantly in trouble with parents, teachers, employers and colleagues they often lose self esteem, abuse alcohol and drugs, are dishonest and become antisocial. Constant danger causes the body to produce 40% less of the chemical that puts adrenaline away, which may show as anxiety, aggression, stress, fear or hyperactivity.

DaVincis are also the most likely people to inspire, excel and drive change.

## Managing DaVinci Colleagues

Managers and colleagues can make all the difference. But it takes some real skills to unleash the potential. And it takes real heart to enjoy DaVincis for who they are, rather than dwell on who they are not.

DaVincis are motivated by the big picture. We know organisations do best with a compelling vision that fosters shared values and intrinsic motivation. This is especially important to DaVincis. But often it means they are hard to motivate with the usual array of offerings like job security, pay, benefits and status.

Except in sales. DaVincis make excellent sales reps, uninhibited in their approach and bouncing back from setbacks. They thrive on commission as it provides instant feedback on their performance. It is not the money so much as the instant measure of success that they crave. Sales can feed their thrill seeking nature, like the pleasure of the chase.

Many DaVincis lack self esteem, despite their apparent over-confidence. This is a product of being constantly in trouble or not fitting in. It takes so little effort but makes so much difference to notice and reflect their abundant qualities.

Positive psychology is a rapidly expanding new field which has demonstrated that people enhance their strengths **and** weaknesses most effectively when they use their signature strengths most often, in the most ways, with the most affirming feedback.

DaVincis are passionate when intrinsically motivated and absent when not motivated. So it is imperative to match the job to their passions. This is easier said than done, because passions can emerge with involvement.

Parenthood is probably the best example. We are so much more passionate about our own children than the nice kid down the road. As parents we will throw our heart and soul into raising our children for reasons that are not entirely logical. As nannies we will just do a reasonable day's work.

DaVincis are passionate parents of their own projects, but disinterested nannies of other people's projects. The key is to encourage ownership through providing authority, responsibility and accountability.

When good ideas bubble up through the organisation, ideally the creative spark is encouraged to explore the idea and progress it further, calling on help and resources when needed. Such processes ideally suit DaVincis rather than passing ideas to the person with the right skills and job description.

DaVincis will take initiative whether you want them to or not. It can be threatening to managers who feel they should be in control, and to organisations that want to be certain of everything they do. Actually healthy organisations take the rollercoaster ride, fostering initiative and coping with the bounties and the risks.

Personally I feel we have adopted too many American management textbooks aimed at managing large, impersonal multinationals. These organisations have replaced the uncertainties of human management with the comfort of systems and processes to cope with their unwieldy size.

But 97% of New Zealand firms have less than 20 staff. Moreover the Kiwi workforce is rich in DaVinci genes and an education system that fosters initiative. It has little patience for the sanitized and over-controlled workplace.

I experienced this first hand at Industry New Zealand. In its pioneering days this was a spectacular government department, inspired by dreams of growing the New Zealand economy and the regions. Its initial contract staff were very talented and included many DaVincis.

But the Audit NZ report was a black mark, as a cleric had wrongly labelled grants as expenditure. The organisation was shamed in parliament, its very existence under intense scrutiny. So the organisation committed to adopting all the best management practices, exhibiting accountability, transparency, client management, and the best systems and processes.

Each decision was right and proper. But collectively it was a disaster. Over the ensuing year many staff told me that their productivity was about 10% of what it had been. These were largely the same staff, in the same organisation, with the same goals and the same managers. But the life had gone out of the organisation and the DaVincis as well as many other staff left. Industry New Zealand sank to being as good as most other public and private medium sized organisations.

We are seeing the same effect in our high schools as the New Zealand Qualifications Authority battles to ensure consistency in NCEA across the country. While laudable the effect is to sanitise education to know with measured certainty that the right mark is given.

But it is very hard to measure higher order learning such as insight, judgment, initiative, leadership, interpersonal skills, creativity and complex problem solving. Many of these are the qualities most abundant in DaVincis, and most at risk from over-measurement and over-control

The key is to find the 'big, hairy, scary measure' that most defines the vision of the organisation, add a few supporting measures, and to dump the rest. George Hickton, the CEO of Tourism New Zealand, is the most exemplary leader applying these ideas. Every organisation he has touched he has transformed its performance, culture and attitude.

The visionary measures unleash the capacity of staff to find creative ways to solve the big challenges. DaVincis **have** to work in this kind of environment, while other staff benefit from it.

DaVincis are a challenge to manage. But any organisation that manages its DaVincis well, will also be managing its entire organisation well. The organisation will be a leader in innovation, problem solving and aspiring to its greatest potential.

