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**ADHD and career sustainability: A sustainable career ecosystem perspective**

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# **ADHD and Career Sustainability: A Sustainable Career Ecosystem Perspective**

## **Abstract**

*Purpose:* We explore the perceptions of career sustainability of individuals with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in the United States, taking a sustainable career ecosystem perspective that considers multiple sustainability indicators and different interdependent actors.

*Design/methodology/approach:* We conducted semi-structured interviews with 31 participants and analyzed the data using a template approach, that allows combining deductive and inductive analysis.

*Findings:* We identify how ADHD impacts different aspects of sustainable careers, namely time, person-related factors, and indicators (i.e., happiness, productivity and health). Moreover, our findings identify empirical support for two additional indicators (financial security and growth mindset) as proposed by sustainable career ecosystem theory. We suggest a disproportionate impact of ADHD on the indicators, specifically, productivity, due to contextual workplace barriers. We also identify key actors at the local ecosystem level (e.g., family members, teachers, neighbors, friends, co-workers, and therapists) that play an important role in individual careers within the ecosystem, particularly regarding diagnosis and support.

*Originality/value:* We provide empirical insights that support the recently developed sustainable career ecosystem theory and suggest a differential impact of ADHD on the indicators.

*Keywords:* ADHD, sustainable careers, career ecosystems, workplace support

## Introduction

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a common neurodevelopmental condition that presents as inattention, hyperactivity, hyperfocus, impulsiveness, or a combination (APA, 2013). A report by the Centers for Disease Control (2024) states that 15.5 million adults in the United States (approximately 6%) are currently diagnosed with ADHD. Individuals with ADHD often face challenges in the workplace, which can affect their employment status and career progression (see Bölte *et al.*, 2025). For example, adults with ADHD have higher rates of unemployment and underemployment compared to those without ADHD (Christiansen *et al.*, 2021). Such marginalization from the labor market translates to negative outcomes for the economy (Schein *et al.*, 2022) and for the individuals, as decent work not only provides a means of living but is also essential to a sense of self-esteem and value (Blustein *et al.*, 2023).

The inherent symptoms associated with ADHD can negatively impact workplace performance, manifesting as distractibility, forgetfulness, restlessness, and impulsivity, and lead to challenges with teamwork and interaction with supervisors (Oscarsson *et al.*, 2022). Fuermaier and colleagues (2021) describe the impact of the different impairments that people with ADHD report on different outcomes, such as efficient work completion and fully utilizing their potential. Beyond the specific symptoms, self-judgment and self-limiting behaviors that stem from the stress of decreased performance and perceived judgment diminish the capability to maintain long-term performance (Adamou *et al.*, 2013; Oscarsson *et al.*, 2022). At the same time, individuals with ADHD often opt not to disclose their condition and ask for appropriate accommodations because of the fear of being stigmatized, which also limits their performance (Masuch *et al.*, 2019). Altogether, the difficulties with executive functioning and efforts to manage the symptoms, combined with psychological stress, often result in burnout (Barthauer *et*

*al.*, 2020; Turjeman-Levi *et al.*, 2024) and subsequent job loss (Fuermaier *et al.*, 2021; Masuch *et al.*, 2019).

To date, most current research on the impact of ADHD on career development has focused on the negative aspects associated with ADHD symptomology. However, recently, the conversation has shifted towards a strengths-based approach, for example, enthusiasm, passion, and loyalty typical of individuals with ADHD (Helgesson *et al.*, 2022; Lauder *et al.*, 2022; Schippers *et al.*, 2022). Crook and McDowall (2023) also refer to an inherent paradox where ADHD creates both barriers to success and strengths, namely core strengths and/or those that result from adaptation. The current study adopts a holistic approach to the career development of individuals with ADHD, examining their experiences through the lens of the sustainable career ecosystem theory (SCET), which considers career development over time, as well as the interaction between a person and other important actors.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The sustainable careers framework (De Vos *et al.*, 2020) offers a broad perspective on individual career development over time. The model specifies three indicators - productivity, happiness, and health (Van der Heijden, 2005) - and assumes an interplay between the individual (agency and meaning) and the social space (multiple contexts), thus combining individual, contextual, and temporal factors. Research on the temporal aspect highlights the importance of a long-term trajectory over short-term strategies (Gerritsen *et al.*, 2024; Retkowsky *et al.*, 2023). Agency is one of the model's key components (see Talluri *et al.*, 2022), yet the contextual impact is also important. The complexity of the context is explained by Baruch (2015) in his ecosystem approach, which describes how different actors within an ecosystem interact with each other. Such actors may include other individuals, organizations with their own goals (Chudzikowski *et*

*al.*, 2020), and non-work-related entities that may impact one's work life (Hirschi *et al.*, 2020; Richardson *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, within such an ecosystem, there is an ongoing interplay between agentic and contextual factors (Mishra *et al.*, 2024).

The sustainable careers and the ecosystem perspectives were integrated into a single SCET theory by Donald (2023a), who highlighted the role of interconnected actors that interact to impact an individual's career sustainability over time. At the heart of the SCET model developed by Donald *et al.* (2024a) are indicators across three levels: individual, organizational, and societal. For individuals, the indicators are: happiness, health, productivity, growth mindset, and financial security. At the organizational level, indicators include attraction and retention of talent, competitive advantage, financial performance, and innovation. On the societal level, indicators include increased standards of living, national competitiveness, national well-being, and investment in public services.

Therefore, this recently developed theory examines outcomes on multiple levels (individual, organizational, and societal) and expands the number of indicators beyond the original three proposed by De Vos and colleagues (2020). Our research aims to explore individual-level indicators of sustainable careers in the context of ADHD. Consequently, our first research question is:

RQ1: How does having ADHD impact an individual's career sustainability?

Moreover, the inclusion of different actors adds another aspect to complexity of managing one's career over time. Whereas some actors were well-known, for example labor markets (Baruch, 2015), recent technological developments expand this range even further, by introducing artificial intelligence that disrupts global and national economies, organizational

processes, and ultimately, individual careers (Donald *et al.*, 2024a). Therefore, our second research question is:

RQ2: How do different actors in the ecosystem interact to influence one's career sustainability?

## **Methods**

### *Research design*

Our study aimed to investigate the impact of ADHD and career ecosystem actors on career sustainability at the individual level. To answer these research questions, we employed a qualitative approach that is well-suited for gaining a deep understanding of individual perspectives (Richardson *et al.*, 2022). We adopted an interpretivist paradigm, focusing on the individual meanings our participants assign to their lived experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

### *Participants*

This study included 31 adults diagnosed with ADHD. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling (Patton, 2015) via LinkedIn, with all participants residing in the United States. We did not pre-define a target number of interviews and instead continued data collection until no additional new insights were identified, thus indicating data saturation (Guest *et al.*, 2006). Participants ranged in age from 22 to 47 years. Fifteen identified as male, 12 as female, and four declined to disclose demographic information. Additional demographic details are presented in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

## *Data Collection*

This study received ethical approval from the first author's Institutional Review Board (IRB). All participant communication, data storage, and interview recordings were handled exclusively by the second author, who ensured secure storage and confidentiality, such that only the second author had access to identifying information. Each participant was assigned a unique code to de-identify data prior to transcription and analysis. The remaining authors worked exclusively with anonymized transcripts. Individual semi-structured life-world interviews (Brinkman and Kvale, 2018) were conducted via Zoom between December 2024 and February 2025. Each interview was scheduled for 30 minutes, with flexibility to accommodate individual needs. This length was chosen intentionally, given the research team's awareness of how ADHD may influence participants' attention and energy during interviews. The second author, a subject matter expert in ADHD, conducted all interviews. Her experience enabled her to create a supportive interview environment, offering options such as breaks, repetition, or clarification of questions as needed. It is important to note the role of the researcher as both collecting data and impacting the participants, who have an opportunity to be heard and to embrace their career progression, which is especially relevant for marginalized populations (Gunn, 2022). Participants were first asked to share a narrative of their career journey. Follow-up questions explored how ADHD influenced their work experiences, with specific prompts aligned with the original Sustainable Careers (SC) framework, which can be seen as a subset of SCET. Example questions were: "How does your ADHD represent itself when working or looking for work?", "What does being productive mean to you?", "What aspects of your job support/negatively impact your health?", "What are some conditions in your environment that you find supportive/non-supportive of your career?" (prompts: different ecosystem actors). All interviews were audio-recorded with

consent and transcribed verbatim using Zoom's transcription service. Each participant received a \$25 Amazon gift card in appreciation for their time, as this value was agreed upon via the institutional review board as a token of appreciation for the participants' lived experience without compromising the value of the data to address the research questions.

### *Data Analysis*

Once the interviews had been transcribed, the researchers analyzed the dataset separately and systematically, treating each interview as a separate analytical unit (Elliott, 2005). Our analytical process combined deductive and inductive approaches. For research question one, first-level coding was done freely after familiarising ourselves with the data; examples of first-level codes included *clarity*, *stability*, *support*, and *strategies*. While our interview protocol was focused on the indicators (productivity, happiness, and health), we identified additional aspects of the sustainable careers model, such as time and person. Then, the analysis was theory-driven, and codes were classified using a template analysis procedure following King's (2004) protocol, which allows a systematic yet flexible approach to coding when some of the codes are known apriori (Davis and Van der Heijden, 2018), but the codebook can be expanded, condensed and/or reorganized upon familiarization with the data. Thus, we developed a coding template on the three indicators of sustainable careers (productivity, happiness, and health), as well as other key concepts from the framework (e.g., agency). The initial, descriptive codes were sorted into categories, or first-level codes. Some codes that did not fit into a category (e.g., financial security) were later identified as indicators within the SCET (Donald *et al.*, 2024a), which resulted in revising the template, thus expanding from the sustainable career framework to SCET.

Within the categories, we analyzed the data inductively, systematically developing second-level codes from participants' own words. For Research Question 2, we focused specifically on the ecosystem aspect, identifying key actors and then defining their roles and impact through an inductive process. All three authors independently engaged with the data and then met regularly to compare interpretations, resolve discrepancies, and synthesize insights, consistent with strategies for enhancing qualitative rigor (Saldaña, 2015). All data were managed and analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. To establish trustworthiness (Creswell, 1998), the team employed several strategies. First, prolonged engagement was achieved by reading each transcript multiple times. Second, investigator triangulation occurred through regular collaborative meetings to compare codes, themes, and findings. Third, thick description was ensured by incorporating direct quotes from participants to support the development of themes. The original template (based on sustainable career theory) and the revised template (based on SCET) are presented in the Appendix.

## **Findings**

Our analysis focused on two key questions: the aspects of sustainable careers in light of ADHD, and the aspects of the ecosystem, e.g., relevant actors that can play a role in individual career sustainability.

### *Research Question 1*

Regarding RQ1: 'How does having ADHD impact an individual's career sustainability?', we identified key components of the original sustainable career model (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). First, we identified the *time* component as manifested in the age of the diagnosis, which played a significant role in individual career development. The age or life stage when the diagnosis is

received impacts the individual's ability to intentionally adjust the course of their career: the earlier the person is aware of their condition, the more time they have to learn about accommodations that can contribute to their productivity.

Second, we identified the person-related aspects, namely *agency* and *meaning*. In the context of ADHD, agency often manifests in relation to the path that leads to diagnosis: in many cases it may be the individual's initiative, which makes it agentic, however there is a complex interplay with other actors, as many participants attributed the initiative for testing to contextual actors: parents, teachers, colleagues, friends, and others. We further explore this in RQ2. Agency is also prominent in the participants taking proactive steps to ensure career sustainability, such as seeking therapy, requesting accommodations and/or support at work, developing strategies, and more.

Another essential person-related factor that was prominent in the data was meaning: when one's work is personally meaningful, one will likely be more satisfied with one's career, sometimes striving for future development and other times being content with the existing situation. While some participants knew early in their career what provides meaning to them, others described that finding meaningful employment took time and experimentation: "*Well, a lot of us don't know what it is until we kind of get into it through volunteer work or, seeing other events happening and wondering what are the mechanics of it*". (P30). Ultimately, many participants recognized that the most effective way to craft a career for themselves is to be self-employed, which allows them to decide on their style of work and accommodate it to their needs. This may be a result of passion-driven choices and/or a desire for independence, such that agency and meaning are often intertwined. Participant 22 describes: "*Growing up, I have always*

*loved to be a makeup artist...I have a studio where I do makeup. You don't get to answer to anybody or boss ...So that kind of motivated me to want to do something like that for myself."*

Next, we proceeded to explore in depth the three predefined indicators of sustainable careers: *productivity*, *happiness*, and *health*. Interestingly, our analysis identified two additional indicators, namely *growth mindset* and *financial security*, that had been theoretically proposed by SCET (Donald *et al.*, 2024a) but had not previously been empirically validated or included in the sustainable careers framework (De Vos *et al.*, 2020).

In terms of *productivity*, the participants referred to ADHD as a source of challenges. Participant 30 explained their experience, *"And it does just make me angry, that I have this brain, I can't turn it off, as much as my mom tells me to stop thinking about that, or don't worry so much...I can't shut it off...That's not how it works."* Another participant described teamwork as a burden: *"[during physical meetings] I must say I don't like it because there's so many people in a room talking and sometimes it's overwhelming to me... I just feel like I want to run away"* (P2).

Participants shared that productivity, based on the challenges associated with their ADHD, required them to be mindful and invest effort to meet their goals, which resulted in the development of effective strategies that allowed them to overcome challenges related to executive functioning. Participant 30 shared, *"I do paper checklists. I've tried online tools. Like I've used Trello, I've used Asana. I'm not super great with those. I use Outlook task reminders."* Likewise, Participant 2 shared: *"I do set goals because if I don't, I pretty much wouldn't do anything. So I tried to set goals that are Mondays, I'll have to complete. For example, if I am working on a project and I'm giving about a month or three weeks to get through that project, I'll have to set little bits of goals to make sure I'm able to get to that target."*

However, some people referred to ADHD also as a source of strength that supports productivity (for example, having advantages in some areas): *“I think it helps me multitask...have my mind in like different places at the same time”* (P13); or referring to challenges that required developing strategies that now serve them:

*“When I worked in a lab and they were showing me how to do experiments most people would just walk with them, watch them do the experiment, or do the experiment alongside them and take notes. No, no, I cannot do that. I will not remember anything. I take my iPad...I will have this recording to refer to”* (P21).

The impact of ADHD on *health* manifested through increased strain, which led to the development of coping strategies. For example, mindfulness exercises and yoga were a common solution for threats to mental health. As shared by Participant 27: *“I practice mindfulness. And I do a whole lot of yoga... It helps my brain come to this reset.”* The solutions also included more intense physical activity, as participants mentioned taking care of their health through exercise and nutrition. As Participant 10 shared, *“I think going to the gym kind of helped a lot, there's this feeling when you're in the gym and you're really working out well, and it kind of makes you forget. It kind of push your mind on task. So basically, going to the gym has been, has been a lot of help for me, physically and mentally”*.

Finally, participants referred to *happiness or satisfaction* caused by three factors: a sense of clarity following diagnosis (understanding the reason for their experiences with symptoms), a sense of acceptance by themselves and others, and finding meaning in their work. Participant 18 shared their thoughts about being officially diagnosed, which explained previous behaviors and performance while providing solutions:

*“And then when that came back with the results...all my life I've been told it's your depression, it's your anxiety...I know that's not it, there's other things going on, when we got the scan, that's when I felt like people, my therapist and everybody, was actually starting to listen.”*

Others felt that sharing their diagnosis allowed them to have a conversation about symptoms surfacing in the workplace: *“You know, so I started feeling these symptoms. You know, on people who actually couldn't properly hold conversations any longer with people getting distracted easily.”* (P6). Having the diagnosis helped this participant explain to their manager why these symptoms were present, making them aware of why these behaviors were occurring.

Participant 2 stresses the importance of a sense of belonging: *“It makes me feel that a part of a very big family that don't just want me to work, but actually cares about my well being...because my colleagues are very wonderful. They always check up on me, want to interact with me, want to know what's the problem, and my boss is very helpful.”* Many participants have also reported a sense of meaningfulness derived from work that is based on passion and aligned with their interests. Participant 3 shared their career passion and meaningfulness:

*“I currently I work as a fashion designer for a clothing brand...I love what I do. We contribute to giving people back their confidence, one outfit at a time....I would definitely say that it's got meaning, and not only for me, not only for my work, co workers, but also the clients, because there's this deep satisfaction that comes from having a client sending a really good review, and that's your work. It's just really deeply satisfying, especially for me, because I might get distracted, but baby, I've still got the skills to get a job done. So joke's on ADHD, not on me.”*

Additionally, we identified two other sustainable career indicators proposed by SCET: *growth mindset* and *financial security*. Our participants mentioned that ADHD does not hinder their ambitions for future growth, and they also reported a strong desire to provide for themselves so as not to be dependent on others. Participant 27 demonstrated growth by starting a new business: *[My parents] always had issues whenever it comes to transporting, selling, and delivering... So it's just something I told myself one day I'm gonna change this away, you know?*". At the same time, other participants described their career choices in light of their ADHD, as a compromise on personally meaningful work in favor of job security and pay: *"Money that is putting it simply. Money is what has led me to where I am right now"* (P12). However, this compromise may also be framed in a positive way: staying in a stable job is associated with financial independence, allowing individuals to provide for themselves, perhaps at the expense of limiting growth ambitions. This sentiment was demonstrated by Participant 31, *"Not necessarily beautiful so they can choose to do without that they don't because they can afford to so regarding job security, I would not say I would not give it 100%, but it pays the bills, so I cannot complain."*

### *Research Question 2*

To answer the research question "How do different actors in the ecosystem interact to influence one's career sustainability?" we focused on the actors that impacted individual career sustainability and how they can be grouped by the type of role they played. First, there were key figures who *initiated the testing* that allowed participants to receive their diagnosis and take further steps that shaped their careers. First, the individuals themselves are actors who take steps towards meeting their goals. Participant 27 pursued a diagnosis as an adult:

*“I was a grown adult...it was during the phase of my life where I was trying to get permanent [employment]. I think after I got done with college...I started noticing little symptoms...so I would see the doctor.... He told me that I'm suffering from ADHD.”*

Other relevant actors came from different social circles: family members, teachers, neighbors, co-workers, and more, who influenced the diagnosis decision. While it would be expected that for minors, it would be the parents or teachers, it was not always the case. Participant 2

describes: *“I was diagnosed with ADHD when I was seven... I think because when I was in school, I was very secluded from my mates. So basically, it was our neighbor that actually made that impression that I might have [a] short attention span, so I went to see the doctor.”*

Participant 26 had family members acting at a later period in young adulthood: *“I was diagnosed when I was 15. I noticed my family kind of noticed that I was really being forgetful...I was always fidgeting. I was so restless...It affected my schoolwork”.*

Conversely, when the participants were tested as adults, the initiative was also sometimes external, for example, coming from a friend, co-worker, or manager. Participant 8 mentioned that both a therapist who was treating them for a different purpose and a friend provided information that was combined into an actionable insight.

*“I hadn't noticed myself that it was a consistent pattern, but then my therapist had brought it up.... Lena [friend] brought it up, have I even noticed that this seems to repeat itself ...I get random bursts of energy, I try to do everything at once and all of a sudden, all of that is gone. So would I like to talk to a different professional about that? And later, she recommended this guy...and that's how I ended up going in for a diagnosis, and this came up, and I was honestly surprised.”*

Another key role that actors play in sustainable careers is *support*. The most prominent actors in the socioemotional aspect are family and friends. Participant 10 shared: *“I have a really supportive family ... that really helped me not want to give up.”* Participant 12 agrees: *“It's like I'm feeling a hundred different emotions at once. And then when I'm talking to her [friend], it sort of just makes everything go away. I can't even stress this enough.”* Work colleagues and leadership also can play a supportive role in sustainable employment, which is not only socioemotional but also practical. Participant 6 shares: *“I've got some senior colleagues...Every loss of inspiration, every episode of wanting to do more is a result of my own personal conversation.”* Participant 29 concurs: *“My peers and my leadership team have said if there's different ways that we can support you, if you need something different, let us know...so it has opened dialogues and communication.”*

Despite getting potential support from others (practical in terms of accommodations, and psychosocial) upon disclosure of ADHD, some participants expressed a sense of hesitation, due to concerns around being perceived as low performers. Some of these concerns did not materialize: *“You know, between my colleagues and my superiors, they are aware about it but it's something that they're saying is really not affecting my productivity, not affecting my output, not affecting how punctual I am as well”.* (P5). However, forced disclosure may lead to stress over long-term employment, such that external actors can pose risks to job security: *“It's something they actually did notice, and they called me to the office. And I had no choice.”* (P4).

In general, our findings indicate that, in most cases, different actors within the ecosystem, particularly at the local level, are an important source of support. Despite a few exceptions where external entities had a negative impact (e.g., forced disclosure, lack of support), they were generally described as positive forces that contribute to career sustainability.

Figure 1 describes the data in the context of the SCET framework.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

## Discussion

Our findings offer the following insights. First, we describe how ADHD may pose risks to long-term career sustainability, especially in regard to productivity and mental health, which is consistent with previous literature (Fuermaier *et al.*, 2021; Stern and Maeir, 2014). However, we also highlight the coping strategies and potential positive outcomes, where ADHD may eventually support career sustainability, either naturally through core strengths, or with effort. For instance, some individuals demonstrate exceptional multitasking abilities, while others describe transforming previously burdensome traits into assets by employing personalized strategies, which aligns with a more contemporary view of ADHD that includes both challenges and strengths (Crook and McDowall, 2023).

Our findings support the sustainable careers model (de Vos *et al.*, 2020) as we identified key components of the model, namely the indicators and the aspects of time, agency, and meaning. Specifically, the timing of diagnosis in terms of the lifespan stage is a critical factor, as an earlier diagnosis provides individuals with greater opportunities to develop a sustainable career. Previous research has shown that individuals diagnosed in childhood are more likely to access academic accommodations, which support long-term productivity and performance (Hamed *et al.*, 2015). For adults, a formal diagnosis also improves labor market participation (Helgesson *et al.*, 2023). Crook and McDowall (2023) identified that time was a factor in determining career success and described how, post-diagnosis, individuals reframe previous experiences and view them less negatively. Over time, this self-awareness may facilitate

improved self-advocacy and self-esteem, factors closely linked to psychological well-being and career satisfaction.

Our findings also highlight the systemic and interpersonal dimensions of sustaining one's career in light of the ADHD diagnosis, and specifically support within an ecosystem. Many participants demonstrated personal agency by pursuing assessments independently and making proactive efforts to navigate workplace challenges, such as seeking therapy, requesting accommodations, and developing individualized coping strategies. We also identified the importance of meaning: when participants viewed their careers as meaningful, they expressed greater satisfaction, whether striving for advancement or finding contentment in their current roles. Interestingly, many individuals with ADHD tended to choose self-employment, allowing them to “harness enormous, but unpredictable, boosts of energy that they experienced from time to time” (Hogstedt *et al.*, 2023, p. 1286). Entrepreneurship emerged as an outlet for their passion and meaning in work, while offering the flexibility to manage their ADHD, supporting previous findings (Antshel, 2018; Moore et al., 2021; White and Shah, 2006). This finding is also in line with contemporary career theories. For example, the protean career (Hall, 1996) depicts careers as self-directed and driven by personal values, as individuals seek psychological satisfaction, freedom and growth. Additionally, the boundaryless career (Arthur, 1994) is characterized by independence from organizations as individuals navigate their own careers, exhibiting flexibility and adaptability. Next, while the interview protocol included questions on the three classic indicators of sustainable careers (happiness, health, and productivity), our data also yielded additional indicators, namely financial security and growth mindset, thus supporting Donald et al.'s (2024a) theoretical development of SCET.

Our second research question, which focused on the ecosystem aspect of sustainable careers, explored the different actors and their impact on individual careers (Baruch, 2015). We identified many key players, such as parents, educators, colleagues, and friends, who played vital roles, such as initiating the diagnostic process, providing ongoing support, and contributing significantly to participants' ability to sustain meaningful careers. Family and friends were the most consistent sources of support, followed by coworkers. Notably, support from colleagues was typically informal and grounded in mutual understanding rather than formal accommodations, underscoring the importance of inclusive workplace cultures in fostering sustainable careers. Interestingly, all these actors were on the local level (Donald *et al.*, 2024a), while entities on the national and global level were not present in the data. On one hand, this finding signifies that this level of support characterizes our specific sample, which is diverse in terms of occupation. Future studies could focus on specific occupations, which can help uncover other potential actors that are relevant in specific contexts. On the other hand, this can also suggest an important gap that higher-level actors, such as systematic government support and technology, have yet to fill to be perceived as significant figures (Donald *et al.*, 2024a).

Moreover, the preference towards self-employment may suggest avoidance or unawareness of potentially relevant actors on higher levels of the ecosystem. Future research should explore this further, and particularly the role of artificial intelligence as a new actor whose impact may be dramatic (Donald *et al.*, 2024a). To sum up, while most studies on ADHD in the work context focused on interventions and negative experiences in the workplace (Lauder *et al.*, 2022), we uncovered many positive aspects alongside the challenges, and this supports the balanced view on ADHD in the workplace, in line with Crook and McDowell (2023).

### *Theoretical contributions*

The theoretical contributions of our study are as follows. First, we support the SCET (Donald, 2023a; Donald *et al.*, 2024a) and provide pioneering evidence for the role of various actors that impact individual careers in many ways. Within the same framework, our findings describe the unique aspects of sustainable careers for people with ADHD, enriching the stream of studies on different subgroups that aim to enhance career sustainability (e.g., Kerti *et al.*, 2024; Richardson and McKenna, 2020). Our findings demonstrate that challenges associated with ADHD do not necessarily hinder career sustainability when the key components (e.g., the person and the context, including other actors) act in ways that can support one's career.

Specifically, we emphasize the temporal aspects of the sustainable career framework. Similar to previous studies that highlighted the importance of a long-term perspective (Gerritsen *et al.*, 2024; Retkowsky *et al.*, 2023), we identify the role of time in career sustainability through the diagnostic element, which provides clarity and allows for making deliberate decisions. Similar to the work of Mishra *et al.* (2024), we also consider the agentic and contextual influences that impact one's career development over time, as we identify the role of significant others who may recognize potential symptoms of ADHD and suggest testing. Yet, the individual may or may not act on that suggestion. We also find supporting evidence for the elements of agency and meaning that are central to sustainable careers. Our findings highlight the agentic choices that individuals with ADHD make, often based on personal interests and passion, and develop strategies to achieve their goals. Access to decent work supports one's self-esteem, and when that work is also meaningful, individuals experience both career satisfaction and improved well-being (Blustein *et al.*, 2023), which are markers of sustainable careers. Therefore,

individuals with ADHD are not only capable of having sustainable careers, but they also act with agency and search for meaningful work to achieve these positive outcomes.

Our findings also highlight the role of the ecosystem (Baruch, 2015), as the interplay between individuals, friends and family, employers and colleagues, and other actors (paid help, therapists, coaches) can significantly enhance career sustainability through providing practical and psychosocial support. This interplay validates Donald *et al.*'s (2024a) SCET, particularly with actors on the local level. Moreover, our data identified additional individual-level indicators of sustainable careers (i.e., growth mindset and financial security), offering further empirical validation for these proposed dimensions in the SCET. An interesting aspect regarding the indicators of sustainable careers is that the impact of ADHD on them may not be proportionate. While the classic model (De Vos *et al.*, 2020) portrays the indicators as potentially equal in size, our participants suggested that ADHD affects productivity more than the other indicators. This suggests a new direction for future studies: while not all research on sustainable careers needs to cover all indicators, it is interesting to investigate the different aspects concerning one another.

#### *Practical contributions:*

Given the vitality of support from managers and colleagues in our findings, we recommend that workplaces provide inclusive support for all employees regardless of diagnosis/disclosure. Practical accommodations such as flexibility in terms of time management and environment will support productivity, as they correspond with the agency component as previously highlighted by Lo Presti and colleagues (2023). Based on our findings, we suggest investing in flexible practices, including remote work when possible (Branicki *et al.*, 2024). Such practices will not only help individuals adjust their working environment for improved productivity (Donald, 2025) but will also benefit those who seek flexibility without necessarily

becoming self-employed. Additionally, inclusive support will contribute to developing a sense of acceptance and belonging that are essential for happiness and mental health. Such a positive exchange between organizations and employees will contribute to both individual careers and to the employers, as it is likely to reduce turnover (Donald, 2023b; Donald *et al.*, 2024b; Talluri *et al.*, 2025). Regarding SCET, previous research has emphasized the importance of inclusion for organizations in terms of strategic advantage (see Krzeminska *et al.*, 2019; McDowall *et al.*, 2025) and organizations can leverage it. While literature from the employee perspective is often focused on the challenges (see Khan *et al.*, 2023), our study describes various individual-level positive outcomes and highlights the value that employees place on inclusion. Thus, we recommend that employers adopt inclusive practices, as they are expected to result in positive outcomes for both employees and organizations, particularly in terms of innovation and competitive performance.

Next, to sustain a career over time, and in line with the growth mindset indicator, it is recommended to invest in continuous self-directed learning. This includes actors such as higher education institutions, which should be sensitive to individual needs, as individuals may not always be aware of potentially having ADHD. Yet, it will impact their choices and opportunity for additional support once they are aware of it. Additionally, organizations and governments can implement structured career programs that encourage ongoing development for employed and self-employed individuals, allowing them to experiment and seek feedback (Heslin *et al.*, 2020). To support the financial independence of small business owners within the ecosystem, we recommend a multi-level collaboration of federal and local government (Retkowsky *et al.*, 2023; Richardson *et al.*, 2020). Such collaborations can provide multiple forms of support: funding,

training, counseling, networking, and more, which is expected to translate to increased productivity (income), happiness (following one's passion), and health (well-being).

Finally, as a new actor that recently entered the conversation, artificial intelligence can impose a threat but also become an important source of support (Donald et al., 2024a). Our findings already emphasize the use of tools and systems to improve efficiency, and such a disruption has the potential to empower individuals in their careers further.

### *Limitations and future research*

Despite investing significant efforts to conduct a thorough study, it has several limitations, suggesting potential future research directions. Our qualitative research aimed for transferability of knowledge, rather than for generalizability, which is limited by our sample. As all the participants reside in the United States, we suggest conducting comparable research in other countries for two main reasons. First, the notion of career success may vary across different national contexts (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2016; Smale *et al.*, 2019), which can impact sustainability indicators. Moreover, as national economies serve as actors in a sustainable career ecosystem (Donald *et al.*, 2024a), they shape the context for individuals, in terms of options, challenges, and available support.

Next, we only focused on ADHD, and as our sample identified people with combinations of diagnoses (e.g., ADHD, autism, and/or anxiety), this suggests more directions for future research. We limited the length of our interviews for ethical reasons, which may have reduced the opportunity for participants who could have taken part in longer sessions to share more detailed insights, potentially affecting the depth of our findings. Notably, the study's ability to attract participants from diverse occupations that are often underrepresented, as well as its

demographic composition, has interesting potential for follow-up studies, particularly in terms of intersectionality. As we only included individuals with ADHD who mentioned managers and co-workers often, it would be beneficial to include those who work with neurodivergent colleagues in future studies to develop a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. For the same reason, it would be interesting to explore specific aspects of the ecosystem (e.g., geographical region) to look at different actors (employees, employers, government agencies at various levels, non-profits, and more) and their interactions. To summarize, our study examines the career sustainability of individuals with ADHD, adopting a sustainable career ecosystem approach that emphasizes the roles of various stakeholders. We make several theoretical and practical contributions and provide suggestions for future research.

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