

**E**VERY ONCE IN A WHILE, Richard Bickford leaves his office for the seclusion of his car. There, on his dashboard, he will finally unfold some papers that demand his undivided attention.

Mr. Bickford, a 39-year-old national sales manager for an electronics-components manufacturer, says his trips to the car are becoming increasingly rare—mainly because he sought help several years ago after a psychologist diagnosed him with attention-deficit disorder.

Later, with the aid of a coach, Mr. Bickford set up procedures to rein in his wandering attention. He now checks his e-mail at set times each day to keep it from spiraling out of control. He tidies his desk regularly and monitors how he spends his time at work.

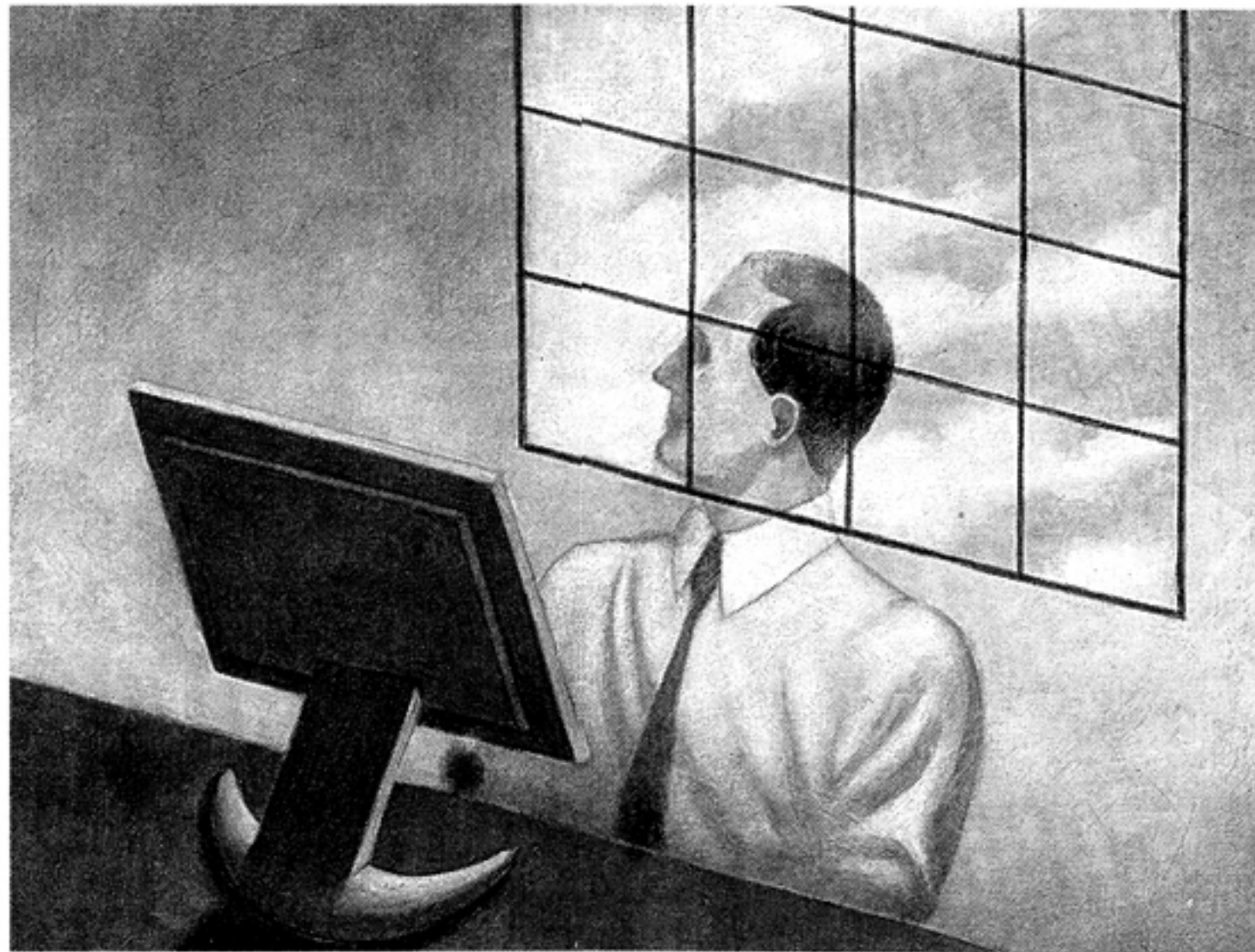
"I'm managing it better than I ever have," says Mr. Bickford.

Attention-deficit disorder is a neurological condition that appears in children but also afflicts adults. The Attention Deficit Disorder Association, in Pottstown, Pa., estimates that between 4% and 6% of the population has ADD and that a minimum of 50% to 70% of children with ADD will continue to have significant problems with symptoms as adults. There is no definitive test for ADD, which has a strong genetic link, and many symptoms apply to people who don't have the disorder.

People with ADD are typically easily distracted, restless and impulsive. They can be among the most creative individuals at a company, yet they can have a tough time focusing for an extended period on a single subject and generally feel overwhelmed by the amount of information coming at them via e-mail, telephone and other means.

Sound familiar? While ADD can be a debilitating disorder that causes problems in all areas of life, most people in the workplace these days experience some degree of "attention deficit."

"How do you know you have ADD



Jon Krause

or a severe case of modern life?" asks Edward Hallowell, founder of the Hallowell Center for Cognitive and Emotional Health in Sudbury, Mass. "Everyone these days is super-busy and multitasking and keeping track of more data points than ever. The actual condition is just that—taken to a more extreme level."

In an era of information overload, even many competent employees never develop entirely successful strategies to shield themselves from distractions in the workplace and ensure that the most important tasks get done first.

"The most important thing is to plan," says Carol Gignoux, an executive coach based in Boston who specializes in working with people with ADD. Many ADD sufferers have trouble finding important documents in cluttered offices or habitually forget meetings. They may also have trouble communicating effectively with others, because their attention can wander in mid-conversation.

Many people with ADD create ever more chaos to spur an adrenaline rush;

the added pressure enables them to finally focus. But they may not be aware of what they're doing, and along with the stress that this behavior creates, many ADD sufferers also experience depression or an anxiety disorder at the same time, says Ms. Gignoux.

To get people back on course, she helps them to track how they spend their days, then to prioritize tasks and even figure out the best time of day to perform them. "Basically, what I'm doing is helping them provide structures in their life to understand and accept themselves," says Ms. Gignoux, who says she herself has ADD.

Donald Wetmore, head of the Productivity Institute, a Stratford, Conn., company that offers time-management seminars, teaches numerous strategies to support a dwindling attention span:

- Plan your workday the night before and come up with a list of items and the order in which they need to be accomplished. This simple action can have a powerful effect, says Mr. Wetmore, comparing most people's sense of priorities to a pack of greyhounds

put down on a racetrack and ready to run off in any direction. The list, he says, acts like "that little rabbit that forms the direction to go in."

- Delegate tasks that aren't getting done, if possible.

- Get someone to monitor your progress. Pick someone you trust in the organization who is willing to work with you and "ride herd on you during the day," Mr. Wetmore says.

- Create an interruptions log. Track the interruptions to your day for a week or more to get an accurate picture of the distractions that regularly come up. Then set to work minimizing them.

- Take a daily lunch break or at least a brief time-out. Give yourself a physical break during the day to allow yourself to refocus when you return to your desk.

One of the biggest workplace mistakes that people with ADD can make is choosing an overbearing boss, Dr. Hallowell says. "They think they need to be under someone's thumb, but that's the opposite of what they need." Getting someone to check in on your daily progress is one thing, but it is important to develop independence in task management.

He believes that ADD is a "vastly underdiagnosed" disorder and that anywhere from 7% to 10% of the population may have it. Many of those people, and others who are easily distracted, are underachievers in the workplace, he says. The good news is that most people can make dramatic improvements with treatment.

Dr. Hallowell says one of his early patients had been fired from more than 100 jobs and that the only position he could hold down was a job as a night security guard. "After treatment, he went to school during the day, got an M.B.A., and now owns his own company," says Dr. Hallowell.

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