

Executive Paper No. 2 EN

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Between Genius and Bureaucratic Collapse: The "2e" Project Manager

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Executive Summary

In complex projects, there are individuals who grasp connections exceptionally quickly, link disparate pieces of information, and identify solutions that remain hidden to others. Some of these individuals also exhibit pronounced ADHD traits or have a diagnosed ADHD condition.

For businesses, this is not merely a matter of employee wellbeing. It is a question of performance, risk management, talent retention, and the responsible utilisation of exceptional abilities.

Reading time: approx. 10 minutes

Target audience:

Executive Board, Project and Department Heads, Transformation Leads



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When high cognitive potential and a neurodevelopmental condition coincide, the professional literature often refers to "Twice Exceptionality" or "2e". The term is not a medical diagnosis and does not describe a uniform personality type. Rather, it describes a field of tension: exceptional abilities can coexist with significant difficulties in attention, self-organisation, prioritisation, or task management. High intelligence can partially compensate for and thereby mask these difficulties for a long time – but it does not automatically eliminate them. [1, 2]

In project management, this can result in a paradoxical performance profile: an individual solves a strategic problem that others have been working on for weeks, only to fail shortly afterwards at a status update, time tracking, or the consistent maintenance of a project tool.

This is neither laziness nor evidence of a lack of professionalism. It can be an expression of a highly uneven profile of strengths and stressors. Studies on adults with ADHD show, on average, difficulties in various areas of executive function. These include, among others, planning, working memory, inhibition, prioritisation, and goal-directed task management. At the same time, some affected individuals report hyperfocus, high energy, divergent thinking, creativity, and unconventional solutions. These strengths do not occur in all individuals and are not an automatic consequence of ADHD. [3–8]

This paper is therefore not a diagnostic guide. It addresses a business question:

How can work be organised so that exceptional problem-solving competence becomes effective without permanently losing the individual to routine, bureaucracy, and self-overwhelm?

1. The Anatomy of the 2e Project Manager

In project management, high cognitive ability does not necessarily manifest through academic titles or flawless documentation. It can also be evident in someone's ability to quickly grasp large volumes of information, connect conflicting signals, and view a project as a cohesive system.

Research does not prove the existence of a uniform "2e brain" that fundamentally works faster, more associatively, or more systemically than other brains. However, it shows that high cognitive abilities and ADHD can coexist, and that this can result in highly uneven performance profiles. [1, 2]

In practice, this might look like this:

A project manager recognises within minutes why a programme is not progressing despite formally correct planning. A project manager combines technical, political, and economic risks into a viable hypothesis, while others are still looking at the topics in isolation.

The same person may simultaneously struggle to:

1. draft a status email completely and without errors,
2. comply with recurring documentation requirements,
3. maintain several administrative systems in parallel,
4. consistently complete tasks lacking immediate urgency,
5. or step away from an intensive work phase in a timely manner.

Meta-analyses on ADHD show that such difficulties can be linked to executive functions. However, they do not manifest in the same way in every individual and can be partially compensated for through experience, routines, support, or high cognitive abilities. [3, 4, 9]

Those who focus exclusively on formal consistency may therefore overlook significant potential. Conversely, those who only see the exceptional results may overlook the toll required to produce those results within an unsuitable system.

2. The Dangerous Illusion: "The Others Are Blocking Me"

Someone who identifies a potential solution very early in a chaotic project may experience team discussions as unnecessarily slow.

This can lead to the conviction:

"The others just don't get it."

Or even harsher:

"The others don't want to get it."

Often, however, the problem is not a lack of willingness. The mental intermediate steps through which an individual arrived at their solution are simply invisible to others. What already seems self-evident to the fast problem-solver may still be an unproven hypothesis for the team. The others have neither weighted the same information nor made the same connections.

The true leadership task therefore does not begin with finding the solution. It begins with translating it.

This involves:

- 1) making assumptions visible,
- 2) explaining the skipped intermediate steps,
- 3) allowing counterarguments,
- 4) jointly reviewing consequences,
- 5) and giving the team time to develop a shared understanding.

Research on shared mental models in teams shows that a shared understanding of tasks, roles, and contexts is positively correlated with coordination and team performance. [15] The core competence of the fast project manager thus becomes **controlled deceleration**.

This does not mean thinking more slowly. It means not confusing one's own speed of thought with the decision-making speed of the entire system. It is not just about being right.

It is about making a solution accessible enough that others can review, support, and implement it.

3. The Paradox: Catalyst and Potential Source of Chaos

Such a profile can be both a significant value driver and an organisational challenge for a company.

In Complex and Urgent Situations

Some adults with ADHD report that they can concentrate particularly intensely on novel, demanding, or highly interest-driven tasks. Hyperfocus refers to a sustained and very strong concentration on a task. It can enable exceptional productivity, but it can also lead to other tasks, priorities, physical needs, or recovery times being blocked out. [5]

Qualitative studies describe successful adults with ADHD as exhibiting, among other things, cognitive dynamism, energy, divergent thinking, courage, resilience, and the ability to adopt unusual perspectives. Research on creativity presents a nuanced picture: while several studies reveal creative abilities or achievements, a general creative superiority of all people with ADHD cannot be deduced from this. [6–8]

For project organisations, this means:

Some of these individuals can be particularly valuable where:

1. existing procedures no longer work,
2. conflicting information needs to be brought together,
3. new solution paths are required,
4. there is high uncertainty,
5. or a project needs to be led out of a deadlocked situation.

They are therefore not automatically "unbeatable in a crisis". But certain complex or urgent situations can activate their existing strengths more effectively than uniform routine work.

In Stable and Administrative Phases

The same person can be at risk if their daily work consists predominantly of recurring processes, minute detailed reporting, and parallel administrative requirements.

Possible consequences include:

1. procrastinating on important but under-stimulating tasks,
2. incomplete documentation,
3. a growing number of unresolved minor issues,
4. high effort to compensate,
5. long working hours,
6. shame over seemingly "simple" mistakes,
7. and ultimately exhaustion.

Studies on working adults with ADHD describe increased workloads, difficulties with task organisation, and a relevant risk for stress and work-related psychological strain. At the same time, many affected individuals develop their own compensation strategies, which can appear successful externally for a long time but consume considerable energy internally. [8–12]

In companies, such individuals are therefore not infrequently perceived alternately as "difficult geniuses", "firefighters", or "sources of chaos".

These attributions fall short.

They describe visible behaviour, but not the interplay between the individual, the task, and the organisational framework.

4. Self-Reflection: Is This Me?

The following checklist is not a diagnostic test. Individual points can have many causes and also occur in people without ADHD.

It is merely a mirror for one's own working style.

1. You get bored in stable project phases and become particularly alert when a situation is complex, urgent, or unresolved.
2. In meetings, you often see a potential solution early on and become impatient when the team discusses questions at length that already seem answered to you.
3. Administrative tasks such as time tracking, status reports, expense reports, or tool maintenance feel disproportionately exhausting.
4. You can keep complex project architectures in your head, but overlook typos, formatting guidelines, or seemingly simple details.
5. You know phases of very intense concentration where you largely block out time, breaks, and other commitments.
6. After such phases, you find it difficult to maintain a stable energy level.
7. You develop your own systems, aids, or workarounds to cope with everyday organisational requirements.

If several of these points apply strongly, it is worthwhile not only to question your own discipline, but to look more closely at your own work organisation.

Practical Approaches for Everyday Work

Energy Management Rather Than Solely Time Management

Not every hour is equally productive. Demanding analysis, strategy, or problem-solving tasks should be scheduled as much as possible in phases where concentration and energy are actually available.

After intensive hyperfocus phases, consciously planned recovery is needed. Permanent hyperfocus is not a sustainable performance model.

Communication Buffers

A solution does not need to be voiced the moment it occurs to you.

It can be helpful to:

- 1) note down the hypothesis first,
- 2) make the skipped intermediate steps visible,
- 3) anticipate counterarguments,
- 4) and only then enter into the discussion with the team.

This turns a mental head start into an accessible leadership achievement.

Taking Structures Out of Your Head

Tasks, appointments, assumptions, and decisions should not be kept exclusively in memory.

Adults with ADHD report, among other things, helpful strategies such as digital reminders, reduced filing systems, simplified processes, clear routines, and a conscious design of their work environment. [9]

Organising Around Strengths

The goal is not to delegate all disliked tasks.

It is about reviewing:

- 1) Which tasks actually need to be done by this specific person?
- 2) Which tasks can be standardised or automated?
- 3) Where are clear templates and fixed routines sufficient?
- 4) What can be sensibly delegated?
- 5) And for which tasks does this person generate the greatest business value?

Support must not be understood as special treatment or personal failure. It is a form of professional work design.

5. The Business Leverage: From Moulding to Enabling

Companies do not lose high-performing individuals solely due to a lack of competence.

They also lose them when the task profile, work environment, and personal working style do not fit together permanently.

Studies on person-job fit show correlations with job satisfaction, retention, strain, and performance. For employees with pronounced ADHD traits, scope for action and social support appear to be particularly relevant for psychological strain. [11, 14]

Figuratively speaking, some organisations try to run a Formula 1 car using a company car process.

The problem is neither the car nor the process.

The problem is that the two do not match.

The Tandem Model

A possible organisational solution is a tandem of two complementary roles:

- 1) a strategically and creatively strong project manager,
- 2) and a strongly structuring force.

This second role can be filled, for example, by:

- 3) a Senior PMO,
- 4) a Co-Project Manager,
- 5) a Project Assistant,
- 6) a Chief of Staff,
- 7) or another experienced coordination function.



The strategically aligned project manager focuses primarily on:

- 1) stakeholders and political dynamics,
- 2) crises and critical decisions,
- 3) strategy and project architecture,
- 4) risk identification,
- 5) connecting different specialist perspectives,
- 6) and solving particularly complex problems.

The structuring role takes over or ensures, in particular:

- 1) schedule and action tracking,
- 2) documentation,
- 3) tool maintenance,
- 4) minutes and decision logs,
- 5) formal quality requirements,
- 6) deadlines,
- 7) escalation paths,
- 8) and translating strategic thoughts into robust project structures.

This tandem model is not yet a scientifically validated standard specifically for 2e project managers. It is an organisational practice derivation from research on work design, compensation strategies, person-job fit, and complementary team structures. [9, 13–15]

The crucial point is that the second role must not be understood as a "clean-up service" for an unreliable project manager.

Both roles bear responsibility.

One creates orientation, options, and momentum.

The other ensures that decisions, knowledge, and accountability are retained in the system.

The ROI Perspective

Such a tandem may initially appear more expensive than a single project management function.

Whether it is economically worthwhile cannot be claimed universally. The benefit should be evaluated using specific metrics, for example:

- 1) avoided project delays,
- 2) less rework,
- 3) earlier risk identification,
- 4) more stable stakeholder communication,
- 5) lower turnover,
- 6) fewer sickness-related absences,
- 7) better documentation quality,
- 8) reduced dependency on individual knowledge holders,
- 9) and faster implementation of critical decisions.

Studies show that ADHD in the work context can be associated with relevant restrictions in work performance and productivity. At the same time, research on specific corporate interventions is still limited. Therefore, a tandem should not be sold as a universal recipe, but treated as a testable organisational hypothesis. [10, 13]

The business question is not:

"Why can't this highly paid person handle their own administration?"

It is:

"Which distribution of work generates the greatest overall benefit for the company while simultaneously reducing avoidable risks?"

6. Conclusion

To use an image, highly gifted people with ADHD traits are the zebras of the project world.

Not because they are fundamentally more brilliant, creative, or high-performing than others. But because their abilities and difficulties can occur in a combination that is inadequately captured by classical assessment standards.

Those who try to standardise such individuals completely may weaken exactly the characteristics for which they were originally hired or appointed to critical projects.

Conversely, those who excuse every organisational weakness with genius endanger the project and overwhelm the environment.

The solution does not lie in romanticisation.

It lies in a realistic work organisation:

- a. deploying strengths purposefully,
- b. openly naming boundaries,
- c. clearly distributing responsibilities,
- d. making thought processes translatable,
- e. securing administrative reliability,
- f. and taking overload seriously before the individual breaks down.

For companies in volatile markets, this is not merely a wellbeing issue.

It is a question of performance, risk management, talent retention, and the responsible handling of exceptional abilities.

Companies can continue to try to make uneven profiles uniform through more pressure.

Or they can design systems that productively embrace difference.



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Invitation

If you recognise yourself in these patterns – as a project manager or as a leader who experiences such profiles in their team – let's talk.

Every project, every person, and every organisation is different.

In direct exchange, we clarify whether the actual problem lies with the person, the task, the role distribution, or the organisational framework – and which path to a solution might make sense under the specific conditions.



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