Paradoxical career strengths and successes of ADHD adults: an evolving narrative

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Abstract

Purpose – Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a neuro-developmental condition that has frequently been pathologised in career research and broader society to date. The study seeks to reframe such assumptions through a qualitative positive-focused exploration of career stories of ADHD adults, elicited through a strength-focused technique with wide applicability for coaching and other career-based development activities.

Design/methodology/approach – Situated in a strength-focused coaching psychology paradigm, the authors undertook semi-structured interviews with 17 participants, using an adapted feedforward interview technique (FFI) rooted in positive psychology (PP), to investigate individuals' strengths and successful career experiences.

Findings – Narrative thematic analysis of the transcripts identified two core themes: "the paradoxical nature of strengths" and "career success as an evolving narrative". The participants described how they have achieved career success both "in spite of" and "because of" ADHD. The use of the FFI demonstrated a helpful and easily taught method for eliciting personal narratives of success and strengths, an essential foundation to any coaching process.

Originality/value – This research provides a nuanced overview, and an associated conceptual model, of how adults with ADHD perceive their career-based strengths and experiences of success. Further, the research shows the value of using a positive psychological coaching approach when working with neurominority individuals, using a successful adaptation of the FFI. The authors hope that the documentation of this technique and the resulting insights will offer important guidance for managers as coaches and internal and external career coaches, as well as providing positive and relatable narrative resources for ADHD adults.

Keywords Adult ADHD, ADHD careers, Career strengths, Career success, Positive psychology, Feedforward interview, Feedback, Neurodiversity, ADHDer, Neurominority, Coaching, ADHD coaching

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is defined as a neuro-developmental condition, affecting 5–7% of children, and symptoms persist into adulthood in approximately 65% of cases (Biederman, 2007).

ADHD in adulthood, including the workplace context, remains poorly understood. Lauder *et al.* (2022) highlight the lack of research into the effectiveness of interventions designed to support ADHDers at work. Many adults present with experiences of under-achievement, frustration, disappointment and low self-esteem, without understanding that there may be an underlying cause (Murphy, 2005). Relevant ADHD literature focuses on dysfunction and pathology and failure in occupational settings (Painter *et al.*, 2008). Broad top-down policy-based research (Adamou *et al.*, 2013) emphasises weaknesses in the United Kingdom's

approach to managing challenges at work associated with ADHD. This research acknowledges that ADHD stigmatisation has resulted in policy-makers, health professionals and businesses failing to address these issues equitably.

A phenomenological study (Sedgwick *et al.,* 2018) explored the character strengths of ADHDers, finding that positive attributes of ADHD can "support and sustain high functioning and flourishing" (p. 250). Schippers *et al.* (2022) discuss the benefits of highlighting strengths during the ADHD diagnostic process, which remains a rarity in practice. Although not focused on careers and work, such research signposts that the ADHD study is becoming less deficit-focused.

Indeed, there has been a growing recognition of ADHDers' potential, particularly regarding creativity (e.g. White and Shah, 2006; Young, 2005) and ability to hyperfocus (Royal *et al.*, 2015). Negatively connoted symptoms of ADHD such as inattentiveness, hyperactivity and impulsivity are reframed as curiosity, innovation and risk-taking, particularly through an entrepreneurial lens (e.g. Verheul *et al.*, 2015). Antshel's (2018) review of ADHD integrates the theories and clinical characteristics of ADHD and entrepreneurship (e.g. hyperactive/impulsive presentation: see also Stappers and Andries, 2022) recognising that ADHD affords advantages in certain occupational settings (Lerner *et al.*, 2019). One study (Patel *et al.*, 2019) concluded that despite a preference for self-employment among ADHDers, earnings are often lower than for waged work. While research links ADHD traits with successful entrepreneurialism, there are few that seek to elicit positive experiences of ADHD careers more broadly. As careers constitute a major part of adult identity (Savickas, 2011) and socio-economic contribution, research into all aspects of ADHD careers is crucial to facilitate holistic understanding and enable ADHDers to reach their working potential.

To address these gaps, the current paper investigates the positive career experiences of ADHDers across varied work contexts using the feedforward interview technique (FFI), to understand how they utilise their respective strengths and navigate their career successes with implications for broader career support. We now turn to the literature on career success and strengths to frame our research.

Career success

Career success has been operationalised primarily as "objective" and "subjective". Hughes defined objective career success as "observable, measurable and verifiable by an objective third party" (Hughes, 1937, 1958, cited in Heslin, 2005, p. 114), evidenced by reward, occupational status and progression through a traditional career path. Subjective career success is an individual's reaction to their developing career experiences (Hughes, 1937, 1958, cited in Heslin, 2005, p. 114), which is therefore the focus of our literature review.

Khapova *et al.* (2007) proposed four subjective career properties: "Inherent duality" (p. 115) as an individual could have high levels of intrinsic job satisfaction yet low objective earnings or vice versa. "Interdependence" highlights that if an individual is progressing well, objectively, in their career, it might influence their subjective reaction; conversely, experiences of happiness might influence perceptions of objective success. Either aspect of success is contingent on perceptions of "Time". Finally, the influence of "multiple dimensions" reflects differing levels of personal importance such as expert status or community impact or work/life balance.

A strength focus

Strength-based coaching is rooted in the positive psychology (PP) movement, which aims to rebalance over-focus on pathology to focus on positive qualities, resources and strengths (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

A strength is "a capacity for behaving, thinking, or feeling in a way that allows optimal functioning and performance in the pursuit of valued outcomes" (Linley and Harrington, 2006, p. 88). Individual strengths recognition and utilisation are still under-researched. To this end, we selected the FFI technique (developed by Kluger and Nir, 2010; adapted by McDowall *et al.*, 2014) for this study. This technique is rooted in appreciative enquiry and has been adapted for coaching and developmental conversations, as well as in research, to facilitate authentic dialogue and reconnect individuals with positive experiences and personal strengths. Identifying, articulating and validating strengths in a person that are often "unrecognised, unnamed and unacknowledged" (Smith, 2006, p. 16) is an empowering message to that individual. FFI acknowledges research which demonstrates that we are more receptive to experiences and change when in a positive frame of mind (Esses, 1989). For ADHDers, who often present with low self-esteem and self-efficacy, identifying strengths as a "personal resource" may be particularly impactful (Asherson *et al.*, 2012; Litman-Ovadia *et al.*, 2014, p. 13).

Career coaching has an extensive history of promoting a strength perspective. Schippers *et al.* (2022) note that strengths can have positive or negative consequences depending on context. Pauwels (2015) cautioned that some of the most meaningfully positive life experiences are frequently inspired by negative circumstances and thus over-focus on the positive may be counterproductive. Therefore, the challenge for PP, and this paper, is to explore potential "dark sides" of the strengths identified by participants to elicit a balanced perspective (Gruman *et al.*, 2018, p. 60).

Research questions
In summary, we aimed to investigate positive ADHD career experiences from a balanced perspective with a view to informing career support practices. Our research questions were as follows:

RQ1. How do ADHDers construct self-identified strengths to explain any career success stories during a strength-focused interview process?

RQ2. To what extent do ADHDers articulate career success achieved *in spite* of their ADHD or *because* of it?

Methods
We obtained ethics approval through the researchers' host institution, including consideration of participant-informed consent and wellbeing. No financial inducement was offered.

Participants and recruitment
Our inclusion criteria stipulated that participants had a primary diagnosis of ADHD and were over 25 years of age to ensure several years of career experience. All broadly concurred with the statement "I feel successful in my career". Seventeen participants submitted written informed consent and participated in the interview from 32 who expressed initial interest.

Participants comprised nine women and eight men (aged 31–69 years). Only one American participant and one British participant had been diagnosed in childhood; all others had been diagnosed in mid-late adulthood. Three participants were self-diagnosed, reflecting difficulty in accessing formal diagnosis (see, e.g. Asherson *et al.*, 2022). The participants' career backgrounds were varied: two academics, two sales professionals, two creative directors/business owners, two charity workers, two teachers, a social entrepreneur, an artist, a police inspector, a journalist, a project manager, a property developer and a healthcare professional.

The heterogeneity of career context and wider demographics aligned with our commitment to presenting a breadth of narratives.

Interview approach and structure
We invited participants to complete a preparation questionnaire to self-define the nature and impact of their ADHD and to gather relevant biographical information. An option was given to work through this verbally if preferred. This neurodiversity-affirmative approach enabled participants to begin structuring their thoughts in advance. Accommodation of preferred communication requests meant that we combined interviews face-to-face ($n = 7$), via an online platform ($n = 7$) and telephone ($n = 3$). There was no difference in terms of rapport building or the quality of discussions held, reflecting previous research (Cachia and Millward, 2011).

The first author conducted all FFI interviews, encompassing three key elements: (1) eliciting a success story to focus on positive emotions and on episodic memory ("think of a specific example of a time when you felt successful at work"); (2) identification of "the peak moment" to foster self-evaluation and emotions and (3) further questions on the context and conditions which enabled success ("what were the conditions in you, such as things that you did, your capabilities and your strengths that made this story possible?" (Kluger and Nir, 2010, p. 236). We incorporated questions addressing the extent to which participants attributed their career success *to their ADHD specifically*.

Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min. The researcher took brief notes during the interview to record reflections, but we based the analysis on subsequent verbatim transcriptions. We sent summaries of initial analysis to each participant to allow for any further clarification and reflection, and to ensure that any interpretations reflected the data (Russo, 2012).

Data analysis
We undertook thematic analysis across the dataset (17 interview transcripts), following the six main phases of analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87): familiarisation with the data, the generation of initial codes, search for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and the write up.

Although the concept of data saturation is debated within the field of qualitative research (see, e.g. Saunders and Townsend, 2016), participants were recruited until our "interpretative judgement" (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p. 210) that we had sufficient data for theory development was met.

Findings and discussion
The FFI technique offered an important opportunity for participants to reflect on their strengths and positive career experiences, which enabled us to identify two overarching themes in Table 1:

Core themes	Sub-themes
The paradoxical nature of strengths	Core strengths
	Strengths as adaptive strategies
	Overplayed strengths
Career success as an evolving narrative	"Hard won" successes despite ADHD
	"Authentic" successes because of ADHD
Source(s): Authors' own work	

Table 1.
Identified themes and
sub-themes

First, participants constructed *the paradoxical nature of strengths* in different ways and contexts. The sub-themes included "ADHD 'core strengths', 'strengths as adaptive strategies' and 'overplayed strengths'", contextualised by the requirements of their working environment and individual self-perception. The second core theme was *career success as an evolving narrative*. Differing participant perspectives suggested an evolving narrative of success from denial through to pride, often influenced by the diagnosis of ADHD.

The paradoxical nature of strengths

Participants either named strengths directly during the FFI, or we inferred and coded accordingly. For example, participants constructed "empathy" as "connecting with people" or "mirroring emotions". The most frequently observed strength "themes" were spontaneity, linking ideas, a different perspective, empathy, a sense of fairness and justice, hyperfocus, physical and mental energy, a sense of humour, altruism, and resilience.

Even more interesting than the *range* of recognised strengths identified in the discussions with participants was how they *perceived* these strengths. We identified three interlinked sub-themes as each strength could be articulated in different, and sometimes contradictory, ways depending on context.

ADHD "core strengths"

Many of the strengths that participants mentioned first were attributed directly to the ADHD condition distinguishing them from neurotypical "norms" which drove their greatest perceived career successes (see Cooper *et al.*, 2021, for a related study of autistic individuals' sense of collective self-esteem).

David, a journalist, spoke about his spontaneity in his work, taking advantage of opportunities as they arise:

> And I think this is an ADHD thing [. . .] a lot of the time, you're walking around in a slight fog [. . .] [. . .] so you don't really have a structure. But the advantage of that is that when something happens, when there's a catalyst, when you have an idea, you aren't boxed in like other people.

Rachel, an academic, also referenced her spontaneity and then explained how she made fast connections in her lecturing role:

> [. . .] My mind is in the place of the 20, 30 years' experience that I've had, so I can pull and connect all sorts of different ideas. When you have a diverse student cohort [. . .] then this ability to have read widely, to have thought about the world and how it works, comes in really handy – you can relate to what [. . .] they're supposed to be learning.

Similarly, Michael B, a social entrepreneur, identified "seeing things that others don't see" as his strength, illustrating his passion for teaching and his connection to students:

> I'm good at what I'm doing, I'm in control [. . .] I've done it for a long time, it's just natural, it flows [. . .] It just feels like a Billy Elliot moment, you know when he says, [. . .] "I feel when I'm dancing, I'm in a different place". It feels like that for teaching; you wouldn't know I have all the hang-ups when I'm teaching a class of people.

Such passion also prompted other participants to seek out transformational experiences that help them to feel a sense of connectedness with the world around them (Smith, 2006, p. 27). Garry had built a reputation for being a filmmaker with the courage to tackle difficult subjects:

> The last couple of years, [. . .] all my short films have been very kind of human issues, [. . .] loss or grief or whatever it might be, but they're really powerful emotions, you know. [. . .] I started to then build on taking on thorny difficult subjects and so my job became being the guy who goes out and says "let's teach kids about this, you know?"

Justice sensitivity is known to be heightened in those with ADHD (see, e.g. Schäfer and Kraneburg, 2015). Kaj, a police inspector, explained this and referenced a sense of alignment with the attributes of the wider ADHD community:

> The ADHD strength around that fight for justice ... a willingness to put oneself in harm's way, for what one sees as the benefit of the right perspective [. . .] the things we ADHDers do the best, are the things that we do out of an emotional response.

Hyperfocus is associated with ADHD anecdotally and recently within academic literature as "a state of heightened intense focus of any duration," (Hupfeld *et al.*, 2018, p. 3). For Jo, a healthcare professional, hyperfocus made a positive difference to her work:

> And I saw how it could make a difference and suddenly it's like 'Wow!' [. . .] and I really got into the flow and to the point where, you know, hyperfocus was very easy to access, so I could just sit for hours analysing my results [. . .] it's a really good feeling.

Strengths as adaptive strategies
Some participants interpreted such behaviours differently, particularly those who talked about these as a coping mechanism or an "adaptive strategy" (Young *et al.*, 2020, p. 9), for example, hyperfocus was considered "boastful" by Garry (also in sales). Rachel described it as "a compensation mechanism, and it's not healthy, it's no healthier than not being able to concentrate on something." Here, the difference in perspective seemed to be based on whether the hyperfocus was a tool to compensate for mismanaged time or as an intentional way of accessing deep analytical thought.

Participants spoke of using humour in the interview and in their day-to-day lives. It was often used as a means of self-deprecation around some of the challenges of ADHD, as exemplified by one participant, an artist: "I mean, I could be a writer if I could remember anything!" While humour could be identified as straightforwardly positive, it is seen as "one of the truly elegant defences in the human repertoire" (Vaillant, 1977, p. 116) and can be an effective way to cope with uncomfortable social situations (Canela *et al.*, 2017, p. 12).

Sarah, a tutor, spoke emotively about the ways in which she works to support the children she teaches

> Have you heard of kingsukuroi? It's the Japanese art of putting broken pottery back together using gold and lacquer [. . .] So, your scars make the whole more valuable than before it got broken – [. . .] I'm performing kingsukuroi for the soul, if you like [. . .] Every time I knock down a barrier for my students, I'm putting gold powder and lacquer on the bits of me I'm trying to put back together, and that's the high [. . .] It's entirely selfish.

Active altruism was constructed as being willing to help others by giving them the care that people looked for themselves (Vaillant, 1977, p. 110) or had missed out on earlier in life. This was reflected almost exactly by Sarah's next statement:

> [. . .] it literally is the most selfish thing on the planet [. . .] by helping other people knock down their barriers, I am mothering the ghost of the girl I used to be.

This experience explains how helping others overcome obstacles facilitates coming to terms with one's own history and experience. Young *et al.*, discussed coping mechanisms used by adults with ADHD and their ability to be resilient and to "bounce back" from stressful situations despite some potential cognitive and social disadvantages (2020, p. 814). Kate is a SEN specialist, and her comments reflected this insight:

> I think people with ADHD are good at failing, [. . .] we become successful because if we come up to a barrier, we're looking for a way round it, because we're used to coming up against things [. . .]

Pete, an entrepreneur, adds to this:

> In a strange way, that's why I'm so strong [. . .] that's why I can navigate through life without anyone because I feel like I had to as a child. So, it's made me a much stronger human, but really, it's a shame it had to.

Overplayed strengths

Overused strengths can be "too much of a good thing" (Kaiser and Overfield, 2011, p. 106), limiting the individual's capacity to recognise any negative impact of their behaviour. Simon, a highly regarded Events Director, recounted a story of working on events in the past, and how he felt he was perceived by others:

> That energy, [. . .], I'm happy to work all night, work the next day, and be a lunatic [. . .] I mean, I'm better at it now, but I used to be really mad [. . .] and people found it really difficult to work with me.

Pete also referenced energy and passion paradoxically, warning of the increased potential of negative impact if things go wrong:

> For anyone with ADHD, having something you're passionate about is really important. Because all that energy goes from anxiety to moving forward to something productive. As soon as you get momentum with ADHD it's amazing where you can go. But the momentum works both ways. That's the other thing I've learned. If you get in a bad place, it's very easy to go down.

Sarah talked about her all-consuming enthusiasm and energy for new projects for her students and her need for autonomy to drive them in her own way:

> I'm in complete control of everything, I just go with whatever my latest obsession is [. . .] [. . .] I'm running on this kind of 'agh!' adrenaline of "Look it's my new toy, it's my new toy!" [. . .] so pretty much my day-to-day life is running around with my new shiny toy, working until 2 o'clock in the morning with it, polishing it, and then, presenting all my students with shiny new stuff!

Initially, this excerpt appeared inspiring because she was so enthusiastic about her autonomy and energy. However, later in the interview she said "[. . .] the hyperactivity will keep me going, and I can fake it until I collapse, until everyone has left [. . .]" implying that she will continue until the point that she burns out. This statement raises queries around how healthy such a drive is mentally or physically. Looking at particular strengths (in this case the combination of energy, innovation and autonomy) as being "intrinsically positive" can obscure the contexts under which they produce "undesirable outcomes" (Pauwels, 2015, p. 814). This insight also reflects the work of Sedgwick *et al.* (2018) when they referred to their study participants' stating that their actions were judged as "either impulsive or spontaneous depending on how other people reacted to it" (p. 245).

Despite the initial focus on drawing out career strengths, we noted that participants' narratives indicated that the strengths and challenges of ADHD were inextricably linked. This reflects the later models of PP theory expounded by Ivtzan *et al.* (2016, p. 2) that "the outcomes of PP theory and research are always positive in some way, and yet the paths, the journey, what we experience on the way to these outcomes may be painful and challenging". This concept of paradox is important because it encourages us to look beyond one-dimensional constructs and incorporate a contextual filter when considering the development, combination and utilisation of strengths in day-to-day life to help us succeed in our endeavours.

The evolving narrative of success

In analysing the interview data, it was apparent that there were differences in emotional response to success, ranging from a fundamental difficulty in recognising their success,

through to confidently embracing their achievements and future potential. This "evolving narrative of success" forms an essential part of the model in Figure 1.

Hard won success before diagnosis
Michael B had experienced some "excruciatingly hard" times in his life but is now the founder of an "objectively" successful, widely supported social enterprise. Yet, his response to the question of his perception of his success was as follows: "Well, am I successful? I don't feel successful. I suppose I am – I don't know. It's an interesting one, isn't it?".

Jo had multiple academic publications to her name, so one would expect a sense of pride or personal recognition of success. However, she verbalised her feelings about success as follows:

> Putting something down on paper that says I've achieved [...], doesn't necessarily equate with a feeling of achievement in myself, if that makes sense. A lot of that is to do with imposter syndrome, and like 'urgh! How much did I have to go through to achieve this?!'

Some participants recognised that they had achieved a certain success but felt they had not reached their potential. One highlighted wasted time in their early careers: "I spent the first five years of my career completely directionless [...] if I'd been guided into the right kind of work, who knows where I could be today?" Another participant, also an academic, explained

> Well, I am smart, but I'm an under-achiever, you know. And it stays. It stays with you [from childhood]. I would just say yes, I'm successful, yes, I've achieved a lot, but I haven't lived up to my potential. If you took the ADHD factor out of my life, I would have achieved much more.
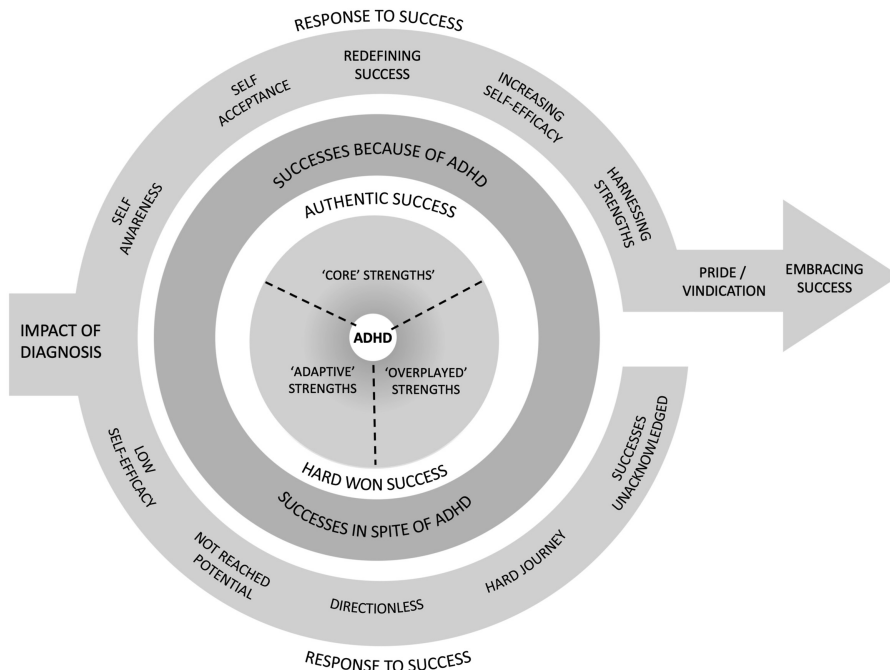
Figure 1.
Proposed model to
illustrate ADHD
strengths and career
success

Source(s): Authors' own work

Understanding the lifelong impact of undiagnosed conditions such as ADHD matters. Orenstein explains how such negative childhood experiences of underachievement can pervade adult life, as their difficulties are not explained to them: "therefore, no matter how successful they are, they fail to meet their own expectations," (2000, p. 36). Fleischmann and Miller (2013) explored the online narratives of individuals who have been diagnosed with ADHD in adulthood; themes of guilt and narrative reconstruction as they retrospectively tried to make sense of their challenges prior to diagnosis and contradiction around their self-perception, reflected those of the participants in this study.

The impact of the diagnosis

The diagnosis of ADHD was a pivotal moment for many of the participants. When asked whether she felt her success had been "because of", or "in spite of" her ADHD, Kate answered

> I think more 'because of' has been since the diagnosis, I think there was more shame there [. . .] "why don't I do it better?" And I think now, I've let myself off the hook with some things [. . .], and I'm proud of the stuff I've done [. . .] I think I've been more successful in the last year as well [. . .] it's that self-awareness.

There was also an element of regret for a potential life unlived, as Simon explained

> I think it's like they say, isn't it, [. . .] once you understand it, it's half the battle [. . .] but you sort of think, Christ, if I'd had a diagnosis when I was a kid, and had the tool of the tablets, my life would have been so different [. . .]

Although detailed analysis around participants' experience of diagnosis was beyond the scope of our current study, the apparent dichotomy of an experience that is perceived so positively from a personal/professional growth perspective yet remains so challenging within the organisational/public domain is an area warranting significant attention. Halleröd *et al.*'s study of experiences of adult diagnosis of ADHD begins to explore these phenomena in more depth (2015).

Authentic success after diagnosis

The diagnosis began a process for some participants of re-evaluating their careers and redefining what success meant to them. David described his perspective on this process of self-acceptance:

> I think that I feel less, [. . .], "I should have a massive income and a big house . . ." I'm more forgiving of the fact that it's more important to always have things that are stimulating enough to keep me going [. . .] the paradox is that if you're ADHDish, the most responsible thing to do is to make sure that you're stimulated [. . .]

An increased sense of personal agency also seemed to occur following diagnosis, as lives were reviewed through a different lens. One participant, a Company Director, had previously felt that much of his career success was down to luck:

> [. . .] the unconscious stuff that's happening on a good level, and the stuff that's happening on a bad level, I tend to forget it, how I got to that point, and so it always seemed like I was constantly being lucky because I couldn't see the breadcrumbs that were leading to that point . . . I'd probably been laying them down all the way along.

This attribution of success to external factors, such as chance or luck, can be linked to lower levels of self-efficacy (Rotter, 1966, cited in Pryor and Bright, 2011). Arguably, as individuals learn to understand themselves better and become more aware and appreciative of their skills and strengths, the unconscious becomes conscious, and they may be better able to recognise and have confidence in their abilities.

The pinnacle of the evolving narrative appeared where the self-acceptance of ADHD was embraced. Kate became effusive while trying to explain how it feels to be successful in a career that she loves:

> You know it's incredible, honestly, [. . .] over the years it can be a rocky ride, can't it? But if you can really harness the positive attributes about your ADHD, about yourself, and then make it happen, it's just like magical. [. . .] it's just so meaningful, I cannot tell you, being able to do this kind of thing.

The exploration of subjective career success properties by Khapova *et al.* (2007), as outlined at the beginning of this paper, offered a useful framework for analysis here. Participants seemed to struggle in balancing the "inherent duality" and "multiple dimensions" of career success by generally prioritising interest, intellectual stimulation and mental health. Mirroring Patel *et al.*'s study (2019) looking at the incomes of self-employed ADHDers, this often left them vulnerable financially, as they tried to sustain levels of responsible earnings to maintain their financial security.

"Time" was a particularly complicating factor, with many feeling they were delayed in their career progression due to the perception of wasted early years, or horizontal moves rather than vertical trajectories, either due to personal choice or personal or professional struggles in progressing within organisations beyond a certain level. The diagnosis allowed them to reframe their own definitions of success and understand why their journey might look different from their neurotypical peers.

Many of the participants' narratives emphasised sporadic success – particular moments in their careers where they had periods of success – rather than a more typical upward trajectory of increased responsibility, status and/or salary, which might allow them to "own" success as a more stable and objective state. The ADHD career seems to relate more strongly to the "spiral career" or "transitory career" concepts outlined by Driver (Larsson *et al.,* 2001) and the self-directed "protean" approach (Hall, 2002), where personal values are the key driver of career success, rather than external validation.

We created a conceptual model to illustrate our findings (see Figure 1) and convey how the themes interlink, without any assumption of causality or temporal linearity. Indeed, the reality is that most ADHDers would be expected to move within and between the various stages at different phases of their lives, and quite possibly at different moments, depending on the context and their own reflective state.

Limitations, implications and future research
To frame our implications, we note the limitations of self-selection as we targeted participants who felt they had experienced a degree of success in their careers. Therefore, we are careful not to generalise to the wider adult ADHD population, who may have had more difficult experiences, and not had the same level of agency enacted by our sample group. Career experiences "do not take place in a vacuum" (Chen and Hong, 2020, p. 194) and need to be explored within the breadth of individual, social, environmental and structural contexts.

Implications for theory and future research
This research focused on participants' own perceptions of their professional success rather than drawing any inferences of objective levels of success attained. We add an incremental, but relevant, insight to theories pertaining to career success. More specifically, we found that any success rests on the deployment of strengths which are paradoxical. We welcome future research initiating a more in-depth exploration of the structural and contextual mechanisms that best support ADHDers to succeed both subjectively and objectively in their careers. Intersectionality and geographical diversity are increasingly recognised as essential in neurodiversity research. Explicit consideration of specific ADHD presentation, co-associated

conditions, timing of diagnosis and demographic variables in relation to career experience would therefore be encouraged.

Implications for practice
We hope that this study raises additional awareness and understanding for line managers and career coaches working with ADHDers, for organisations supporting neurominority (Doyle, 2020) employees, and provides positive and relatable narratives of career success for adults or young people.

The FFI technique was beneficial in structuring early strengths-based discussions with a client and set a tone of positivity to the relationship. The focus on strengths, and the contexts in which clients have used them, may also be important in terms of understanding how their story functionally shapes their life (Smith, 2015). Identifying, articulating, contextualising and "owning" their strengths is an essential part of their evolving narrative of career success. The FFI technique is therefore a useful framing for those working with ADHDers, helping to make individuals' strengths salient and instigating a process of authentic discussion and balanced reflection which participants noted as being particularly helpful. FFI offered an important alternative to more structured strengths questionnaires and psychometrics, which can feel overwhelming, and uncomfortably ambiguous for neurominority clients, and can therefore lead to impulsivity and inconsistency in responses (Caroll and Ponterotto, 1998). Equally, it is beneficial to help the client recognise potential contextual "overplayed" or "dark sides" of strengths, and what strategies they could utilise to feel more balanced in their expressions of strength. Our research emphasised that an identified strength is not sufficient information by itself. Strength as a construct is not inherently positive or negative (Gruman *et al.*, 2018), so great exploration is required to gain a deeper understanding of its meaning to the individual within various situations.

The model developed shows some specific themes that may offer relevant theoretical insight and a potential reference for discussion when working with ADHDers. This study shows that a diagnosis of ADHD has a profound impact on participants' sense of self, as they begin to reframe past failures as symptoms of their ADHD rather than as personality flaws (Fleischmann and Miller, 2013), so working through identity reconstruction issues may also be a prerequisite to moving forward (e.g. Savickas, 2013). Support for those seeking a diagnosis of ADHD from an appropriate clinical professional should therefore be prioritised.

Understanding the environment that supports success for each ADHDer is pivotal, so discussing options for contextual support may give a sense of personal agency and control. Helping ADHDers to develop and track longer-term career management strategies may also be beneficial if they are frustrated with their current career trajectory. Recent research from McIntosh *et al.* (2023) emphasises the benefit of an employee disclosing their ADHD as being "part of the medium through which they experience thriving in the workplace" (p. 239); but to do so, they need to have a feeling of psychological safety. Unfortunately, due to the continuing stigma in most work environments, most ADHDers currently choose not to disclose their condition (Schreuer and Dorot, 2017). Lauder *et al.* (2022) highlight this stigma as a "significant [structural] barrier to accessing workplace support as well as access to coaching" (p. 13). Career coaches in private practice should therefore be aware that their interaction could be the first time that a client has discussed their condition in a career context. It would be an inclusive practice giving client agency over whether, how and when they wish to disclose and offer the opportunity to instigate such processes in a pre-screening questionnaire, as we did for this study.

Conclusions
Our investigation of career strengths and successes of ADHDers through a positive lens found more nuance than anticipated. Participant narratives elicited clear examples of when their strengths of energy, unconventionality of approach and ability to connect with others brought career success in different ways depending on context and self-perception.

The FFI model was a helpful way to frame a strengths-based approach with our participants by making positive experiences salient, with gentle and skilful facilitation, even where individual career success had been inconsistent and trajectories patchy to date. FFI is an easily-taught technique to apply when interviewing other vulnerable or marginalised groups in future research studies.

Throughout the study, there was an emphasis on specific and sporadic incidences of success rather than claiming a broad status of "being successful" *per se*. Essentially, participants felt that their most authentic successes have occurred *because* of their ADHD; successes achieved *in spite* of their ADHD have been hard-won. This research emphasises that life with ADHD is complicated and often paradoxical.

Positive psychology has much to offer as a framework for ADHD support. The role of career coaches is to help clients with ADHD reflect on their personal journey and understand how their neurodivergence and associated contextual pressures may have impacted and continue to impact their life. It is important to support this client group in interpreting their own version of success and in identifying and optimising their unique strengths. Additionally, ADHDers can be supported by career coaches and line managers to put in place scaffolding and strategies for their difficulties. A balanced, pragmatic, strength-based approach will enable each individual to better understand their ADHD, develop personal agency and succeed, both subjectively and objectively in their careers.

The central purpose of this research was to give a platform to the voices of adult ADHDers. Therefore, it seems appropriate to conclude the study with a poignant quote from Jenny, a project manager:

> I do think the biggest difference came when I accepted my strengths and found strategies for my weaknesses. That's the point where I really felt [. . .]. most like me [. . .] and when I've felt most like me, that's the point where I started to achieve? When [. . .] I stopped trying to fit into boxes I wasn't going to fit in. [. . .] I don't really understand why, but it's working for me, so I'm going to go with that!

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