Life Sciences und
Facility Management

Interview Study

Sensory inclusive Offices for ADHD – Socio-Ecological Context

Interim Result
December 2025

Acknowledgement

Thank you very much for your participation in our study on sensory inclusive office environments!

Your contributions have been crucial in helping us better understand the sensory challenges experienced by people with ADHD in office environments.

Purpose

The overall aim of our multi-stage research programme is to develop concrete recommendations for workplace adaptations that can make offices more inclusive and less demanding.

What we already knew:
Our previous study showed that people with ADHD often experience various sensory stressors in offices (noise, lack of shielding, temperature). However, these **stressors varied depending on participants' individual sensory needs**. We observed a similar pattern regarding measures perceived as effective. For example, many participants found sit–stand desks helpful – but again, effectiveness varied depending on **sensory needs**. Overall, it was evident that individuals who received accommodations reported significantly higher levels of well-being.

What we did not yet know:
How do individual sensory stressors and successful accommodation measures relate to the overall work situation?For us, the overall situation includes office design, team dynamics, relationships with supervisors, and more.

This document provides a concise summary of initial findings based on the analysis of the conducted interviews. Further analyses are currently underway (see Slide 10).

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us:
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Context

2.5-6%

Proportion of the Swiss population diagnosed with Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)[1-3]

- Many affected individuals experience sensory challenges at work due to differences in sensory processing (sensory gating) and attentional control.
- Non-adapted workplaces can lead to health problems, difficulties in maintaining employment, or even exclusion from the labour market.[4-5]

Despite the fact that the Disability Equality Act (UN CRPD, Art. 26) grants a right to reasonable adjustments in Switzerland, there is a lack of concrete implementation solutions.[6]

Research Questions & Method

Which sensory challenges do people with ADHD experience in office work environments, and how do physical, social, individual, and organisational contexts influence their coping?

a) Which **stimuli** are experienced as stressful?
b) Which **contextual factors** influence the strain experience?
c) Which **coping strategies** are effective, and under which conditions?

Design
Qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews based on the Critical Incident Technique and photo elicitation.*

Rekrutierung
Broad, multi-channel recruitment strategy via professional networks, social media, and ZHAW communication channels.

**(Not yet analysed)*

Sample
ADHD diagnosis; employment in various professional roles and office environments.20 participants – diverse in age, sector, and work setting.
Data collection (February–March 2025)
Interviews conducted online or in person (ZHAW, cafés, offices) or during walks.
Analyse
Thematic Analysis
Transcription and analysis software MAXQDA.

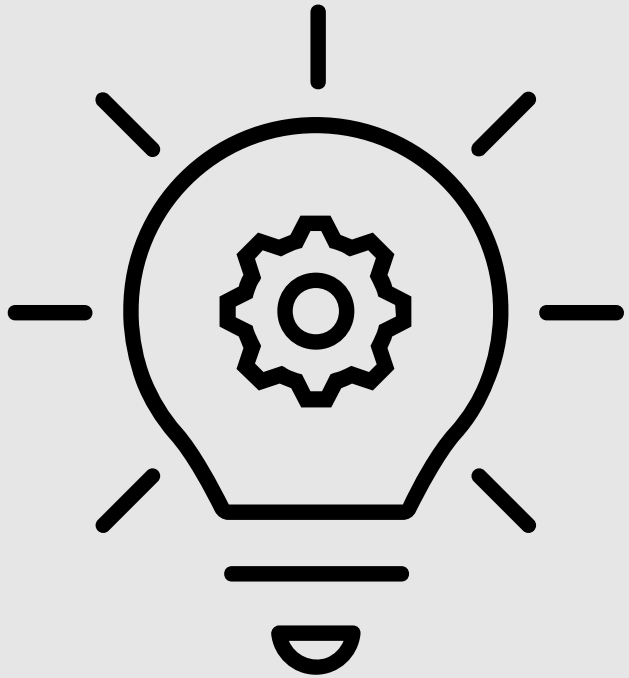
Key Insight (Contextual Interaction)

It is not the stimuli alone that are stressful, but above all the lack of control over when and how they occur.

For example, in large open-plan offices, environmental continuity is reduced (e.g. people walking past, fluctuating noise levels, changing temperatures). This requires constant monitoring of both the situation and the environment, necessitating continuously changing sensory protection strategies.

This leads to additional cognitive load and reduced concentration capacity.

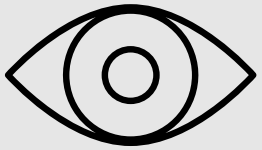
Stimuli do not have an isolated effect; rather, they unfold their impact in interaction with contextual factors.



a) Which sensory stimuli are perceived as stressful?

Auditory stimuli

- Conversational noise
- Spontaneous interruptions
- Loud phone calls
  - ➢ **Consequences:** paralysing effects, exhaustion, withdrawal behaviour
  - ➢ **Extreme cases:** termination of employment



Visual stimuli

- Movement in the peripheral field of vision
- Continuous, unpredictable movement
- Digital sensory overload
  - ➢ **Consequences:** impaired concentration, withdrawal behaviour

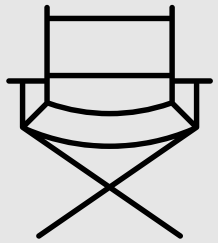
Thermal-tactile stimuli

- Non-ergonomic furniture
  - ➢ **Consequences:** Physical tension, inner restlessness
- Uncomfortable room temperatures, draughts
  - ➢ **Consequences:** Reduced concentration, lower motivation and mood

Olfactory stimuli

- Food or body odours
- Less frequent, but particularly invasive
- ➢ **Consequences**: disgust, withdrawal behaviour

b) Interaction Sensory Stress with Social, Organisational & Individual Factors



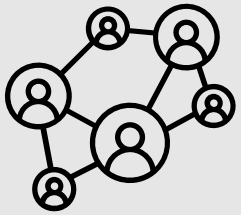
Physical Factors

Relieving:

- Fixed, visually shielded workstations
- Personalised workstations (decor, ergonomics, visual barriers)
- Seating arrangements and visual orientation
- For some: single offices; for others: shared offices or even open concepts with partitions

Worsening:

- (Fear of) misunderstanding, stigmatisation, rejection, trivialization
- Social micro-signals (social insecurity and exclusion)



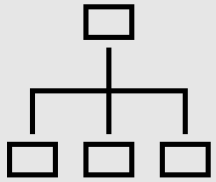
Sociale Factors

Relieving:

- Psychological safety
- Clear social rules and respect for boundaries
- Consideration within the team
- Structuring and supportive leadership

Worsening:

- (Fear of) misunderstanding, stigmatisation, rejection, trivialization
- Social micro-signals (social insecurity and exclusion)



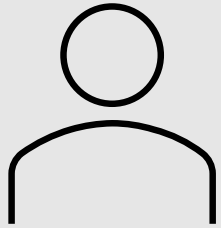
Organisational Factors

Relieving:

- Clear organisational structures
- Transparent communication
- Flexible but reliable working time models(working during “off-times”, high workload on “energy days”)
- Job design (interesting tasks, variety, autonomy)
- Job design where preferred stimulus level matches task complexity

Worsening

- Job design (e.g. workload, unclear task definitions)
- Non-binding flexibility models; contradictions & ambiguity = loss of control
- Lack of willingness to make adjustments (e.g. rigid attendance rules)



Individual Factors

Worsening:

- Poor baseline condition
- Failure to recognise early warning signs of (sensory) overload

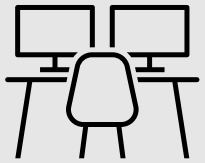
c) Coping Strategies and Supporting Contexts?

Individual strategies

- Retreat to quiet areas
- Noise-cancelling headphones
- Introduction of focus times
- Switching to home office
- Self-regulation strategies (e.g. mindfulness, physical self-care, clear daily structure, breaks, movement, adapted clothing)

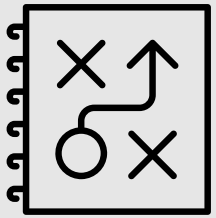
Social strategies

- Open, non-judgmental communication within the team
- Presence of psychological safety
- Body doubling
- Awareness-raising and feedback culture



Physical strategies

- Changing work location to low-traffic areas
- Office zoning (acoustic zoning, separation of break/eating areas and workspaces)
- Creation of retreat spaces
- Ergonomic furniture that allows movement
- Sensory / decompression / wellness rooms



Organisational strategies

- Adaptive working time models
- Clearly regulated meeting times
- Transparent communication rules
- Provision of movement aids and fidget tools
- Change management and early communication

Core Conclusions

Inclusive workplace management must do more than spatial adaptation – it must ensure social acceptance and organisational clarity.

The study shows that:

- Sensory stress is not caused solely by stimuli, but primarily by their uncontrollability.
- The social and organisational context strongly determines the impact of sensory load.
- Key protective factors are not only architectural, but above all social and cultural.
- Effective coping depends on whether strategies are socially accepted, organisationally supported, and physically feasible.
- Coping is not an individual act, but relationally embedded.

Outlook

- Currently: In-depth analysis focusing on differences related to sensory profiles and diagnostic status

- Focus group end of Q1 / beginning of Q2 2026:
  - Joint discussion of results
  - Conducted with student support
  - Invitations will be sent in early 2026.

Donation in your (indirect) name

As mentioned in the study invitation, CHF 10 was donated per participation; half each to elpos and Neurodivergent Zürich.We were able to donate CHF 100 to each organisation.

„Sensory inclusion is not a ‘nice-to-have’, but a fundamental prerequisite for equal participation in working life.“

Interviewee

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Project Details

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