



Supporting Executive Function at Work

Strategies for professionals navigating focus, planning, and time

Executive function is the set of mental skills your brain uses to manage everything else: starting tasks, planning your day, holding information in mind, switching between priorities, and following a project through to the end. When these skills feel effortful, it isn't a reflection of intelligence, effort, or how much you care. It's simply how some brains are wired, and the modern workplace rarely makes allowances for it.

This guide is for neurodivergent professionals and anyone who finds focus, planning, and time slippery at work. The strategies below aren't about forcing yourself into a neurotypical mould. They're about building scaffolding that works *with* your brain, so your strengths get the room they deserve.

First, a reframe

If you've ever been called lazy, disorganised, or "not living up to your potential," it's worth naming what's actually happening. Executive functioning challenges are real and physiological. The goal isn't to try harder. It's to set up your environment so that less of your energy is spent fighting your own wiring, and more goes into the work you're good at.

1. Focus and attention

Staying on task is harder when the task is vague, boring, or has no clear endpoint.

- **Shrink the task.** "Write the report" is a wall. "Open the document and write one ugly sentence" is a door. Lower the bar to entry until starting feels almost too easy.
- **Body double.** Working alongside someone else, in person or on a silent video call, borrows their momentum to anchor your own. Many neurodivergent professionals find this one of the most powerful tools available.
- **Protect your peak hours.** Notice when your focus is naturally strongest and ring-fence that window for deep work. Push admin and meetings to the edges.
- **Manage the sensory environment.** Noise-cancelling headphones, a tidy line of sight, or a specific "focus" playlist can quiet the background noise your brain would otherwise track.

2. Planning and organisation

When everything lives in your head, your working memory carries a load it was never meant to.

- **Externalise everything.** Get tasks, deadlines, and ideas out of your head and into a trusted system, whether that's a notebook, an app, or sticky notes. The point isn't the tool; it's that you stop relying on memory alone.



- **Make the invisible visible.** Use wall planners, colour-coding, or kanban boards so your workload exists somewhere you can see it. Out of sight genuinely is out of mind for many of us.
- **Plan backwards from the deadline.** Start at the due date and work back, breaking the project into stages with their own mini-deadlines. A single distant deadline is hard to act on; a chain of small ones is far easier.
- **Build a “launch pad.”** Keep the things you need to begin a task ready and waiting, so transitions cost less energy.

3. Time management

Time blindness, the difficulty of sensing how much time has passed or how long something will take, is one of the most common and least understood challenges.

- **Make time physical.** Analogue timers, visual countdown clocks, and time-tracking apps turn an abstract concept into something you can actually see.
- **Estimate, then double.** If a task feels like it'll take an hour, plan for closer to two. Padding your estimates reduces the cascade of stress when things overrun.
- **Use transitions and buffers.** Block short gaps between meetings and tasks. The switch itself takes energy, and racing from one thing to the next is where things get dropped.
- **Time-box, don't open-end.** “I'll work on this until 3pm” protects you better than “I'll work on this until it's done.”

4. Getting started (and finishing)

The gap between knowing what to do and doing it is where many of us get stuck.

- **The five-minute start.** Commit to just five minutes. You can stop after, but momentum often carries you past it.
- **Pair tasks with something pleasant.** A good coffee, a favourite playlist, a comfortable spot, anything that makes beginning less aversive.
- **Reward completion.** Build in small, genuine rewards so your brain has something to move toward, not just away from.
- **Watch for the “almost done” trap.** Finishing can be as hard as starting. Name the last 10% as its own task so it doesn't quietly stall.

Working with your employer

You don't have to manage this entirely on your own. Many of these strategies are also reasonable adjustments your employer can support.

- **Flexible hours** to match your natural focus rhythms.
- **Written follow-ups** after verbal instructions, so nothing relies on memory in the moment.



- **Clear, specific briefs** with defined priorities and deadlines.
- **Quiet or low-distraction workspaces**, or permission to use focus tools.
- **A workplace needs assessment** to identify what would genuinely help in your specific role.

In the UK, the [Access to Work](#) scheme can fund equipment, coaching, and support. A formal diagnosis isn't required to request reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010, though it can strengthen the case.

A final word

Executive function challenges aren't a character flaw, and the strategies that help aren't crutches. They're the same kind of sensible scaffolding that lets anyone do their best work. Experiment, keep what helps, and drop what doesn't. You're not trying to become a different kind of worker. You're building the conditions in which the worker you already are can thrive.

NeuroEmpower offers workplace needs assessments, coaching, and CPD-accredited neurodiversity training across the UK. If you or your team would benefit from tailored support, get in touch at info@neuroempower.org.