

Monotropism in the Modern Workplace



What if your brain
wasn't made for multitasking?

A Teams message flashes mid-sentence. A meeting interrupts a stretch of flow. Three emails all marked urgent. You finish a call and realise you've missed five new threads, three "quick asks," and the sender of that first message is now chasing, wondering why you haven't replied. Your brain silently screams as the next call comes in.

It's not burnout. It's context overload. For some of us, it hits sooner and

harder because our brains are wired to work differently.

The Monotropic Mind

There's a theory you may not have heard of: monotropism. First developed by autistic researchers including Dinah Murray, Wenn Lawson, and Mike Lesser, monotropism describes a way of processing the world where attention naturally narrows rather than spreads (monotropism.org).

Monotropic minds tend to focus deeply on one thing at a time. Think of it like a spotlight, intense and concentrated, rather than a floodlight that illuminates everything faintly. The total brightness is the same, but the scope and depth are very different. It sounds great, and sometimes it is, but in today's workplace, it's not always a blessing.

That's because work, as it's typically designed, assumes polytropism, the ability to juggle multiple inputs, shift gears rapidly, and stay lightly tethered to many things at once.

Backed by Research

Recent efforts like the Monotropism Questionnaire (developed with autistic and non-autistic participants) have shown that higher monotropism scores correlate strongly with both autism and ADHD, supporting the idea that monotropic attention traits are present across neurodivergent populations (stimpunks.org).

In a study of 492 adults (including autistic-only, ADHD-only, and combined AuDHD individuals), hyperfocus—a key marker of

monotropism — was elevated in all neurodivergent groups. Interestingly, those who experienced deeper flow also reported more difficulty shifting attention and more mental health challenges like anxiety and rumination ([researchgate.net](https://www.researchgate.net)).

If your brain leans toward mono rather than poly, this constant context-switching doesn't just drain you. It derails you.

When the Workplace Works Against You

For people with monotropic minds, the workplace can feel like a minefield of invisible tripwires. It's not just the volume of tasks or the speed of change. It's the fragmentation, the constant switching, the expectation to be in multiple places mentally at once.

Most people feel this occasionally. Some of us feel it all the time.

For monotropic brains, workplace norms aren't just inconvenient. They're exhausting.

Here's what that looks like day-to-day:

- *Mid-focus meetings feel like being unplugged mid-upload.*
- *Always-on chat fragments attention and hijacks urgency.*
- *"Just a quick call" demands instant switching that derails deep focus.*
- *Multitasking is praised. Deep work gets interrupted.*

The worst part? This is often framed as a personal failing.

- Why can't you keep up?

- Why do you seem overwhelmed?

- Why does your energy drop off a cliff?

The truth is, the system isn't neutral. It's built for a different kind of mind.

When Different Gets Misread as Broken

In workplaces built around multitasking and reactivity, people who thrive in depth often get negative labels: slow, inflexible, disengaged. They're not underperforming. They're operating on a completely different cognitive rhythm.

Many neurodivergent individuals, especially those with autism, ADHD, or both, experience this daily.

It's not about being disorganised or lazy. It's about working in a system that rewards constant switching and visibility instead of clarity and concentration.

- *What looks like disengagement might actually be hyperfocus.*
- *What looks like inflexibility might be someone protecting their focus.*
- *What looks like "difficult" might be someone just trying not to drown.*

Pete Wharmby put it perfectly in *Untypical*:

"It's not that I can't cope—it's that I'm coping constantly."

Masking. Adapting. Pushing through. It all takes a toll. When that effort goes unseen, it gets misread as weakness.

What If We're Asking the Wrong Question?

Maybe it's time we stopped asking "*Why can't they keep up?*" And started asking "*What are we missing when we don't slow down?*"

Redesigning for Depth: What Better Could Look Like

The good news is the things that help monotropic people also benefit everyone.

Workplaces that protect deep work, reduce interruptions, and respect individual working rhythms are not only more humane, they are more effective.

Here are a few places to start:

- Structured deep work blocks with protected time and clear boundaries
- Asynchronous communication as the default, not the exception
- Fewer real-time demands and more autonomy in managing priorities
- Recognition of flow states as productivity, not avoidance
- Flexible environments that reduce sensory and cognitive overload

This isn't about special treatment, it's about removing barriers that impact everyone.

From Awareness to Culture Shift

You don't need to know who on your team is neurodivergent to make things better. You just need to believe that different brains exist, and that they matter.

Inclusion isn't just about identity, it's about cognitive safety. It's about building systems where people don't have to burn out just to belong.

Closing Thought: Deep Work as Survival

You've probably heard of deep work. It's often talked about as a productivity hack, a nice-to-have, a luxury but for some people, it's not a strategy. It's survival.

What would change if we stopped rewarding reactivity and started valuing depth?

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