



Is ADHD a Weakness or a Superpower?

Dunn Right Legal's Principal Solicitor, Desley, was Diagnosed in the Final Year of her Law Degree. She Gives us her Tips on Harnessing the Positive Traits of ADHD as a Strength in the Legal Profession

Desley operates her own law firm, Dunn Right Legal. As the Principal Solicitor, she specializes in construction, commercial litigation, family law, estates, and criminal law. Desley speaks with us today about her experience throughout her legal studies and employment on ADHD and her strategies to harness her inner superpower!

Desley was in her final year of university when she received an ADHD diagnosis. Today she shares her advice for students studying law with ADHD, her experiences as a practicing lawyer, and recommendations on how employers can provide better support for neurodivergent minds so that they can thrive in the legal profession.

At university, Desley found that special adjustments, such as being able to take her exams in a separate room, were beneficial to her studies. Desley gained confidence in herself and her abilities after disclosing her diagnosis to her professors. Before understanding she had ADHD and disclosing her diagnosis, she feared engaging or asking questions and chose to withdraw to avoid attention or criticism. After disclosing her diagnosis and knowing her professors were aware, Desley felt comfortable participating in classes and asking questions. Desley feels that neurodevelopmental disorders often lead to negative assumptions about your character because these issues are invisible to the outside world. Doors are only open to visible disabilities.

Desley considers ADHD her superpower. It helps her power through in the legal profession because it gifts her the ability to function well under pressure, making her mind a powerhouse for last-minute decision-making and thinking quickly on her feet. She credits her experience of being diagnosed late in life for enhancing her soft skills and finding herself able to empathize with clients under scrutiny because she knows what it feels like to be in a position under the microscope. Desley was surprised to learn at the end of her degree that she was required to disclose her diagnosis as part of the admission process. She wishes she had been educated on the requirements for admission much earlier. Being unaware meant she was unprepared to disclose in-depth medical reports and records about her ADHD in a short time frame as required by the admission process. Desley describes her ability to understand complex issues quickly and translate them into terms that clients and junior colleagues in training can easily understand as an asset that arises due to her neurodivergent mind.

Desley considers early education for students and lawyers critical to supporting those with ADHD in the legal profession. Early education on the admission process and disclosure requirements, allows applicants time to mentally prepare to have the disclosure conversation and jump through any hoops for admission.

Desley Dunn, Principal Solicitor at Dunn Right Legal

<https://dunnrightlegal.com.au/>



What has your experience been like working in the legal profession with ADHD? Is there anything that you feel we could change to cater to your needs?

It has been turbulent. I started as a receptionist over 11 years ago but am now a Principal – ADHD can be seen as a super power or a weakness. In my early career I found it difficult to tell employers about my condition and challenging to talk about managing my condition in the workplace. I was embarrassed – everyone thought I was fine because I'd always done alright but I knew I wasn't performing at my best.

I wasn't diagnosed until my final year of university, by that point I had already successfully survived most of my degree and years working full time in law, untreated and unmedicated. For this reason, I never thought having ADHD would be an issue in my career but as part of the process for admission as a solicitor I had to disclose my diagnosis. Much to my surprise mere disclosure wasn't sufficient and I had to provide a medical history along with reports from treating practitioners addressing the suitability criteria, my condition, treatment, and prognosis. It's something I wish I had known about from the outset of my degree or even 6 months earlier. I was newly diagnosed and did not feel ready to have my diagnosis put under the microscope. On top of that, as I was unaware of the depth of disclosure I needed to make, so having to obtain the necessary disclosure in the short time frame and worrying about whether my application would be accepted caused me significant stress and anxiety until I was officially admitted. If I had been aware earlier on, I would have had the opportunity to seek help with disclosing my diagnosis and more time to gather the necessary disclosure material.

For me, I work best with room to move and loud music blaring – yes you read that correctly. The more chaos and distraction, the more I can focus most of the time. The flipside to that is not enough or too much can distract me, open plan offices where I can hear other conversations are my worst nightmare. At one workplace I was pretty much sacked for "blaming the office layout" when I was not my most productive self. At another firm, once they understood my performance could be improved by managing sound levels, they did everything they could to support me, and they got the benefit of my productivity and billables going through the roof. Good quality headphones and a hat (or physical barriers blocking out neighbouring staff) have been my saviour in open plan spaces.

At my office now I have a sit/stand desk along with an exercise ball instead of your usual office chair. I also have a reading light, free standing lamp, couch, heaps of cushions, a fluffy rug and throw blanket – this allows me to adjust the lighting and work from my desk, the floor, or the couch. To the non-neurodivergent people, I assume this sounds strange or extremely unconventional, but hey it works and I'm more productive. My workspace helps me soothe symptoms and get the job done efficiently without distress.

Any positive aspects of having ADHD that you would like to share?

I function well under immense pressure. If you need it done last minute or if it's a high stress situation I will perform and I will perform my best.

Having felt like I have been under investigation or treated differently due to the condition, I find that my soft skills are enhanced, and I can empathise with clients who feel the system is geared against them, feel they are under the microscope or struggling with disclosing personal information as part of their case; and

I understand complex issues almost instantly and I can translate them into plain English or even diagrams to help clients (and junior colleagues in training) understand easily.



Do you have any recommendations that we can implement in the workplace or at university to support people with ADHD better so that they can thrive in the legal profession?

I was lucky at my university I was given special adjustments due to my condition – The adjustments weren't that different to the "normal" people. One of the adjustments was that the professors were informed of my condition and how it can impact my learning. This was huge because up until then, I always felt I'd be labelled as the student who didn't care or just didn't listen if I withdrew from engaging, got things wrong or misunderstood. Knowing that my professors knew that my brain worked differently and that I wasn't withdrawing in class for no reason, helped me engage more in class. I was no longer fearful to engage if I felt unsure, didn't understand something, to ask questions or to contribute if I did know the answers.

Another adjustment I had was being able to undertake my exams in a smaller room, not the main exam hall. Initially I thought that was the most useless adjustment, but the small exam room changed my life. I didn't perform substantially better, but I felt substantially better going into the exam. You don't realise how much being in a big exam hall sucks when you have ADHD, there is so much going on even though the room is silent.

I'd strongly encourage anyone with ADHD to seek support at their university or workplace. If you break an arm (which I have during my legal career) people can see the condition and will literally open doors for you. But you can't see ADHD and as there are many types of ADHD what works for one person may not work for another. In terms of change, I think law students should be educated on neurodevelopmental disorders, be made aware of how to contact support services, informed on what support is available and what adjustments can be facilitated, advised early in their careers that they need to disclose their diagnosis as part of the admission process so that they can prepare and be provided with guidance on how to have the conversation with employers.

Student Wellbeing & Accessibility Office Information

Under the [Disability Standards for Education 2005](#), education providers are required to provide students with a disability with reasonable adjustments to enable them to participate on the same basis as other students in all aspects of university life. For more information, see [Disability Education Standards](#) - Your Right to An Education.

UNE aims to support all students, who face barriers to higher education, to success in their studies. We are therefore providing services for students in a range of circumstances beyond those with a disability and/or health condition.

SAWO is a free and confidential service. You can reach out to the team by:

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<https://www.une.edu.au/current-students/support/student-support/studentaccess-and-inclusion/services-for-students>

