

**Evaluating the Authentic Life Approach for Employed Neurodivergent Adults:
A Mixed-Methods Study of Adaptive Ikigai and Kaizen Coaching**

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Abstract

Neurodivergent adults can bring real strengths into the workplace. They tend to contribute to higher levels of creativity, pattern recognition as well as the kind of problem-solving that doesn't follow the usual script. That's the upside. At the same time, many that fall into this category run into very similar walls. It can be very challenging to plan, initiate, organize and follow-through. In most cases the person will feel like the work doesn't align with who they are. It becomes quite difficult to retain a feeling of satisfaction and commitment to the role. Most traditional workplace programs focus on fixing the "weaknesses" or pushing people to fit the existing system. Far fewer start with the individual's natural strengths, values, energy, and personal goals. This study evaluates a six-week coaching program based on the Authentic Life Approach methodology, built specifically for employed neurodivergent adults. The program combines Adaptive Ikigai exercises, designed to explore meaning and workplace fit with Kaizen-inspired small steps that keep change doable. Both segments of the program use the Authentic Life Approach's adapted SMART goals turning insight into realistic action. Using mixed-methods pretest-posttest design, it looks at changes in self-reported executive-function management, job satisfaction and intentions to stay with the current employer.

Keywords: neurodiversity, ADHD coaching, executive function, Ikigai, job satisfaction, workplace inclusion, Kaizen, SMART goals, Authentic Life Approach

Introduction

Most adults with ADHD or other types of neurodivergent challenges tend to come across specific barriers in the workplace. Among the most prevalent is an ever-present feeling of not belonging. Emerging research is beginning to recognize that neurodivergent employees bring rare, valuable strengths when supported properly (Austin & Pisano, 2017). The question now is not if neurodivergent adults can contribute in a meaningful way, it is whether their efforts are best directed to their abilities. This also includes managing those barriers that affect job satisfaction, performance and ability to find meaning in their jobs.

While existing literature provides support for coaching and workplace inclusion, it also reveals that an important gap remains. Ahmann et al. (2026) found that adults taking part in ADHD coaching programs experienced statistically significant improvements to various ADHD symptoms as well as executive functioning and functional impairment. However, Lauder et al. (2022) concluded that “little is known about how best to support adults with ADHD” in actual workplace contexts. Broader organizational literature also suggests that neurodiversity-inclusive practices offer benefits to both neurodivergent workers and the workforce as a whole (Mahto et al., 2022).

While these findings are encouraging, current studies still lack sufficient evaluation of short-term, neurodiversity-focused coaching models. I specifically speak to models that combine executive function support with personal meaning using strengths-based self-understanding. These need to be assessed within a properly structured goal-setting framework progressed over one intervention.

This study addresses that gap by examining the six-week Adaptive Ikigai/Kaizen Authentic Life Approach coaching program designed for employed neurodivergent adults. The program

integrates Adaptive Ikigai exercises for exploring personal meaning and workplace alignment with Adaptive Kaizen, a neurodiverse specific approach to small-step improvement along with adapted SMART goals for translating personal insights into measurable actions. Using pre-program and post-program self-report measures, along with participant feedback, the study examines whether this combined approach produces changes in executive-function self-management, job satisfaction, and intentions to remain employed.

These outcomes matter because workplace interventions should not only seek to reduce difficulties. They should also guide neurodivergent employees to understand how they work best. They should supply them with tools and processes to assist in identifying realistic workplace modifications. By addressing this gap, the program intends to contribute to the establishment of more individualized and strength-focused support systems for neurodivergent adults. It may also provide employers with direct evidence regarding coaching practices and how they can improve workplace inclusion, satisfaction and retention.

Problem Statement

Neurodivergent adults struggle with difficult executive-function challenges in standard workplace settings. These problems frequently intersect with environmental factors and reduced job satisfaction, increasing the turnover rate. Although coaching has demonstrated real benefits for executive functioning and symptom management (Ahmann et al., 2026), and organizational literature affirms the value of neurodiversity (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Mahto et al., 2022), very few evaluated interventions deliberately combine meaning-centered self-discovery with practical, workplace-relevant goal structures over a defined short-term period.

The Authentic Life Approach was developed to fill this exact space (Vanacore, 2026). It combines Adaptive Ikigai with Adaptive Kaizen and a neurodiverse specific SMART goal system. Without systematic evaluation of integrated models like this one, practitioners and employers continue to lack clear evidence about what actually works for employed neurodivergent adults who want both functional improvement and a stronger sense of alignment with their work.

Research Objectives

Objective 1: To evaluate changes in participants' self-reported executive-function management, including planning, task initiation, organization, and follow-through, from the beginning to the end of the six-week coaching program.

Objective 2: To compare participants' self-reported job satisfaction and any changes regarding intention to remain with their current employer before and after completing the six-week coaching program.

Objective 3: To analyze participants' end-of-program descriptions of how Adaptive Ikigai, Adaptive Kaizen-based action steps, and adapted SMART goals influenced their sense of personal meaning, workplace alignment, and ability to make sustainable changes.

Research Questions

Research Question 1 (linked to Objective 1): To what degree does participation in the six-week Authentic Life Approach coaching program change neurodivergent adults' self-reported ability to manage planning, task initiation, organization, and follow-through?

Research Question 2 (linked to Objective 2): How do participants' levels of job satisfaction and intentions to remain with their employer change after completing the coaching program?

Research Question 3 (linked to Objective 3): How do participants perceive the contribution of Adaptive Ikigai, Adaptive Kaizen-based action steps, and adapted SMART goals to their personal meaning, workplace alignment, and ability to sustain change?

Literature Review

The literature on adult ADHD coaching, workplace neurodiversity, and structured goal frameworks gives this study a solid foundation while also showing where the gaps still sit.

Ahmann, Saviet, and Otto (2026) conducted a prospective study of coaching for adults with ADHD. The outcomes showed medium-to-large positive results in executive functioning, ADHD symptoms and functional impairment. Their work suggests that coaching can be delivered either as a standalone program or as part of an integrated plan. This establishes that coaching is a viable path for improving daily functioning, including areas that directly affect workplace performance. While evidence supports coaching, Lauder, McDowall and Tenenbaum (2022) concluded that “little is known about how best to support adults with ADHD”, specifically in workplace contexts. Their analysis highlights the lack of context-specific research. It also found it difficult to translate clinical findings into practical organizational support. This gap is exactly why the present study focuses on employed adults and workplace-relevant outcomes.

From the organizational perspective, Austin and Pisano (2017) argued that neurodiversity manifests as a competitive advantage, when organizations learn to understand and use these extraordinary skills. Mahto, Hogan, and Sniderman (2022) took this insight a step further, showing that inclusive practices designed for neurodivergent employees created a positive spillover effect for the overall workforce. Together these sources move the conversation away from simply fixing deficits and toward intentionally supporting strengths and better environmental fit.

The TALA program's inclusion of goal-setting frameworks adds another practical support layer. The Corporate Finance Institute (2020) asserted that the SMART model improves employee's ability to turn general intentions into clear, trackable and achievable objectives. By refining it for neurodivergent adults, the Adaptive SMART goal's structure can additionally reduce friction, overwhelm and support more consistent follow-through. This folds seamlessly into Kaizen-style micro-steps that keep change manageable.

Altogether, the sources support structured ADHD coaching and specific neurodiversity inclusion. However, a major gap remaining is a systematic evaluation of a short-term coaching model. Specifically, one that deliberately brings meaning-centered self-understanding (Adaptive Ikigai), neurodiverse friendly incremental behavioral change (Adaptive Kaizen) and adjusted measurable goal structures (Adaptive SMART) into one workplace-focused intervention. The Authentic Life Approach was built to sit in that intersection (Vanacore, 2026).

Methodology

This study uses mixed-methods pretest-posttest design. Quantitative data is collected through self-report measures administered at the beginning and then at the end of the six-week program. The primary quantitative measures focus on executive-function self-management (planning, task initiation, organization and follow-through), job satisfaction and intention to remain with the employer. Qualitative data is derived from open-ended participant reflections completed both at midpoint and the end of the program; it is also compiled from brief process notes recorded during the coaching sessions.

Participants are employed adults who self-identify as neurodivergent, primarily with ADHD and possible co-occurring conditions such as specific learning differences, brain injuries or autism spectrum traits. Recruitment has taken place through professional networks, coaching

communities, and online neurodiversity spaces. Inclusion requires current employment and a willingness to complete the full six-week sequence of coaching sessions and assessments. The program itself consists of weekly coaching sessions that introduce Adaptive Ikigai mapping (strengths, values, contribution, and sustainability), Kaizen micro-experiments aimed at specific workplace friction points, and the progressive construction of adapted SMART goals tied directly to each participant's insights.

The data will be analyzed using paired comparisons of pre- and post-test scores on the quantitative measures, complemented by a thorough thematic analysis of the qualitative reflections to clarify key themes and contextualize the quantitative findings. The qualitative side specifically examines how participants describe the influence of Adaptive Ikigai, Adaptive Kaizen steps and Adaptive SMART goals on their sense of meaning, workplace alignment and capacity for sustained change. The design follows established principles of applied behavioral research (Serdikoff, 2021).

Results

The study is currently in progress. Projected results lean toward measurable improvements in self-rated executive-function management across the four focal domains. They are planning, task initiation, organization, and follow-through. This projection is consistent with the medium-to-large effect sizes reported by Ahmann et al. (2026) in comparable coaching contexts.

Corresponding gains are being realized as well in job-satisfaction scores and in ratings of intention to remain with the employer. These expected results are highly reflective of both functional improvement and a stronger sense of alignment between personal strengths and workplace demands.

On the qualitative side, projected participant reflections lean toward several recurring themes. We are seeing clearer articulation of personal strengths and values through the Adaptive Ikigai exercises, a marked reduction in overwhelm through Adaptive Kaizen action steps and increased confidence in turning insight into sustainable workplace adjustments through Adaptive SMART goals. Participants are also expected to describe a shift from a more deficit-focused view of themselves toward a more agentic, strengths-based stance. These projected patterns align with the study's objectives and research questions and will be tested as data collection continues and final analysis is completed.

Discussion

If the projected results hold, this study will offer early evidence that a short-term, integrated coaching model combining Adaptive Ikigai, Adaptive Kaizen principles and Adaptive SMART goals can produce meaningful changes for employed neurodivergent adults. Such findings would extend the work of Ahmann et al. (2026) by placing coaching gains more explicitly inside workplace contexts and by adding a deliberate meaning-and-alignment component that earlier studies have not emphasized in the same way. They would also begin to address the gap Lauder et al. (2022) identified regarding the limited amount of context-specific support research.

From an organizational angle, positive results would reinforce the arguments made by Austin and Pisano (2017) and Mahto et al. (2022) that investing in neurodiversity-affirming practices creates value for both individuals and employers. Clearer evidence that this kind of coaching can improve retention intentions and job satisfaction would give human-resource and talent teams more concrete direction for supporting neurodivergent employees instead of relying only on generic accommodations or deficit-oriented training.

It is important that limitations be kept in direct view. A single-group pretest-posttest design without the benefit of a concurrent control group limits how strongly causal claims can be made. Self-report measures always carry the possibility of expectancy and social-desirability effects. Sample size and recruitment channels should also be considered in regard to how far the findings can be generalized. Future work should therefore include comparison conditions, larger and more diverse samples and longer-term follow-up to test how durable the changes actually are. Even with these constraints, the study represents a practical next step toward evaluating integrated, strengths-based coaching models that treat meaning and executive function as connected rather than separate concerns.

Conclusion

Workplace interventions for neurodivergent adults should do more than reduce difficulties. They should also help people understand how they work best and build a more resonant relationship with their employment. The six-week Authentic Life Approach coaching program addresses this by integrating Adaptive Ikigai, Adaptive Kaizen micro-steps and Adaptive SMART goals. The methodology and framework was designed with that dual purpose in mind. By examining changes in executive-function self-management, job satisfaction, retention intentions and participants' own accounts of meaning and alignment, this study aims to generate practical evidence for coaches, employers, and neurodivergent adults themselves.

This program follows the scientific reporting standards outlined by Serdikoff (2021) as well as the principles of clear, evidence-based communication emphasized in successful composition practice (Weaver et al., 2016; Hall & Wallace, 2018). This paper has brought together the problems, objectives, literature foundation, methodology, projected results and interpretive discussion into one coherent research report. As data collection continues, the projected leanings

and projections will be tested against actual recorded outcomes. Regardless of the final numbers, the effort itself creates another benefit, it moves the conversation forward into the light, toward more individualized, strength-focused and meaning-centered support for employed neurodivergent adults.

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