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A Longitudinal Autoethnography of Email Access for a Professional with Chronic Illness and ADHD: Preliminary Insights

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Abstract

Email is a foundational infrastructure of professional environments, yet for chronically ill and neurodivergent individuals, it often becomes an invisible barrier to access. We share preliminary insights from a 14-year autoethnography of a professional with chronic illness and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). We detail this professional's iterative adaptation of mainstream email features into Mail++, their personalized workplace communication workflow for managing executive function challenges and chronic illness flares. We propose three emerging themes: (1) from hacks to assistive technology, (2) evolving access needs, and (3) toll of inaccessible systems. Based on our findings, we present initial design insights for accessible workplace communication systems. As future work in this ongoing study, we discuss a more in-depth qualitative analysis of the autoethnographic data, and formal user testing of the Mail++ approach with a population of professionals with chronic illness and ADHD to better inform the design of assistive workplace technology.

Keywords

ADHD, chronic illness, workplace accessibility

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1 Introduction & Related Work

Digital workplace communication has become vital in professional environments [4, 21, 37]. Managing email, in particular, is a core component of modern professional work, where its successful usage positively impacts productivity and reputation, while difficulties can contribute to anxiety, burnout, and overwhelm [13, 25, 31]. For individuals with disabilities, email often becomes an invisible barrier to access [1]. This lack of accessible infrastructure may contribute to the lower employment rates among disabled workers in the United States, with only 22.7% employed in 2024 compared to the 65.5% employment of those without disabilities [34–36].

Previous literature often focuses on web accessibility, largely driven by the Americans with Disabilities (ADA) act compliance in workplace settings [26]. However, some studies reveal that many professionals lack understanding of accessibility in business communication materials [14]. Moreover, a recent industry report found that out of over 400,000 HTML emails tested, only 28 were fully accessible, with 99.97% containing "Serious" or "Critical" accessibility issues, such as missing language and direction attributes, improper use of tables for layout, and inadequate alternative text for images [15]. This context often necessitates unacknowledged repair work, or 'invisible access labor' [7, 38], undertaken by disabled professionals to make systems accommodate their access needs, frequently through do-it-yourself (DIY) solutions [10, 12, 32]. Workplace teaching and training in digital accessibility are scarce, leading to informal, self-directed learning and a lack of foundational awareness among many professionals [24].

A potential solution to such access labor is through the adoption of existing productivity frameworks (e.g., Getting Things Done [3], PARA, Inbox Zero, and Pomodoro [6, 17]). However, such frameworks often implicitly assume stable motivation and consistent self-regulation and may account for fluctuating energy, but often do not explicitly acknowledge the access needs of marginalized populations [3]. Therefore, these approaches often fail users with varying mental capacities, leading them to develop their own compensatory systems [8, 23, 28].

Previous work has explored professional support for neurodivergent individuals, including AI-assisted email writing support for adults with dyslexia [16] and academic writing practices of adults with dyslexia [38]. While prior longitudinal research has examined email accessibility for individuals with severe acquired cognitive impairments [33], to the best of our knowledge there has not been a longitudinal, autoethnographic study specifically investigating a professional with both chronic illness and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) as they navigate workplace

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communication across industry and academia. Currently, there is a gap in understanding the experiences of disabled professionals when facing such demands. Therefore, this study focuses on the distinct challenges related to mental effort, triage, and varying attention/processing capacities inherent in receiving and processing large volumes of professional emails.

Autoethnographic and first-person methods are increasingly recognized as rigorous and vital research methods in accessibility, offering a rich window into disabled experiences [9, 20, 22]. These approaches frame lived experience not as anecdotal, but as epistemically valid and structurally situated data, particularly when traditional user studies overlook or flatten the nuances of disability [9, 20, 22]. Recent autoethnographic work in human-computer interaction (HCI) has explored pacing tools for individuals with long COVID [19], articulated the need for new design practices for chronic illnesses through duoethnography [27], and used group autoethnography to develop disability-centered design practices with chronically ill and blind authors [18].

In this work, we use autoethnographic methods to address this knowledge gap and present preliminary insights of a 14-year, disabled-led, retrospective autoethnography of one disabled professional's experience in creatively managing their email access needs while living with chronic illness and ADHD. We explore the following research questions:

RQ1 What email communication challenges do professionals with chronic illness and ADHD experience, and how do they adapt existing tools to fit their access needs?

RQ2 What are the broader implications of these user-driven adaptations for designing more accessible workplace communication tools for professionals with chronic illness and ADHD?

2 Methodology

This paper builds on the collection and preliminary analysis of autoethnographic data from a professional with chronic illness and ADHD struggling with workplace communication access barriers, which led to the development of a custom workflow referred to as *Mail++* [1].

2.1 Raven's Biography

Raven is an academic with chronic illness and ADHD who, starting in 2011, gradually adapted *Gmail* [2] features to manage communication demands. Their access needs stem from unpredictable physical symptoms (fatigue, migraines, pain) often accompanied by periods of impaired mental clarity, exacerbating executive dysfunction from their ADHD (diagnosed in 2020). These adaptations ultimately functioned as assistive technology. The critical role of these strategies became apparent when a 2022 workplace policy change prevented continued use of their existing methods.

2.2 Autoethnographic Data and Analysis

Autoethnographic data includes Raven's previous emails, text messages, and informal notes and reflections spanning from 2011 to 2025, as provided by them. While acknowledging inherent potential recall biases, data collection evolved over time to capture both immediate reflections and retrospective insights, aiding in thematic triangulation. As such, Raven was interviewed twice in early 2025 by the co-authors (1-hour per interview session). The interviews, treated as retrospective reflections, were transcribed using OpenAI Whisper [30] and contributed to a total dataset of 23,871 words.

The preliminary, open coding [2, 11] analysis of this autoethnographic data focused on identifying 6 codes related to the iterative development of Mail++ and the relation of Mail++ features to events in Raven's life. The co-authors met multiple times per week over a six-week period to discuss codes found in Raven's data and brainstormed initial emergent themes throughout Raven's journey. We present these three themes as (1) from hacks to assistive technology, (2) evolving access needs, and (3) toll of inaccessible systems. A complete qualitative coding analysis with open, axial, and selective coding [2, 11] of the comprehensive 14-year data set is in progress and will be presented in future work.

3 Preliminary Findings

In this section, we present preliminary insights from the 14-year disabled-led autoethnography on Raven's evolving experience managing workplace communication with chronic illness and ADHD, organized into three initial themes.

3.1 Timeline Overview

The timeline of this 14-year autoethnographic data reveals the dynamic intersection between Raven's evolving health, professional roles, and the iterative development of Mail++.

- **2011 - 2013 (Doctoral Student, Undiagnosed Neurodivergence):** In 2011 Raven was a doctoral student, driven by a desire to apply productivity methods such as Getting Things Done (GTD) [3, 17] to support symptoms of their undiagnosed neurodivergence.
- **Late 2013 - 2015 (Onset of Chronic Pain & Migraines):** The birth of Raven's first child in late 2013 and the onset of chronic musculoskeletal pain intensified. This led to increased phone-based triage for urgent items, which became crucial when Raven developed chronic migraines in 2015.
- **2016 - 2020 (Startup Founder, ADHD Diagnosis):** As Raven's career shifted into founding a startup (2016 - 2018), email demand heavily increased. In 2018, Ravel completely separated their email accounts and was formally diagnosed with ADHD in 2020.
- **2021 - 2025 (Faculty Role, Forced System Transition):** In 2021, Raven's faculty role required a transition from Gmail [3] to Outlook [4] (fully enforced in 2022), presenting new access challenges as the Mail++ features they had previously relied on were no longer usable.

3.2 From Hacks to Assistive Technology

When mainstream workplace communication tools became inaccessible, Raven was forced into 'invisible access labor' [1], where they had to develop their own solutions or *"hacks for access"* to everyday

[1] Mail++ is not a new system, but rather a workflow which combines several customized adaptations to existing Gmail features.
[2] https://mail.google.com/
[3] https://mail.google.com/
[4] https://outlook.live.com/

communication platforms. Raven did this in several ways, such as incorporating a Gmail filter applied to a "Waiting for" label to emails they BCC'd to themselves, which created a passive tracking system for follow-ups.

In 2016 - 2018 when Raven faced *"overwhelming email volume"* due to their new position as CEO of a startup, they had a temporary administrative support accommodation. After the loss of this accommodation (2018), Raven removed one of their email accounts entirely. A feature Raven relied on during this time was a distraction-free compose window and a Chrome custom search engine, both of which leveraged keyboard shortcuts. In retrospective interviews, Raven claimed that such features were useful for their (then undiagnosed) *"ADHD-related distractability"*. Raven describes:

Raven on Compose and Search Shortcuts for their ADHD

"The compose window is really key [...] the goal of both [compose and search hacks] is to be able to do an email-related task that doesn't interrupt your workflow... It was costing me like hours and hours of productivity [...] go into the email, get out, get on with your life... and then I totally forget what I came to do... [The custom search engine] was almost a surgical intervention [...] I did the email. Now I can keep working on this project."

3.3 Evolving Access Needs

Over time, Raven's accessibility needs changed. Specifically, this is illustrated when Raven developed migraines (concurrently to an increase of the chronic pain they had already been experiencing) as a new symptom of their chronic illness in 2015:

Raven's Reflection on Migraines and Triaging

"I started having migraines in 2015 [...] I understood that I'd be better off in a dark room and focusing on my abortive meds and trying to get better, instead of trying to push through. That's when the triage piece became really, really key because when you have a migraine, you have to drop everything. You don't know when it's going to happen. [...] So that's when the [urgent] label became really a key component of the system."

This experience reveals key aspects of evolving access needs, which include anticipatory design for times of crisis (such as symptom flareups, common for those with chronic pain [5, 29]) and an emphasis on predictability and trust, which appeared through Raven's reliable triaging system. Beyond acute episodes, Raven's continuous refinement of Mail++ (e.g., leveraging mobile for asynchronous sorting during low-energy periods) further demonstrate the need for highly flexible and customizable accessibility features in workflow communication environments.

3.4 Toll of Inaccessible Systems

The most pressing finding from the initial analysis of Raven's data is the severe, often 'unspoken toll' that inaccessible workplace communication systems place on disabled professionals. This includes significant emotional distress and professional damage, evident in Raven's sudden loss of access to their Mail++ workflow in 2022, which rendered email *"cognitively and physically unmanageable"*, which had immediate professional consequences:

Raven on Missing Deadlines andthe Professional Toll of Inaccessibility

"I missed compliance deadlines at work... Now, what happens instead is that every day there's 200+ emails. and I can't tell which is which...

I can confidently say that the lack of access that I'm currently experiencing is **severely impacting my ability to professionally manage my communications and my reputation**."

"I was seriously considering quitting my job just because I couldn't handle the email side..."

3.5 Raven's Workflow Features

The most commonly used features of Raven's workflow included: labeling emails with actionable labels, sending emails with BCC to themselves as a "waiting for" queue, Chrome bookmarking of key shortcuts (e.g., label folders), using the Gmail compose window in full screen mode, Chrome search engine shortcuts to quickly find information, and mobile triage for flareup management. The combination of these existing features created Raven's workflow—which they named Mail++.

4 Conclusion & Future Work

In this work, we share preliminary insights from an ongoing, 14-year disabled-led autoethnography exploring one professional's email access needs while managing chronic illness and ADHD. Our analysis identified three initial themes: from hacks to assistive technology, evolving access needs, and the toll of inaccessible systems. From these, we propose two design insights for accessible workplace communication: (1) software should be flexible, allowing users to adapt it to their needs—for instance, Raven created custom keyboard shortcuts for faster access to search and filters; and (2) software should adapt to users' changing needs—for example, Raven leveraged interoperability for rapid mobile triaging during flare-ups.

While our exploratory findings provide valuable insights into one individual's experiences, we plan a formal user study with a diverse group of chronically ill professionals with ADHD. This study will gather detailed comparative data to assess the effectiveness and usability of Mail++'s adaptive strategies (e.g., custom labels, distraction-free compose window, mobile triage). From these insights, we will propose concrete design recommendations for workplace communication tools that automatically triage, label, or organize emails based on user-defined priorities. We hope this work will spark discussion on accessible workplace communication tools for professionals with disabilities.

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