A career coach explains how to thrive at work as an introvert

From endless meetings to constant small talk, being an introvert at work can be hard. A career coach explains how to cope.

I’m sitting at my desk, chatting to colleagues while typing away, enjoying the office atmosphere. But by lunchtime, I’m exhausted. It’s not because the work is difficult – it’s from feeling switched on all morning.

If you’re an introvert, the world of work can be challenging. The need to feel always alert and able to hold conversations while still getting your job done can be overwhelming. Sometimes you just want to quietly sit and work on your report or presentation without making small talk. Or maybe a run of meetings leaves you longing for some time alone.

Stylist spoke to career coach and Life Coach Directory member Patricia Ezechie to find out how to not only survive but thrive at work as an introvert.

Why being an introvert at work can be challenging

The typical modern office, with shared desks, little privacy and lots of noise, can be hard to focus in. “For introverts who tend to thrive in their inner worlds – which is where they also derive most of their energy – and for whom focus, space and time to process their thoughts and choose their words is paramount, being in these open, highly populated, shared spaces can feel daunting,” explains Ezechie.

“Introverts tend to like their own company or to gather in smaller groups. This doesn’t mean they are antisocial or don’t like being with people. For introverts, it’s all about energy. Because they are more internally focused, they can find being in larger groups incredibly draining as they must engage with more people. The expansion of energy outwards required to do this is what introverts find most challenging and overwhelming because it is so emotionally and mentally draining for them.”

Find quiet spaces to work

“I always suggest one of the first things to do when you join a new organisation, especially as an introvert, is to identify the quiet thinking spaces in the building,” says Ezechie. “The flip side of modern open plan working spaces is that office designers have usually also created smaller ‘thinking’ and ‘being’ spaces. In some companies, this might be designated meditation and prayer rooms for quiet contemplation or just smaller more private spaces or meeting rooms. Find them and use them.”

Alongside this, try to map your energy levels throughout the day and identify when or what tends to leave you overwhelmed. Ezechie recommends diarising to use these quiet spaces to work and recharge.

She also suggests taking regular breaks outside. “It’s something we all need to do, particularly if you are an introvert in a busy hectic office. If you are lucky enough to have a green space nearby use that to re-energise and rebalance.”

For me, I know that I appreciate my lunchbreak to myself – sitting with a coffee and a book in a quiet space away from the office is my perfect chance to unwind. I’ve had colleagues be confused about why I do this, so I simply explain that I enjoy it and that it’s a choice. It’s not about being shy or lonely, it’s about valuing alone time. Communicating your preferences is an important part of thriving at work as an introvert so people understand how you work.

Understand your working style

“Understanding our individual working style is essential for each of us to thrive and succeed in the workplace,” says Ezechie. “Simply put, our working style is how we like to work best. It is how we approach our day-to-day tasks and projects, work with others and solve problems to do our best work. Your working style will help you clarify your key skills and strengths, which is invaluable in steering you along the right path in your career and to opportunities, projects, and environments where you will excel and thrive.

“If you understand your working style you can develop strategies and ways of working to enable you to engage and work effectively with others, be seen and heard and recognised for your skills, value and contributions while also taking care of your own emotional and mental needs. This will also ensure you continue to develop, grow and progress, and that your colleagues, peers and leaders are aware of the unique skills, strengths and contributions you bring to the team.”

It’s worth thinking how your working style matches different career options. Do you prefer workplaces where you have freedom in how you structure your time versus ones where you feel glued to your desk, having to deal with a constant stream of customers? This can help you think more long-term about what vibes best with who you are.

Networking and meetings

Ezechie says that suggesting smaller meetings to your team can be helpful. When this isn’t possible, have smaller meetings with team members before larger ones to share your thoughts and ideas in more comfortable size groups.

“Networking is a key component of succeeding in your career and being an introvert shouldn’t mean you can’t do this effectively,” says Ezechie. “Develop your relationships with your colleagues by getting to know them in one-to-one meetings or in smaller groups. This can also be a great way of turning work colleagues into friends too.”

She emphasises the importance of remembering your organisation wants to know what you think, values your contributions and you are part of a team. “What you think and have to say is important so don’t let the fact you’re an introvert rob you or your team of the value you bring. Plan what you are going to say or the questions you are going to ask at meetings ahead of time. Then ask the question or make a comment.

“And there is always email. So, even if after preparing your contributions for a meeting you didn’t get a chance to speak or felt too overwhelmed in the moment, send your thoughts and comments to the team as a follow-up email. That thought or comment could be the game changer”

The value of being an introvert

Sometimes it can feel like the world isn’t meant for introverts. But we shouldn’t have to change who we are to match this. And introversion can bring lots of benefits in itself.

“Introverts bring many advantages to the workplace but one of the key ones is their ability to focus and their keen observation skills,” says Ezechie. “Their preference for being on their own, inward reflection and contemplation means they often spend more time thinking about, working through and solving problems. When they have something to say or add it is usually worth the wait because of the amount of time they have spent pondering and processing the problem. Introverts tend to have curious minds, which can make them abstract thinkers – an invaluable asset to have in a diverse team.”

Your introversion isn’t something to hide, it can allow you to flourish and see things in different ways. Let’s celebrate who we are – as long as we can have a quiet coffee by ourselves afterwards.