



The Async Contributor Model: A Practical Approach to Mental Health Accommodation

AUGUST 2025

7 min read • 1,573 words

Themes: Mental Health

Yesterday I shared [The Cost of Transparency](#)—my experience of systematic workplace exclusion after disclosing schizoaffective disorder. The [Hacker News discussion](#) that followed was predictably messy, but it surfaced something valuable: a practical accommodation model that actually works.

Buried in the criticism and debate, one commenter proposed a solution I've successfully used at various points in my career but never formalized. Rather than getting lost in abstract debates about accommodation limits, let's examine what this concrete alternative looks like in practice.

The Core Solution: What One Commenter Got Right

energy123 cut through the noise with this insight:

"You've got to put them behind a remote, narrowly-scoped, async interface. Basically hire them as a remote consultant, with 1 point of contact, and send them non-urgent tasks that they can complete whenever."

This person understood something crucial: accommodation isn't about lowering standards or excusing poor performance. It's about creating structures that let people contribute their best work without requiring neurotypical social performance

Neurotypical social performance includes things like daily standups, impromptu meetings, casual hallway conversations, open office environments, and the assumption that availability equals productivity. Many highly productive people struggle with these requirements regardless of their technical abilities.

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I've been successful at using variations of this model at various points in my career. Some of my most successful technical contributions happened through exactly this type of arrangement.

Why Traditional Employment Often Fails

The discussion revealed why standard accommodation approaches struggle with conditions like schizoaffective disorder. **awolven**, who also has the condition, described a different experience:

"I have schizoaffective disorder and work in the tech industry and have not noticed any of the things this author talks about... It is only when I have an episode of psychosis that things get difficult, and rightfully so for the people around you."

This illustrates a common pattern: successful accommodation often requires either symptom invisibility or internalized responsibility for others' comfort

Notice the language: "dangerous mental illness" and episodes being "rightfully" difficult for others. This self-stigmatization, while psychologically protective, reinforces the idea that people with mental health conditions should apologize for their existence rather than expect reasonable accommodation.

. The async model removes this burden by focusing on deliverables rather than daily social navigation.

jerlendds captured the deeper fear many of us live with:

"I know each episode I go through there's a likely chance less of the sane me comes back... less of who I really am, the me that I like, that can get along with others, that can develop cool software, and frankly, that scares the ever living shit out of me."

This is exactly why the async model matters—it preserves your ability to contribute technically even when social functioning becomes challenging

Progressive conditions create legitimate fear about losing core identity and capabilities. Work structures that depend heavily on social performance become increasingly difficult to maintain, while technical skills often remain more stable. The async model preserves the pathway to meaningful contribution.

Implementation: The Async Contributor Framework

Here's how to structure these arrangements for maximum success:

What This Actually Looks Like

For the Organization:

- Identify a 2-4 week backlog project
- Assign one experienced team member as single point of contact
- Write detailed requirements and acceptance criteria upfront
- Set realistic deadlines with 50% buffer time
- Use written-only communication (email/project management tools)
- Budget as specialized consultant/contractor

For the Contributor:

- Receive complete project brief with clear deliverables

- Work during optimal hours without daily check-ins
- Provide written progress updates (weekly or bi-weekly)
- Deliver working code/documentation with handoff instructions
- Handle feedback through async communication channels
- Get paid upon delivery, not hours logged

For the Team:

- No accommodation overhead or daily management responsibility
- Clear integration points and handoff procedures
- Work continues regardless of contributor's availability
- Receive deliverables without meeting coordination
- Benefit from fresh perspective on technical challenges

Core Components

Single Point of Contact: One person manages all communication and requirements. This eliminates the social overhead of maintaining multiple professional relationships and prevents the need to repeatedly explain accommodation needs

This mirrors how many successful consultants work—one primary client contact who handles all internal coordination. It reduces cognitive load and prevents the social exhaustion that comes from managing multiple stakeholder relationships simultaneously.

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Project-Based Deliverables: Work gets broken into discrete, well-defined projects with clear success criteria. Think "implement this authentication system" rather than "maintain our auth infrastructure." Projects should be substantial enough to justify the setup overhead but small enough to complete in 2-4 weeks

The sweet spot is projects that would normally take a full-time employee 1-2 weeks but can be allocated 3-4 weeks for async completion. This accounts for the non-linear work patterns while delivering comparable value.

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Asynchronous Communication: All interaction happens through written channels with response expectations measured in days, not hours. No phone calls, video conferences, or real-time meetings unless absolutely necessary and scheduled well in advance

This isn't just accommodation—it's often better practice. Written communication creates better documentation, allows for more thoughtful responses, and eliminates the productivity theater of constant meetings.

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Flexible Timeline with Buffer: Realistic deadlines with built-in buffer time. The trade-off is predictable: longer timelines in exchange for higher completion rates and quality work during optimal mental states.

Role Types That Work Well

The async contributor model works best for specific types of technical work:

The Technical Troubleshooter: Complex debugging, architecture challenges, legacy code cleanup. These benefit from sustained focus without meeting interruptions

Debugging complex systems often requires hours of uninterrupted focus to trace through interconnected failures. The async model allows for deep work sessions that would be impossible in traditional office environments with constant interruptions.

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The Documentation Specialist: Transform tribal knowledge into clear documentation, API guides, onboarding materials. High-value work often deprioritized by full-time teams but critical for scalability.

The Innovation Projects Lead: Experimental features, proof-of-concepts, research initiatives. These projects handle uncertainty well and benefit from creative exploration during optimal mental states

Innovation work often involves false starts, creative exploration, and non-linear progress—patterns that align well with the episodic nature of many mental health conditions. When you're feeling sharp, you can make breakthrough progress; when struggling, the project can wait without breaking critical systems.

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The Code Quality Advocate: Refactoring projects, testing frameworks, development tooling improvements. Technical debt reduction that requires deep system understanding but minimal daily coordination.

Why This Benefits Everyone

For Contributors: Technical work without social performance requirements. Contribute during optimal mental states rather than arbitrary schedules. Focus on deliverables rather than explaining daily fluctuations in energy or symptoms.

For Organizations: Access to talent typically excluded by traditional hiring processes. Often higher quality work due to uninterrupted focus time. Clear project boundaries and deliverables

Many companies already operate this way with specialized consultants and overseas contractors. Formalizing it as an accommodation model simply makes explicit what's already proven to work in other contexts.

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For Teams: No accommodation overhead for existing team members. Clear handoffs and integration points. Work continues regardless of the contributor's availability on any given day.

Getting Started: Implementation Guide

For **organizations** wanting to try this approach:

1. **Start small:** Identify one well-defined project that could benefit from focused, uninterrupted work
2. **Choose the right contact person:** Someone experienced with managing contractors or remote team members
3. **Define success clearly:** Write detailed requirements and acceptance criteria upfront
4. **Set realistic timelines:** Add 50% buffer time to normal estimates

5. **Document everything:** All communication should be written and archived

The key is treating this like any other consulting arrangement initially. Once the model proves successful, you can formalize it as an accommodation option for employees or future hires.

For **potential contributors:** This model works when you can:

- Deliver high-quality technical work during your optimal periods
- Communicate clearly about project requirements and timelines
- Work independently without daily guidance or social interaction
- Handle written feedback and iterate on deliverables

The arrangement benefits from transparency about what accommodations you need without requiring disclosure of specific medical details.

Beyond Individual Accommodation

The async contributor model addresses a broader question: how do we build work structures that serve human reality rather than fighting against it?

Many people—whether dealing with mental health conditions, chronic illness, family responsibilities, or simply preferring deep focus work—could benefit from alternatives to the traditional office environment and meeting-heavy culture

Research consistently shows that knowledge work benefits from sustained focus time, yet most office environments make this impossible. The async contributor model serves not just accommodation needs but optimal productivity conditions for many types of technical work.

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What started as a mental health accommodation becomes a model for more effective knowledge work generally.

The Practical Path Forward

The discussion demonstrated something valuable: people are ready to think practically about accommodation when presented with concrete models rather than abstract principles.

The async contributor framework offers a starting point. It's not the only solution, but it's one that works within existing business structures while providing meaningful opportunity for people typically excluded from traditional employment.

Most importantly, it focuses on what people can contribute rather than what they can't do. That shift in perspective—from deficit to capability—changes everything.

Aaron Swartz famously advised "don't read the comments"—sage wisdom for preserving mental health online. But sometimes the comment section, messy as it is, surfaces insights that formal institutions miss. The async contributor model emerged from exactly this kind of crowdsourced problem-solving that happens when real experiences meet practical minds.

Turns out the internet comment section provided better solutions than most inclusion committees.

This practical approach to workplace accommodation connects to [Digital Chakras: Our Scattered Online Selves](#) which offers integration practices that complement workplace accommodation—maintaining authentic self-expression across different professional contexts rather than fragmenting identity to meet various algorithmic expectations.