

# Autism in organizations: perceptions and actions for inclusion from the point of view of managers

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## Abstract

Our article aims to identify managers' perceptions and actions for inclusion of people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in organizations that employ these professionals in Brazil. The number of people diagnosed with autism in the US has increased, according to 2021 data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In comparison with the USA, from the transposition of the data, Brazil counts a number close to 4.48 million of autistic people (Paiva, 2021) in 2021. Most Brazilian organizations do not offer minimum conditions for the inclusion of these professionals (Leopoldino, 2018), and the topic is still scarce in the international and national academic literature, especially empirically. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with six executives from national and foreign companies that hire professionals with ASD. Through thematic analysis, managers' perceptions of these professionals and the inclusion actions adopted by them were identified. The results indicate that the perceptions of managers are based on stereotypes but these end up changing as they live with professionals with ASD. Regarding actions for inclusion, the importance of a culture of inclusion was identified, as well as the monitoring of professionals with ASD by intermediaries at all stages of their careers and the attention of those involved with their health. The results provide useful findings for organizations that promote diversity and show that actions for the inclusion of people with ASD are still incipient in our country.

**Keywords:** Autism. Inclusion. Perceptions. Actions.

## *Autism in organizations: perceptions and actions for inclusion from the point of view of managers*

### Resumo

Nosso artigo tem como objetivo identificar quais são as percepções e ações para inclusão, do ponto de vista de gestores, de pessoas com Transtorno do Espectro Autista (TEA) nas organizações que empregam esses profissionais no Brasil. O número de pessoas diagnosticadas com autismo nos Estados Unidos tem aumentado, conforme dados do Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); com base na transposição dos dados, o Brasil teria um número próximo a 4,48 milhões de autistas (Paiva, 2021) em 2021. A maioria das organizações brasileiras não oferece condições mínimas para a inclusão desses profissionais (Leopoldino, 2018), e o tema ainda é escasso na literatura acadêmica internacional e nacional, especialmente de forma empírica. Para este estudo, foram realizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas com seis executivos de empresas nacionais e estrangeiras que contratam profissionais com TEA. Por meio da análise temática, foram identificadas as percepções dos gestores sobre esses profissionais e as ações de inclusão adotadas por eles. Os resultados indicam que as percepções dos gestores têm como base estereótipos, mas que estes acabam se alterando à medida que convivem com profissionais com TEA. Com relação às ações para inclusão, foram identificados a importância da cultura de inclusão, o acompanhamento do profissional com TEA pelos intermediadores em todas as etapas da carreira e a atenção dos envolvidos com a saúde deles. Os resultados fornecem achados úteis para organizações que promovem a diversidade, além de mostrar que as ações para a inclusão de pessoas com TEA ainda se mostram incipientes em nosso país.

**Palavras-chave:** Autismo. Inclusão. Percepções. Ações.

## *Autismo en las organizaciones: percepciones y acciones para la inclusión desde el punto de vista de los gerentes*

### Resumen

Nuestro artículo tiene como objetivo identificar las percepciones y acciones para la inclusión, desde el punto de vista de los gerentes, de personas con Trastorno del Espectro Autista (TEA) en organizaciones que emplean a estos profesionales en Brasil. El número de personas diagnosticadas con autismo en EE.UU. aumentó según datos de 2021 de los Centros para el Control y la Prevención de Enfermedades (CDC); con base en la transposición de datos, Brasil tendría alrededor de 4,48 millones de personas autistas (Paiva, 2021). La mayoría de las organizaciones brasileñas no ofrece condiciones mínimas para la inclusión de estos profesionales (Leopoldino, 2018) y el tema aún es escaso en la literatura académica internacional y nacional, especialmente de manera empírica. Para este estudio, se realizaron entrevistas semiestruturadas a seis ejecutivos de empresas nacionales y extranjeras que contratan profesionales con TEA. A través del análisis temático, se identificaron las percepciones de los gerentes sobre estos profesionales y las acciones de inclusión adoptadas por ellos. Los resultados indican que las percepciones de los gerentes se basan en estereotipos, pero que estos acaban cambiando a medida que conviven con profesionales con TEA. En cuanto a las acciones para la inclusión, se identificó la importancia de una cultura de inclusión, del seguimiento de los profesionales con TEA por parte de los intermediarios en todas las etapas de su carrera y de la atención de los involucrados con su salud. Los resultados brindan hallazgos útiles para las organizaciones que promueven la diversidad, además de mostrar que las acciones para la inclusión de personas con TEA son aún incipientes en nuestro país.

**Palabras clave:** Autism. Inclusion. Perceptions. Actions.

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## INTRODUCTION

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This study focuses on the labor market for people diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The main objective is to identify, from the managers' point of view, perceptions and actions for the inclusion of people with ASD in Brazilian organizations. According to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NIH), the term ASD designates an incurable developmental disorder characterized by several conditions that affect social skills, communication, relationships, and self-regulation. It is usually diagnosed in childhood by observing behaviors that affect people in diverse ways and to various degrees.

According to Coleman and Adams (2018), there was a 78% increase in the diagnosis of autism in American children from 2002 to 2008 (i.e., people who are entering the labor market nowadays, in 2022). Data on the population with ASD is very limited in Brazil. However, the country's School Census indicated a 37.27% increase in students with ASD enrolled in regular classes between 2017 and 2018 (Santos, 2020).

Among the social advances for people with ASD, the United Nations published, in 2007, the convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which recognizes the rights of individuals with ASD. The convention also creates the environment for policies associated with the inclusion of autistic people in the labor market (Leopoldino, 2016). For Baldwin, Costley, and Warren (2014), despite their ability and willingness to work, professionals with ASD face significant disadvantages in the labor market, such as a lack of understanding and support in work environments. Conceição, Escalante, and Silva (2021) identified that people with ASD have difficulties finding a job and obtaining a position that matches their expectations and professional background.

International studies (Hedley et al., 2018; Krzeminska, Härtel, Carrero, & Herrera, 2020; Lattimore, Parsons, & Reid, 2006; Wehman et al., 2014) highlight the main actions organizations have carried out to promote inclusion, such as mentoring, internship, peer and leader support, and vocational rehabilitation. In Brazil, despite the increase in diagnoses and the social advances regarding the rights of people with ASD, the topic is still little explored, especially in the labor market. A review by Leopoldino (2016) on the inclusion of people with ASD in workplaces showed that this subject was practically untouched in the Brazilian academy. Thus, this research contributes to addressing this gap, together with more recent studies such as Conceição, Escalante, and Silva (2021) mentioned above.

This study conducted six semi-structured interviews with executives of national and foreign organizations operating in Brazil, guided by the following research question: What are the actions adopted by organizations operating in Brazil toward the inclusion of people with ASD? The research explores measures adopted in organizations throughout the country and seeks to identify new actions that may contribute to increasing inclusion in the labor market and workplaces and the general understanding of this complex topic.

This research contributed to the national and international literature, fostering a still incipient debate on actions for the inclusion of people with ASD. In addition, we offer a literature review of Brazilian articles included in the platforms Scielo and Ebsco using the keywords, in Portuguese: *autismo, mercado de trabalho, inclusão, práticas*, and *TEA* (autism, labor market, inclusion, practices, and ASD). There was no evidence of works addressing the topic of the inclusion of people with ASD in Brazil. Therefore, our contribution also gains social and managerial relevance, including for organizational policymakers.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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This section discusses two topics: (1) the Brazilian labor market for professionals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in order to increase understanding of the research context, and (2) actions for the inclusion of professionals with ASD seeking to learn successful initiatives.

## THE BRAZILIAN LABOR MARKET FOR PROFESSIONALS WITH ASD

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Inclusion is crucial for people with ASD, from childhood when starting school to entering and staying in the labor market (Stravogiannis, 2021). Despite the importance, many barriers hinder the development of inclusive actions and prevent pedagogical practices from creating conditions for children to be included in the school environment and for young people with ASD to access and stay in the labor market. According to Bidart and Santos (2021), there is a significant number of studies about autistic children, but it is essential to also reflect on the aging of these individuals and their needs, promoting integration and autonomous life. According to Conceição et al. (2021), the inclusion of autistic people occurs at all stages of life, so they can be autonomous and achieve their potential.

Understanding the difference between insertion and inclusion is essential to study the labor market for people with ASD. The dictionaries in Portuguese state that “*inserir*” (to insert) is to “place something inside” (Dicionário Online de Português [DICIO], 2022a, our translation) and that “*incluir*” (to include) is to “belong to a group, to become part of a class of people” (DICIO, 2022b, our translation). In this sense, this article seeks to understand inclusion as the process by which society adapts to include people with disabilities (PwD), while these people prepare to take on societal roles. Therefore, social inclusion is a bilateral process aiming to form a partnership to solve problems, decide on solutions and achieve equal opportunities for all (Sasaki, 1997).

There is still much prejudice and discrimination in the labor market against professionals with disabilities. According to Assis and Freitas (2014), despite the existence of a law establishing quotas to protect the access of PwD in the labor market (art. 93 of law 8213, enacted on July 24, 1991), these professionals have faced difficulties when going through hiring processes, and in aspects such as professional retention and valorization. According to the law, organizations must reserve a proportion of their job positions for PwD, which varies based on the total number of employees. Organizations with 100 to 200 employees must reserve 2%; from 201 to 500, 3%; from 501 to 1,000, 4%. Organizations with more than 1,001 employees must reserve 5% of their job positions for PwD (Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos, 2020). Miranda and Vicente (2012) point out that this legislation is subject to prejudice, as there are professionals who interpret it as an advantage for PwD.

In addition, some professionals fear and distrust the work rendered by PwD, using the excuse of low performance as a justification to avoid offering them opportunities for professional advancement. However, Souza, Salvagni, Nodari, and Rasia (2017) studied a case where leaders and teams in an agribusiness company demonstrated an understanding of the need for the inclusion of PwD fully. Such an understanding was based on developing an organizational vision that proposed promoting better working conditions for these individuals. These conditions may be connected to the company’s work of disseminating new knowledge about the subject in areas of the company where PwD were not working directly and to the expansion of the number of professionals with disabilities. Assis and Freitas (2014) found that, regardless of the size and segment of the organization, it is possible to include PwD, but constant investment in reflection and information on the issue is necessary. The authors claim that, in this way, it is possible to reduce prejudice and social exclusion.

Some legal provisions seek to promote the rights of people with ASD. Law 12764, enacted on December 27, 2012, establishes the National Policy for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder. It determines that the person with ASD is considered a person with a disability for all legal purposes (Lei nº 12.764, de 27 de dezembro de 2012). In addition, the Brazilian inclusion law (LBI), law 13146 enacted on July 6, 2015, known as the Statute of Persons with Disabilities, sought to ensure and promote the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms for social inclusion and citizenship (Lei nº 13.146, de 6 de julho de 2015).

Despite the legal provisions, the rights of people with ASD have not always been respected (Leopoldino & Coelho, 2018). Organizations representing the interests of autistic people contribute to protecting their rights through partnerships strengthening the dialogue with the government, and confronting other actors who oppose this population’s demands.

Leopoldino (2018) observed that the ecosystem around autism in Brazil consists of membership organizations dedicated to the cause, entities forming the educational and health systems (including private health plans), the judiciary, and the system of communication with society. Despite the scope of the systems addressed by the author, there is a lack of actors focused exclusively on the professional lives of people with ASD, making it even more difficult to include these individuals in the labor market.

The study by Leopoldino and Coelho (2018) corroborates the difficulty of including people with ASD in the labor market by showing that Brazilian organizations do not offer minimum conditions to facilitate this process. However, the authors suggest four activities to help different individuals and organizations to become inclusive: training people, referral to the market, workplace adjustments, and supporting the inclusion process. It is noteworthy that employers are responsible for some of the barriers to inclusion, such as the lack of support in the work environment and the offer of low-quality jobs. In addition, there is a lack of vocational training for people with ASD and the ineffectiveness of quotas for PwD. These barriers can be mitigated by exploring the potential of these professionals, usually related to their ability to memorize details, focus on completing tasks, comply with work rules, and, in some cases, perform repetitive functions (Leopoldino & Coelho, 2018).

Bidart and Santos (2021) interviewed professionals with ASD and identified competencies such as attention to detail, commitment, little distraction, and enthusiasm. The interviewees mentioned that practices such as performance evaluation and feedback would help understand each professional's characteristics and profile and stimulate hyperfocus on specific activities or sectors in the organization, increasing work efficiency.

## Management practices for professionals with ASD

The management practices applied to professionals with ASD must consider the particularities of each person, which implies adaptations both in practice and in the workplace (Brinzea, 2019). Bidart and Santos (2021) advocate that the company has to make adaptations in the workplace and know the specific needs and individual characteristics of professionals with ASD to avoid judgment and prejudice.

The needs of individuals with ASD should be recognized as different from those with more generalized developmental and/or intellectual disabilities (Müller, Schuler, Burton, & Yates, 2003). According to Wehman et al. (2014), for most youth with ASD, employment after high school or college graduation is difficult despite many years of intensive special education. Krzeminska and Hawse (2020) reinforce that people with ASD have the highest unemployment rates among any group of people with and without disabilities. However, their skills are essential to meet the current and future workforce needs, especially in STEM areas. A study by Agiprino-Ramos and Salomão (2014), with 75 professionals from different areas such as psychology, psychiatry, teaching, and neurology, revealed a lack of knowledge about autism compared, for example, with Down syndrome, which indicates the need for professional training to improve inclusion of people with ASD in society.

According to Rast, Roux, and Shattuck (2020), one of the many challenges faced by professionals with ASD is the gaps in services to help them find jobs. The literature highlights other challenges, such as difficulties in conducting specific tasks, individual factors, personal limitations, social difficulties, distractibility, not managing work-related stress, and being perceived as too frank (Hedley et al., 2018). Furthermore, individuals in specific jobs for people with ASD stated to have faced problems of formality (i.e., difficulties related to organizational and practical aspects in the process of entering the job). In contrast, individuals in jobs non-specific for people with ASD mentioned social problems, such as obstacles related to communication and human interaction (Lorenz, Frischling, Cuadros, & Heinitz, 2016). The employment outcomes for these people may improve when identifying factors associated with a successful transition to work based on the perspectives of the individual and those who work with or support them (Hedley et al., 2018).

According to Hedley et al. (2018), the practices that most facilitate the success of professionals with ASD are organizational support, advice from co-workers, supportive leadership, allowance of environmental modifications, and the presence of a consultant. Cone (2018) stresses other practices such as vocational support, building integration strategies, and exploring the strengths of these professionals, while Parr and Hunter (2014) add that the notion of leadership preferences for people with ASD is complex, but leadership has a substantial effect on employee attitudes and performance.

Autism is a spectrum disorder, which means that individuals can experience a variety of symptoms. As such, they may have different needs and preferences regarding leadership, depending on limitations and strengths. The leader's demonstration of honesty, respect, and consideration can be particularly important in improving these professionals' attitudes at work. In addition, leaders can demonstrate support and consideration, uphold values and a balanced perspective, and provide some degree of structure for professionals with ASD. They must understand their employees' limitations in social and communication areas, provide support throughout activities, show respect to everyone, and implement a framework to meet their needs (Parr & Hunter, 2014).

According to Krzeminska et al. (2020), having a buddy or mentor is also helpful, both for people with ASD who have disclosed the diagnosis within the company and for those who have not, which suggests the importance of making this practice available to all workers who wish to. For the authors, the involvement of co-workers during the inclusion process is essential, as they tend to communicate and interact more frequently with professionals with ASD than managers and executives. They also warn that the physical environment must be clean and ergonomically comfortable, with adequate auditory and visual components.

Wehman et al. (2014) argue that internships are important since they offer an intensive immersion of professionals with ASD in the workplace, facilitating the progression from the internship to a job. The authors also suggest using vocational rehabilitation as a form of assistance for PwD seeking employment. Vocational rehabilitation means training to develop professional skills that contribute to job satisfaction and improve wages (Rast et al., 2020). Some authors point out that training conducted in the workplace can be more effective if it is complemented with simulated training (outside the workplace) (Lattimore et al., 2006).

Discrimination against professionals with ASD entering the job market is common, especially if the individual is older than their peers – which is not rare since people with ASD have fewer opportunities throughout life compared to people with other disabilities. Therefore, supporting and planning the development of these individuals from childhood to adulthood is a facilitating set of measures to help them build careers. Internship programs, young apprentice programs, and similar opportunities can be beneficial and ensure adequate and effective learning in perceiving and responding to work environments (Van Wieren, Reid, & McMahon, 2008).

## METHODOLOGY

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This qualitative research adopted an inductive method to explain a real phenomenon. A participatory and less controllable approach was used to work with descriptions, comparisons, and interpretations. Therefore, the researcher could conveniently direct the research path (Gil, 2008).

The study data were collected through semi-structured interviews and examined through content analysis. This method was chosen since it is not necessarily outcome-oriented, using an interpretation that oscillates between objectivity and subjectivity (Bardin, 2016). According to Bardin (2016), content analysis can be conducted using different techniques that may be separated into three groups: (i) thematic analysis, which aims at specific elements of the messages and includes categorical and evaluation analysis; (ii) formal analysis, focusing on the forms and sequence of discourse and encompasses the analysis of enunciation and expression; and (iii) structural analysis, which addresses the underlying and implicit aspects of the message, includes analysis of relationships and discourse. This research adopted thematic analysis, separating the text into content units, reorganizing them into groups by similarity, and allocating them into categories.

The semi-structured interviews followed a previously prepared script. However, the interviewer was free to change the sequence of questions and ask supplementary questions for clarification (Manzini, 2012). Six managers from five organizations with programs aimed at people with ASD and operating in Brazil were interviewed.

The five organizations were a company that develops business management software, a world-leading financial services institution, a large Brazilian financial institution, a leading global audit and consulting services, and a non-profit organization focused on the inclusion of people with ASD in the labor market. The non-profit had partnerships to promote the inclusion of people with ASD with the other four organizations represented in the study.

The selected interviewees were leaders responsible for a group of professionals with ASD (or a professional responsible for including people with ASD in the organization, regardless of managing these employees directly). The study interviewed one professional from each company and two from the non-profit organization.

During the interviews, all interviewees showed great interest in the subject, with a very positive expression of feelings, especially when talking about the evolution of programs aimed at hiring and permanence of people with ASD in the organizations. All interviews lasted, on average, 60 minutes and were transcribed to facilitate understanding and to categorize the various topics covered.

### Box 1 Interviewees' profile

Organizations	Interviewees	Age	Background	Area
A	Gabriela	34	Psychology	Coaching and training
A	Fernando	50	Psychology	Coaching and training
B	Thomas	41	Psychology	Diversity
C	Mercedes	56	Psychology	Human resources
D	Isabela	36	Computing science	Product development
E	Rosa	52	Economy	Diversity

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Two main themes were identified during the thematic analysis: perceptions of ASD and actions for the inclusion of professionals with ASD. This section addresses them separately.

### Perceptions of ASD

This theme refers to the interviewees' perceptions of ASD insofar as it is a theme little known in the corporate environment. The data reveal that some interviewees, especially psychologists, link autism to the guidelines of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) or the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), instruments that standardize the coding of diseases and other health problems. The interviewees showed they recognized out the breadth of the spectrum after evaluating the set of characteristics presented by each professional with ASD since they have different ways of interacting and communicating, for example. However, they admit the influence of stereotypes and prejudices, which are recognized after they started to work with people with ASD. According to Miranda and Vicente (2022), professionals with disabilities are victims of prejudice from insertion to ascension in organizations.

The findings also revealed the stereotypes related to professionals with ASD, a topic not yet addressed in the Brazilian academic literature on organizational studies. These stereotypes influence the behavior of employees, leading to discrimination against people with such a disorder.

For Fernando (organization A), professionals with ASD are more “systematic” and have “tics.” For him, there is more prejudice than difficulties when working with someone with ASD. Likewise, Isabela (organization D) recognized that she was prejudiced about autism as she did not know anything about the subject until she was introduced to people with ASD by the program to include these professionals in the organization. She pointed out the need to demystify the issue in the job market. For her, it is important to emphasize the potential of these people and how much they can contribute to the organizations’ activities.

This section shows that the managers’ perceptions regarding professionals with ASD permeate the stereotypes associated with inappropriate behavior and the image of autistic people as geniuses.

It is worth mentioning that the theme “perceptions of ASD” is interrelated with the theme “actions for the inclusion of professionals with ASD,” which emerged from the interviews and is presented below. It was possible to identify that perceptions of ASD changed as the actions were implemented and the interaction with professionals with ASD intensified. Inclusion programs promote greater awareness and knowledge about professionals with ASD, reducing prejudice and discrimination. They are crucial to offering the experience of working with professionals with ASD and demystifying autism in our society. The following subsection presents these actions.

## Actions for the inclusion of professionals with ASD

This theme refers to the main actions for the inclusion of professionals with ASD adopted by the organizations represented in this research. This section presents the actions of hiring and integrating, supporting and training, accessibility, health, culture of inclusion, and quotas.

### *Hiring and integrating*

The research data revealed the main actions of hiring and integrating professionals with ASD in organizations. The interviewees’ indicated the importance of intermediary institutions (such as organization A in this study) between the professionals and the hiring company.

Regarding the hiring process, the interviewees from the non-profit organization (“A”) explained that the intermediation the organization offered to a contracting company willing to hire individuals with ASD was primarily based on the analysis of what skills the company looked for in these professionals. The position and area the professional will occupy are usually related to the technical competence needed. In parallel, the contracting company develops a specific project, which will define the contracting model and the areas that will receive the professionals. Thus, organization A is oriented to carry out the stages of preparation and selection of candidates.

Organization A also provides training courses for professionals with ASD who approach the non-profit seeking a first job or a new one. In most cases, training focuses on developing social skills. As soon as they are hired, all professionals who will interact with the person with ASD receive training on how to deal with this professional in terms of work orientation and social interaction.

The interviewees from organization A also commented that it is necessary to deal with stereotypes and prejudices regarding people with ASD, as there is the impression that they can be aggressive and present inappropriate behavior.

One of the stereotypes about professionals with ASD is that they work only in areas of programming and development, as pointed out by Mercedes (organization C). However, successful experiences in administrative areas led to expanding the scope and considering hiring for positions in other areas of the organization. On this topic, the interviewees mentioned that professionals with ASD can work in many areas beyond technology.

Mercedes also mentioned the creation of a group in her company, the group of diversity ambassadors. Its members came from various departments (sales, marketing, development, programming, and finance). The group's objective was to address the issue and offer support in the different departments, observing daily if there is someone with ASD characteristics or other deficiencies so that they act with the support of professionals specialized in the topic.

In addition to hiring, it is necessary to carry out an integration process in order to include the professional with ASD in the team. It is recommended that this integration be done in a monitored way over time without setting a deadline. Gabriela (organization A) explained:

When this employee is selected, their integration into the team (onboarding) is conducted in a monitored way, and they are supported. Some teams will help in the first days, according to the time of each employee. But we must continue supporting without a deadline.

During this onboarding process, it is also important to raise awareness among the team. Rosa (organization E) is involved in the project to hire people with ASD and tells how she idealizes the program:

[...] when hiring these young people in the assisted employment modality, we count on raising awareness of the teams to inform them about the details of the program, what is the special care to be observed, the most effective way to relate to the person, understanding and respecting them; so we dispel myths and offer them practical challenges [...] People have many fantasies about intellectual and mental disabilities, so we need to dispel them, but we also need to give them a practical tool. [We must] have an intermediary who understands the subject and gives us adequate support from the moment of hiring.

Some factors are crucial to successful hiring and integration processes: raising awareness and engaging employees, counting on intermediary organizations, supporting professionals with ASD, and allocating these professionals to the areas they demonstrate aptitude.

### *Support and training*

Many interviewees reported that supporting professionals with ASD is the differential for their employability and permanence in the job market. Such support can be carried out by an intermediary, such as organization A, the area of human resources, or a professional who identifies with the theme. The interviewees emphasized that the inclusion process would not work or be very difficult without this support. The support must encompass activities of raising the team's awareness, teaching the task to the person with ASD, guiding the team on how to relate to a professional with ASD, and offering general guidelines on how to make all practices more accessible.

When the intermediary is an outsourced organization, it is crucial the presence of a person from the organization dedicated to the theme. According to the interviewee of organization B, a person from the diversity team manages the program they conduct in partnership with organization A (intermediary). The manager can call the intermediary organization and its psychologist in any situation.

Mercedes (organization C) mentioned that managers must be involved in support activities, especially to understand the process of communicating with professionals with ASD, considering their difficulties regarding social skills. The interviewee added:

It's very important that they [managers] know what to look out for for that person's inclusion and for that person's success over time. When we bring a person with ASD, we realize that the majority, although it is not a rule, do not look you in the eye, do not know how to sell themselves. Not just for their inability to communicate, but for the humility they have. They don't say "I'm great at English," for example, even though they are.



The intermediary organization supports the professional with ASD months or weeks before they start working in a company. The institution knows the professional's capabilities and helps them to stand out in the selection process. Isabela (Organization D) reports her experience in the selection process:

I realize, as I am from HR, observing the dynamics, how much difference this intervention makes. We prepare the manager before the interview while the candidate is outside. He asks the questions, we from HR help to make it clear [to the candidate] and warn him not to expect certain answers from the candidate. This helps a lot in the process.

Another relevant point is supporting the professional already employed during an organizational change. The intermediary organization has to contact the area of human resources of the contracting company to decide how to handle the situation with the professional with ASD. It is not a process of adaptation but a new process of inclusion. Gabriel (organization A) commented:

It is important to consider that, in large organizations, everything is very dynamic. The manager changes, the profile of the area changes and, suddenly, the activity that the professional with ASD used to do no longer exists, it is replaced by another. [...] If the team is totally different from the first one, we need to train it again to explain what ASD is, we need to train another person on the team to be the focal point. If the profile of the area has changed and requires a more analytical capacity, and as they have super-concrete thinking, they have difficulty creating hypotheses, as this requires abstraction, we need to help HR allocate this person to another area [...] if they stopped being a junior professional and became full, if they have another responsibility, we help this manager follow the career. The role changes, which is no longer a matter of adaptation, but a new process of inclusion.

The training offered to professionals with ASD usually aims to develop both technical and socio-professional skills. It is about how a company works, how relationships take place, what these professionals with ASD need to know, how they should behave in certain situations, and how to proceed with the work. Often, it is the intermediary organization that offers the training. Interviewees warned that the intermediary organization has to be very flexible and attentive to the company's needs, changing the training if necessary. Gabriela (organization A) offered some examples:

For example, in the change from face-to-face work to working from home mode due to the pandemic, we have an imposition; there is no room for negotiation. For some, this was beneficial; for others, it was not. That's because the work was well supervised, and thus it ran better. When the person is alone, in some cases, they have difficulty focusing, and we saw that some activities started to be postponed, procrastinated. When they cause an emotional impact, these changes need to be worked on in a support group by psychologists. This is one point we will always need to have: flexibility. The only certainty we have in the behavioral part is that things will change at some point.

According to the research data, the action supporting professionals with ASD is essential for them to remain and develop in the job market. Managers can count on the support from the intermediary organization to engage in the cause and understand the nuances around the theme. The training of technical and socio-professional skills of individuals with ASD is also important so they can develop their labor activities properly.

## *Accessibility*

Interviewees also addressed the importance of accessibility to work, i.e., the working conditions offered to professionals with ASD. Accessibility is linked to the behavioral support of those involved, and managers and/or HR professionals must ensure the environment is conducive to the performance of an employee with ASD. The environment is expected to present little circulation, such as people walking or talking or much light. The use of headphones and/or sunglasses must be permitted. Understanding on the part of the team is also essential. Mercedes (organization C) reported:

We had an intern who entered the sales area, which is on an open floor, with no closed doors. And this person had hearing sensitivity, which can be very common among people with ASD. So, we prepared the environment for her to be in a place a little further away, in a closed room, and she would use headphones. Colleagues already knew she would use headphones almost all the time because of her sensitivity. These attitudes lead to accessibility, not only in terms of the environmental issue of light and noise but because we have to be an instrument so that these people can be in a work environment, as well as helping them in communication and sociability.

Accessibility is also linked to a concern for the well-being of professionals with ASD. Therefore, managers and intermediaries should be aware of temperament, concentration, and mood changes, as they can be associated with a change in medication. Another point is to offer the possibility for these professionals to have a buddy and a mentor within the organization. Mercedes (organization C) explained:

In practical terms, the buddy will tell you where the bathroom, staff room, or cafeteria is, for example, or company rules. This buddy is very important in this sense. They are not a manager; we even ask not to be, because they are different roles. The manager will not always be with the person; they cannot be 100% there in this process. There is the role of manager, the role of buddy, and the role of mentor, which we create within the organization, and I think it is very cool. The mentor is usually outside the area [...], but their role is more focused on showing how the organization works, how the relationships in the company work, and what they must understand, and everyone ends up complementing each other. That's accessibility.

Accessibility is also related to the working conditions offered to professionals with ASD, especially concerning working hours. It is important to know everyone's individual limits. Fernando and Gabriela (organization A) said:

Today we work with CLT [formal employment contracts] hires of 40 hours per week, and we know that not every person with ASD, even if it is not severe, with IT skills, will adapt to a regime of eight hours of work a day. For some people, this can be too much. Can't we get adaptations of 30 hours a week or 20 hours a week? This helps with inclusion.

It is noted that accessibility is associated with certain peculiarities, and it is important that the company knows what these peculiarities are and offers adequate working conditions so that professionals with ASD can carry out their activities in the best possible way.

## *Health*

Paying attention to the health aspects of professionals with ASD is inevitable. Managers must know them so that they can offer adequate working conditions.

A person with ASD may have some health impairment that can interfere with work. Some depend on medication to control certain aspects of the condition, whether for focus, concentration, or emotion, so they do not have seizures, for example. Health problems may lead to losing all the training and routine obtained during the training period, as the professional may no longer be able to start on time and work the way they used to. Gabriela (organization A) added:

So, for the health of the professional, if it no longer makes sense for the person to be in that position, we remove them from the position. Obviously, after the team has tried and us, and when it is clear that the professional with ASD is not in a moment of balance. We also seek to intervene with support from the family, the psychologist, and the psychiatrist, and we will continue like this for a while. If the support is successful, we will re-enter the person with another client or company. There has to be this sensitivity because the impact on the person's health and quality of life can be huge.

The lack of adaptation due to socio-professional issues can trigger depression or anxiety. Fernando and Gabriela (organization A) reported that professionals with ASD may be experiencing something unstructured, whether at home or work, and the person will need clinical-therapeutic support. If the support is intensive, it may be difficult to reconcile with work. As an intermediary, organization A helps this professional make the decision to communicate to the company that they will have to take care of their health, making professional performance unfeasible. In many cases, with the intermediation of organization A, the doors are open for the professional to return when they deem appropriate. Gabriela (organization A) said:

We are talking about people with different characteristics who may have some health issues that need to be taken care of to have a full life and quality of life.

In general, the interviewees showed that health affects the development and permanence of professionals with ASD in the job market. Therefore, it is important to have the support of specialized people to carry out the early intervention, which will help avoid health problems and allow them to continue their activities.

### *Culture of inclusion*

Based on the interviews, it was possible to identify the importance of the companies' culture in the theme of inclusion and how it influenced the process of developing programs to hire people with ASD.

The interviewees commented on the main initiatives that strengthen the inclusive process, such as raising awareness among managers about ASD and publicizing it in the business community and emphasizing the importance of the organization's culture for mobilization on the subject. Gabriela (organization A) explained:

We always start with testimonials. At the same time, we talk to the areas about the project, explain that we will have new job positions, raise awareness among employees and guide them on how the relationship with people with ASD should be. Even better is when the organization's culture allows for internal mobilization.

The interviewees from organization A also emphasize the importance of linking the inclusion program to the business strategy, as some companies, despite propagating a strong discourse of diversity in the media, do not have people with ASD in the workforce, which makes the inclusion policy incomplete, according to Fernando (organization A):

On the subject of human rights in business, we are signatories of the UN Global Compact; we have solid advocacy work. So, we try to sensitize these companies to this issue, which is 100% human, but, in fact, it is also strategic, and we have had a good response to this type of provocation.

The interviewees from organization A also mentioned the elements that contribute to a company being more inclusive of professionals with ASD. The first element is supported employment; the second is related to a differentiated selection process, with job positions designed for these people and employee awareness; the third is associated with how each case is handled within the company in terms of the performance of the employee with ASD.

Another point concerns that, on the one hand, the inclusion of people with ASD is usually linked to an organization with humanized management. On the other hand, the very inclusion of these professionals contributes to more human culture in the organization.

Thus, it is concluded that the culture of companies directly influences the results of hiring and inclusion programs for people with ASD. The interviews revealed that dedication to the topic and humanized management could emerge from the program and gain strength in order to obtain good results.

### *Quotas*

When interviewees were asked about the adoption of quotas in companies for people with ASD, most commented that the Brazilian quota law was not decisive for developing inclusion programs. Mercedes (organization C) mentioned that:

As the program was born in Germany, which has nothing to do with quotas, I must say that when we started here in Brazil, we didn't even make this association. We hire for the ability and potential that the person has, and not for their disability since we all have some kind of disability.

Mercedes (organization C) also commented that the company's goal was to be above any requirements imposed by governments of the various countries where the quota law is present. Even in countries with no legislation on quotas for PwD, such as Argentina, the organization is trying to include as many professionals as possible. So, inclusion is linked to the company's strategy, "it's part of the business, regardless of whether the country has a quota or not, we need to go beyond the legislation." (Mercedes). We also note the importance of the parent companies abroad in this process:

In the world, not more than ten years ago, there were already institutions dedicated to the inclusion of people with disabilities, one of these being ASD. Organization A is one of them. It is a Danish organization that has this role in the inclusion of people with ASD, always focusing on quality. It is present in several countries. And one of their roles is to support several partners with a lot of information on the subject, as they did with us.

Some interviewees also commented on the organization's desire to go beyond quotas. Rosa (organization E) said that the company had set the goal that 7% of employees will be PwD by 2025. The executive commented that it was essential for the organization to have more people with disabilities on the business' front line, whether in technology or other areas. She believes in the power of the company's leaders to influence the process and make this possible. Rosa said that, for this reason, the company encourages executives to speak out if they have a disability.

The interviewees agreed that the quota law encouraged changes but was not enough to include professionals with ASD. They stressed the need to offer space for these professionals to develop their skills and gain confidence.

The interviews showed that the quota system is not necessarily a determinant for the program to include people with ASD, but, in some cases, it was a good gateway.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

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This research sought to identify perceptions and actions for the inclusion, from the point of view of managers, of people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in organizations that employ these professionals in Brazil. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with six executives from national and foreign organizations that employ people with ASD. Based on the data obtained, it was possible to identify two emerging themes: perceptions of ASD and actions for the inclusion of professionals with ASD.

Regarding the interviewees' perceptions of ASD, it was found that they are linked to some stereotypes insofar as there is no broad knowledge about autism. This generalized view is associated with the difficulty of professionals with ASD to deal with some situations due to crises that can be punctual or recurrent, their genius, and the idea that they should occupy positions associated with technology. It was identified, however, that these prejudices were revised as the organization hired these professionals, making it possible to have a better relationship with them and, consequently, review perceptions. It was understood that coexistence is not as difficult as imagined and that professionals with ASD can occupy different roles as long as they are aligned with their interests and abilities. These findings are relevant as the stereotypes associated with professionals with ASD have not yet been discussed in the Brazilian academic literature on organizational studies, making it possible to consider them a theoretical contribution to the field. In addition, we verified the implications of stereotypes,

which make it difficult to develop actions for inclusion that consider the uniqueness of individuals, which proved to be crucial for successful inclusion.

Concerning actions for inclusion, the importance of the Brazilian quota law was highlighted, despite companies having developed inclusion programs influenced by their parent companies abroad and as a matter of business strategy. Other actions associated with hiring and integration, supporting and training, accessibility, culture of inclusion, and health were identified as fundamental for the inclusive process. It was identified that multiple efforts are needed, coming from intermediary organizations and managers, consultants, mentors, leaders, and co-workers, for inclusion to happen. If those involved are dedicated and engaged, the performance of the professional with ASD is effective. The importance of adapting the work environment to these professionals' work and performance was also noted.

This research contributes to the advancement of knowledge about the job market for professionals with ASD in management studies as it presents empirical data about the actions developed by organizations in the Brazilian context and elucidates new actions that have not yet been identified in the international literature on the subject. We verified that some efforts have been made in search of greater inclusion, not only regarding the inclusion of these professionals in the job market. Based on the interviews, it is possible to say that these organizations are genuinely willing to contribute, adapt processes, and position themselves as partners in the search for greater equality of opportunities. However, these initiatives are still incipient and disproportionate to the demands of professionals with ASD in Brazil. More companies need to engage in inclusive processes in an interdisciplinary way in order to obtain more expressive results.

Despite the contributions, we recognize that one of the limitations of this text is the number of participating companies during data collection. Although they are among the main ones that promote programs to hire people with ASD in Brazil, the data do not allow generalizing the results and proposing a solid model of good practices, as they are mostly still incipient. In addition, it is important to remember that the article exclusively contemplated the point of view of the professionals involved in the hiring and inclusion of people with ASD. Therefore, there is a bias that cannot be disregarded. Another relevant point is the politically correct discourse brought by the topic of disability, which may have influenced the results obtained from the interviews.

As a suggestion for future research, it is important to understand the perspective of the professionals with ASD who are already inserted in the job market, as they can assess the effectiveness of existing actions aimed at inclusion and propose new actions that meet demands. In addition, future studies should consider the point of view of other professionals involved during the inclusion of people with ASD in organizations, such as psychologists, doctors, and coaches.

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