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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### THE WORK OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN THE PERCEPTION OF COLLEAGUES AND MANAGERS

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#### Abstract

The main objective of this study was to explore the work of disabled people (PwD) in the perception of colleagues and managers, assessing four dimensions: *General Perception of Hiring*; *Emotional Intelligence*; *Interpersonal Communication*; and *Inclusion in the workplace*. This study used a quantitative methodology, with a closed-answer questionnaire applied via Googleforms. The sample was made up of 314 PwD co-workers, including supervisors (n=314), employees of the Auchan Portugal Group. Data analysis was performed through descriptive and inferential statistics, using SPSS-24.0 software. The results were the following: the vast majority of participants considered that hiring PwD contributes to the social responsibility of the company (92.7%), although a small percentage considered that PwD have more difficulty in understanding a task (30%) and lower productivity (23.6%) [*General Perception of Hiring*]; most participants are sensitive to the emotions and feelings of PwD (89.2%) [*Emotional Intelligence*]; part of the participants did not agree or disagree that living with PwD improves the climate of the organization (42%); about half of the co-workers disagreed that PwD do not adopt inappropriate behavior in the organization (51%) [*Interpersonal Communication*]; the majority considered that PwD are well integrated into the organizational environment (77.1%), were well accepted by all (71.7%) and agree with the legislation that requires companies with 75 or more workers to hire a PwD (82.2%) [*Inclusion in the workplace*].

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#### Introduction:-

Work is a highly valued activity that provides the opportunity for people to engage in meaningful activities, socialize with others, and achieve financial autonomy (Sundar, 2018). In every country in the world, people with disabilities (PwD) have a higher unemployment rate compared to people without disabilities (Balcazar et al., 2014; Prates, 2019).

The literature shows that many PwD want to work but often cannot because of the many barriers they have to face, one of them being the negative perception by colleagues and managers, especially regarding their productivity

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(Shaw et al., 2014; Manaia, 2015; Colella & Bruyère, 2011). Generalized conceptions about PwD work productivity are mentioned in several studies, along with employers' lack of knowledge about disability (McDonall et al., 2014). PwD are systematically perceived by employers and colleagues as less receptive and less skilled to perform job functions, compared to people without disabilities (Rohmer & Louvet, 2018; Moghazy & Sherif, 2017; Breen et al., 2018).

Other studies have described the character of disability as a restrictive factor for employment, where learning disability in particular is emphasized as a factor worsening employability (Dammeyer & Chapman, 2018; Zappella, 2015; Gustafsson et al., 2013). Cost concerns related to hiring PwD are another factor seen as a barrier to labor market inclusion (Velarde-Talleri et al., 2018). Lack of integrated services and accessible resources and are also mentioned as impeding factors (Shaw et al., 2014).

Other studies show contrary results, indicating that employers and colleagues of PwD have a positive perception of their work inclusion (Vasconcelos & Maranhão, 2020; Camargo et al., 2016; Rojkín, 2015). One factor that has been linked to favorable attitudes toward labor market inclusion is employers' previous experience working with PwD (Andersson et al., 2015). In the study by Manguinhas (2016), employers who had contact with PwD showed a positive outlook toward their hiring experiences, considering that the socio-professional integration of this population is important and favors equal opportunities. Several studies have also highlighted the importance of consultation and assistance from PwD employment services as facilitating factors (Guimarães et al., 2017; Kaye et al., 2011; Lindsay et al., 2017).

In addition, professional education and qualification are also key factors for greater opportunities in the labor market and professional recognition of PwD (Morais, 2017). The perception of the PwD's work by colleagues and managers can positively or negatively influence the process of PwD inclusion in the organization. In the study by Lindsay et al. (2017), negative perceptions by co-workers of the PwD during everyday life, led to negative experiences and feelings for the disabled employee, i.e., led to increased levels of anxiety, stress, and difficulties in staying in the job. Shahin et al., (2020), in addition, found that negative perceptions and discrimination at work, led to higher rates of illegal dismissals by PwD compared to their colleagues. In contrast, positive perceptions by colleagues and management towards the disabled employee, created positive experiences and feelings at work, which led to higher job satisfaction and job retention (Ripat & Woodgate, 2017).

In this sense, and given the relevance of the topic in question, this study's main objective was to analyze the work of PwD in the perception of colleagues and managers in four dimensions: *General Perception of Hiring; Emotional Intelligence; Interpersonal Communication; and Inclusion in the workplace.*

### **Methodology:-**

In the present study, the quantitative methodology with the use of a questionnaire was used.

### **Sample**

The total sample was composed of 314 participants, (PwD's co-workers), employees of the hypermarket chain Grupo Auchan Portugal, which is an example of good practice in the area of recruitment and inclusion of PwD. Regarding the distribution of socio-demographic variables, most participants were female (74.5%), between 30-39 years old (38.2%) and between 40-49 years old (37.9%), with secondary education (67.2%), and married/cohabiting (60.2%). Regarding the socio-professional variables, most participants were workers (85%), in the PGC - FMCG area (28.3%) and in the FP - Fresh Produce area (19.7%).

### **Data Collection**

Data collection occurred face-to-face, between February 2018 and March 2020, with visits to the various stores in the country.

In this research, we chose to use a questionnaire with closed answers to the co-workers of people with disabilities, applied through *Googleforms*. The questionnaires were immediately sent to be filled out as we visited the stores.

The questionnaire contained, in the initial part, socio-demographic data, academic qualifications, marital status, and socio-professional data - professional position, area of work, and place of work. The possible answers were on a scale of 1 to 5 (1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3= neither agree nor disagree; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree). The

questionnaire consisted of four groups of questions: the first group contained 8 questions, the second 6 questions, the third 6 questions, and the last 7 questions.

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis was performed using descriptive and inferential statistics, using SPSS-24.0 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software.

### **Results:-**

#### **Internal Consistency**

The internal consistency of the dimensions under study was reasonable, since Cronbach's alpha is between 0.70 and 0.80, except in the "Interpersonal Communication" dimension, whose coefficient was weak ( $\alpha=0.608$ ), but is close to the acceptable value (Pestana & Gageiro, 2008).

#### **Analysis of the questionnaire to PwD co-workers**

The results of the questionnaire to PwD co-workers, particularly on the four dimensions under study: General Perception of Hiring; Emotional Intelligence; Interpersonal Communication; and Inclusion in the Workplace, indicated that the great majority of PwD co-workers agreed or totally agreed with the items in the four dimensions, which suggests a positive score with the themes under study.

#### **General Hiring Perception**

In the dimension *General Perception of Hiring*, the item "*Hiring PwD contributes to the social responsibility of the company*" was the one that obtained the highest degree of agreement from almost all the participants (92.7%); and in the following two items, although on average neither agreed nor disagreed, a portion agreed or totally agreed with "*PwD have more difficulty understanding or performing a task*" (30%); and "*PwD have less productivity*" (23.6%).

#### **Emotional Intelligence**

In the *Emotional Intelligence* dimension, the item "*When the PwD talks about an important event in his/her life, I am sensitive to his/her feelings and emotions*" was the one that obtained the highest level of agreement, with 89.2% of the participants agreeing or totally agreeing with this fact.

#### **Interpersonal Communication**

In the dimension *Interpersonal Communication* the item "*The PwD does not adopt inappropriate attitudes/behaviors in the organization*" about half of the PwD coworkers disagreed or totally disagreed with this fact (51%) and neither agreed nor disagreed (33.8%); and in the item "*Working together with the PwD improves the organizational climate*" part of the participants neither agreed nor disagreed with this fact (42%).

#### **Inclusion in the workplace**

In the dimension *Inclusion in the workplace*, the majority (77.1%) agreed that "*The PwD is well integrated into the organizational environment*"; 71.7% agreed that "*All co-workers accepted well the PwD*"; and 82.2% agreed or totally agreed "*with the legislation that obliges companies with 75 or more workers to hire a PwD*".

### **Discussion:-**

Regarding the dimension *General Perception of Hiring*, on average participants totally agreed that hiring PwD contributes to the company's social responsibility. Similarly, in the study by Guimarães et al (2017), which aimed to analyze the inclusion of PwD in a company in the energy sector, the results showed that the inclusion of PwD in the company is part of corporate social responsibility. The authors found that there is a set of efforts made by the company in order to meet its legal obligations related to this type of inclusion through awareness and dissemination of the vacancies offered (Guimarães et al., 2017). Only a part agreed or totally agreed with "*PwD have more difficulty understanding or performing a task*" and "*PwD have lower productivity*". In the study by Opoku-Boadi (2015), the results showed that PwD are seen by employers as more truthful and loyal people compared to people without disabilities. However, the main reason for not hiring PwD, is that employers see them as less productive. Also in Al Tarawneh's (2016) study, the majority of PwD colleagues and managers pointed out a number of concerns regarding PwD work, namely lack of productivity, high absenteeism rates, inability to communicate effectively with colleagues and clients and inability to take responsibility for work. Nevertheless, several studies have shown that PwD can perform satisfactorily in a large number of jobs. For example, in Seva's (2020) study, it

was found that workers with disabilities are competent and productive in the workplace, provided they are given the right task. Rueda et al. (2016) similarly found that many employers have a preference for employees with sensory impairments to perform typing tasks, as they develop high levels of concentration and also because of the speed with which they type on the computer. Also in the study of Carvalho-Freitas and Marques (2010), 94% of the participants agreed that the performance of PwD is similar to that of other people, with no differentiations.

With regard to the *Emotional Intelligence dimension*, the item "When the PwD talks about an important event in his/her life, I am sensitive to his/her feelings and emotions" had the highest level of agreement, with 89.2% of the participants agreeing or totally agreeing with this fact. Also in the study of Mik-Meyer (2016), the results showed that one of the main behaviors of colleagues with PwD were overprotective and helpful, since they were very careful and delicate in dealing with these people on a daily basis, always paying attention to their feelings and emotions.

In the *Interpersonal Communication dimension* the item "PwD does not adopt inappropriate attitudes/behaviors in the organization" about half of the PwD co-workers disagreed or totally disagreed with this fact (51%) and neither agreed nor disagreed. Similar results were found by Zappella (2015), in which employers reported that they felt fear that employees with disabilities would be dangerous and assault co-workers. Another concern expressed by employers was managing the PwD's emotional reactions. They reported that they did not always understand the reasons for PwD's emotional reactions, and therefore did not know how to deal with them. According to them, some of the PwD's emotional reactions were exaggerated and, from their perspective, not always justified (Zappella, 2015). Similarly, in the study by Henaio (2016), a small proportion of the participants reported that they had felt some discomfort while working with PwD because they had shown certain behavioral problems and had already had inappropriate attitudes in the organization. According to some authors, many employees have no knowledge about disability in general, which makes them not know how to react when the PwD presents some inappropriate or exaggerated behavior in the organization, more common in people with intellectual disabilities (Carreras & Moreno, 2011; Felizardo et al., 2016; Rosa et al., 2019). In this sense, and also according to the above-mentioned authors, it would be important that all employees receive adequate training to work together with PwD.

In the item "Living with PwD improves the climate of the organization" part of the participants neither agreed nor disagreed with this fact (42%). Several studies found demonstrated the beneficial effects of living with PwD on the organizational climate. In the study by Felizardo et al. (2016), it was found that the organizational climate became more relaxed and lighter with the presence of PwD, besides influencing people to be more understanding and patient. Also in the study of Buciunien and Kazlauskaite (2010), in a supermarket chain, the results showed that the insertion of PwD at work contributes to the development of a more positive climate within the company, raising the level of tolerance of people and educating customers to the difference. Similarly, in the study by Carvalho-Freitas & Marques (2010), the vast majority of participants (90%) agreed that hiring PwD improves the company's climate.

In the dimension *Inclusion in the workplace*, the majority (77.1%) agreed that "PwD is well integrated into the organizational environment." Similar results were found by Silva et al. (2018), in which the majority of the managers interviewed stated that employees with disabilities did not experience difficulties adapting. Furthermore, 86% of employees with disabilities considered that they felt well integrated into the organization (Silva et al., 2018). The majority (71.7%) agreed that "All co-workers accepted PwD well". Also in the study of Gaspar (2019), the results found indicated that most participants considered that PwD is integrated at work, however, all agreed that there are still many prejudices and obstacles to be overcome for an effective integration.

The vast majority (82.2%) agreed or totally agreed "with the legislation that obliges companies with 75 or more workers to hire a PwD." Similar results were found by Silva et al. (2018) in which 90% of respondents reported that they agreed with the law established for hiring PwD.

## Conclusions:-

Nowadays, PwD are still very much pushed aside by society, since there are many prejudices and stereotypes about them. Such prejudices and stereotypes hinder their inclusion, both in society and in the labor market, the proof being the high unemployment rates that this population presents in contrast to people without disabilities. Although employment is not synonymous with social inclusion, it symbolizes a major step forward for this inclusion, since the right to work is a right for everyone and contributes greatly to social inclusion (Gonçalves & Nogueira, 2012).

People, especially employers, perceive PwD as less productive and less capable, which does not fully correspond to reality. However, and fortunately for these people, many companies do not have this negative view. On the opposite, they consider hiring PwD to be an added value for the organization, since they promote tolerance, understanding, and cultural diversity, in addition to contributing to a good image of the organization and to improving the climate in general (Hahn et al., 2018).

By analyzing the results obtained in this study, it can be concluded that PwD colleagues and managers have, in general, a positive perception of their work. With regard to the General Perception of Hiring, it is concluded that the vast majority of co-workers and managers consider that hiring PwD contributes to the social responsibility of the company. However, it was found that a small percentage of the participants considered that PwD have more difficulty in understanding a task and less productivity, which indicates that there are still prejudices regarding this population, especially regarding the abilities and productivity of these employees.

With regard to Emotional Intelligence, it was concluded that most participants are sensitive to the emotions and feelings of PwD, which is quite positive, since it may reflect the existence of a supportive relationship, so important for the inclusion of these people at work.

With regard to Interpersonal Communication, we concluded that part of the participants neither agreed nor disagreed that living with PwD improves the organizational climate. This may be interpreted positively, in the sense that they consider PwD as any other employee, without any differentiation; or negatively, in the sense that they cannot perceive the advantages of working with this population, or simply do not communicate directly with PwD. It was also verified that half of the co-workers disagreed that PwD do not adopt inappropriate behavior in the organization, which may mean lack of preparation/skills to deal with these people.

Finally, regarding Inclusion in the workplace, we conclude that most of the PwD's colleagues consider that the PwD is well integrated into the organizational environment, that he/she was well accepted by everyone and agrees with the legislation that requires companies with 75 or more employees to hire a PwD.

Therefore, we conclude that, although there is a not so positive perception on the part of managers and colleagues concerning the productivity and ability of PwD to perform a task and also concerning the dimension of Interpersonal Communication, there is sensitivity to their feelings and a good acceptance on their part, which reflects an effort on the part of the company to overcome the existing barriers, mainly at the level of mentalities.

This study allowed us to deepen the issue of the perception of colleagues and managers regarding the work of PwD, taking into account its importance for an effective inclusion.

The main limitation of this study is the sample size, and the results cannot be generalized to the general population. We suggest that further studies should be conducted in this area with a larger sample and in other professional settings.

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