# DIFFICULTIES PERCEIVED BY WORKERS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE ROUTINE OF THEIR WORK

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**ABSTRACT:** This study aimed to investigate, with disabled workers, the main difficulties faced by these in their first months at work. It is qualitative research with 16 disabled workers, in a private company providing teaching services at a high school and higher education level, in the northwest of the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. Data collection took place through a structured interview and content analysis, in August 2014. It was possible to list two categories: the first, inherent to the difficulties faced by the disabled workers, and the second, to the worker's (dis-)satisfactions and contributions to improving the work process. It was identified that the majority of the interviewees did not face difficulties – however, in some reports, it was possible to learn some instances of discrimination, and difficulties in adapting. Some of the company's actions facilitated the process of the disabled worker's insertion. It is considered that the inclusion of the nurse, within companies, may contribute to the better integration of these workers.

**DESCRIPTORS:** Disabled persons; Occupational Health Nursing; Occupational health.

#### DIFICULDADES PERCEBIDAS POR TRABALHADORES COM DEFICIÊNCIA NO COTIDIANO DO TRABALHO

**RESUMO:** Este estudo teve como objetivo investigar, junto a trabalhadores com deficiência, as principais dificuldades enfrentadas os primeiros meses de trabalho. Trata-se de pesquisa qualitativa com 16 trabalhadores com deficiência, numa empresa privada de ensino superior e médio no noroeste do estado do Rio Grande do Sul. A coleta dos dados se deu mediante entrevista estruturada e análise de conteúdo em agosto 2014. Foi possível elencar duas categorias: a primeira inerente às dificuldades enfrentadas pelos trabalhadores com deficiência, e a segunda, às (in)satisfações e contribuições do trabalhador para a melhoria do processo de trabalho. Identificou-se que a maioria dos entrevistados não enfrentou dificuldades, contudo em alguns relatos, foi possível apreender alguma discriminação e dificuldades de adaptação. Algumas ações da empresa foram facilitadoras do processo de inserção do trabalhador com deficiência. Considera-se que a inclusão do enfermeiro, dentro das empresas, possa contribuir para uma melhor integração destes trabalhadores. **DESCRITORES:** Pessoas com deficiência; Enfermagem do trabalho; Saúde do trabalhador.

# DIFICULTADES PERCEBIDAS POR LOS TRABAJADORES CON DISCAPACIDADES EN LA RUTINA DE SU TRABAJO

**RESUMEN:** El objetivo de este estudio fue investigar, con trabajadores discapacitados, las principales dificultades a las que se enfrentan en sus primeros meses de trabajo. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa con 16 trabajadores discapacitados, en una empresa privada que presta servicios de enseñanza en una escuela secundaria y superior, en el noroeste del estado brasileño de Rio Grande do Sul. La recolección de datos se realizó mediante una entrevista estructurada y un análisis de contenido, en agosto de 2014. Se pudo enumerar dos categorías: la primera, inherente a las dificultades de los trabajadores discapacitados, y la segunda a las (des) satisfacciones y Contribuciones para mejorar el proceso de trabajo. Se identificó que la mayoría de los entrevistados no se enfrentaban a dificultades; sin embargo, en algunos informes se pudo conocer algunos casos de discriminación y dificultades de adaptación. Algunas de las acciones de la empresa facilitaron el proceso de inserción del trabajador discapacitado. Se considera que la inclusión de la enfermera, dentro de las empresas, puede contribuir a la mejor integración de estos trabajadores.

**DESCRIPTORES:** Personas discapacitadas; Enfermería en Salud Ocupacional; Salud del trabajo.

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**Received:** 10/03/2016

Finalized: 03/10/2016

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#### INTRODUCTION

For persons with disabilities (PWD), work has social and personal value, as it does for people without disabilities<sup>(1)</sup>. In Brazil, the Federal Constitution considers work to be one of the citizen's social rights, like education, health, leisure, safety, social security, protection for maternity and childhood and assistance to the vulnerable.

Companies which have 100 or more workers are obliged to fill between 2 and 5% of their staff numbers with persons with some form of disability. Decree 5,296/2004 provided more rigorous technical criteria regarding the qualification of the disabilities, restricting the quotas to people with specific types of disabilities<sup>(2)</sup>.

Upon employing an employee with disability (EWD), in accordance with the quotas required by law, companies must adapt their work environments according to the need affected<sup>(2)</sup>. This may cause some burden, either because of the fact that the EWD often does not have the same income or autonomy as the worker without a disability, or because – depending on the disability – the company must provide resources for the performance of the disabled worker's work tasks, in the form of specific materials or training<sup>(3)</sup>.

In addition to this, the company must make efforts for the EWD's adaptation in the environment, a factor which is supremely important if inclusion is genuinely to occur. When this does not happen, the PWD are unable to have autonomy or independence, or to show their potential within the company<sup>(4)</sup>.

In the European Union, spaces allow people with some form of disability to make the most of their abilities, thus participating in society and the economy<sup>(5)</sup>.

"Occupational health" is an area of public health which aims to study and intervene in the relationships between work and health. It seeks to promote and protect the worker's health, these aims being achieved through risk surveillance actions regarding the work environments, their conditions and the risks posed to the worker's health – as well as through the organization and provision of healthcare to the workers(6). Furthermore, these actions contribute to the prevention of threats to health arising from the stress generated in forced or unplanned adaptation, or resulting from discrimination.

The present study is justified by the need to prepare and improve the PWD's insertion in companies, and aims to investigate, with disabled workers, the main difficulties faced during the first months of work.

# METHOD

The study is exploratory<sup>(7)</sup> and has a qualitative character. The research subjects were workers with some form of disability, in a higher education establishment, in the northwest of the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. The inclusion criteria were: to be officially employed in the company, under the policy of quotas for disabled workers, to be over 18 years old, and to agree to participate in the study. The inclusion criteria did not take into account educational level, hourly workload, or the job performed.

The data were collected through a structured interview made up of 18 open questions. The researcher used a question script, while recording the accounts using a voice recorder. These were later transcribed and analyzed using the method of thematic content analysis<sup>(7)</sup>. Data collection took place during the second semester of 2014. All participants were informed about the study's objectives, as well as their right to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time.

The study complied with Resolution 466/2012 of the National Health Council, bearing in mind that human beings were involved in the research<sup>(8)</sup>. It was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidade Regional Integrada do Alto Uruguai e das Missões (Santo Ângelo Campus), and was approved under Implemented Opinion N. 711.327, of 7<sup>th</sup> July 2014. Confidentiality regarding the identity of the company and the interviewees was total. To this end, the subjects were identified using the names of chemical elements. The roles performed and the buildings and departments reported in the accounts were also removed with the aim of making identification impossible.

The invitation to participate in the study was made by the Human Resources Department of the coparticipating institution, after having been approved by the management of the same. The researcher only

contacted those invited who had accepted to participate, at which time the Terms of Free and Informed Consent (TFIC) were presented and two copies of which were signed.

#### RESULTS

## Characterization of the subjects and of the study scenario

The company has a total of 449 employees. The total number of employees with disabilities (EWD) was 18 professionals, of whom 16 accepted to participate in the research. The interviewees' age varied between 20 and 76 years old, and 11 (68.75%) were male. Regarding educational level, the lowest was senior high school completed, with four (25%) of the interviewees, while six (37.5%) stated that they had concluded higher education, and four (25%) were studying at that time.

The length of work in the company varied between four months and 40 years, with 11 (68.75%) stating that they had worked in the institution for an average of two years. Of the interviewees, only two stated that it was their first job, while another two stated that they had more than one job at that time.

When asked about the disabilities that the participant had, nine (56.25%) mentioned that it was a physical disability. The other reports characterized the disabilities as visual, auditory, or cognitive. Regarding how long the interviewee had had the disability, 11 (68.75%) stated that this had been since birth. Of the interviewees, 13 (81.25%) stated that they had not met any difficulties in the first months of work in this company, and that they were not suffering any type of prejudice or discrimination at the time. However, the rest of the participants mentioned having encountered difficulties in the adaptation to the work in this or in other companies for which they had worked in the past.

After the reading, re-reading and analysis of the data collected, it was possible to list two main categories. The first was inherent to the difficulties encountered by the workers with disabilities, and the second, to the worker's (dis-)satisfactions and contributions to improving the work process.

The category titled 'Difficulties encountered by the workers with disabilities' may be observed in the following accounts:

- [...] Lack of preparation of colleagues, lack of work material, lack of a place for the worker, lack of everything. [...] They did not give me any role, not even a chair, not even a table. I tried to find something to do. (Bromine)
- [...] Building Y is all stairs, and there are a lot of stairs. There is no ramp, nothing. (Sodium)
- [...] I think that at the moment [the problem] is a toilet [for wheelchair users] [...]. (Carbon)

It was possible to note that – among the difficulties indicated – the discrimination arising from the differentiated condition denotes an association between disability and limitation. When questioned about the type of discrimination and its origin, the reports were distinct. Some interviewees mentioned it being on the part of management, while others reported it being on the part of clients (the institution's students). Another situation related to a group of students who, upon being greeted by a EWD, responded in a prejudiced way, nastily imitating his impeded way of speaking.

For the category titled 'The worker's (dis-)satisfactions and contributions to improving the work process', we place emphasis on the following accounts:

They should have a process with a psychologist, and they don't have it [...]. (Aluminum)

Since I started here, they have been adapting, because there was no elevator, and now there is. The main buildings have them now, but they still don't have them in some buildings. They're carrying out some reforms, but it's okay. (Zinc)

Setting up a specific, and effective, department of inclusion. In this department, they've worked on the issue of the workers' ability to work, and adaptations undertaken in order to facilitate inclusion. (Bromine)

Many interviewees mentioned noting the company's initiatives and actions for promoting inclusion – and when asked about possible improvements, half reported being satisfied with the current working conditions. They mentioned that the company had shown itself to be concerned with adapting to their needs, and that

they perceive the team's interest in constantly improving the EWDs' working conditions – factors which weigh in the workers' concept of the institution.

## DISCUSSION

# Difficulties encountered by the workers with disabilities

Whenever a worker is inserted in a work environment without prior preparation, whether this is structural, organizational or human, this process may generate stress for the work team, the company, and the EWD him- or herself. The results demonstrate that the company in question was not yet prepared to embrace these subjects.

Regarding the work process, it should be stressed that there must be clarification for the entire team in relation to the roles that each worker is to carry out, as well as regarding a hierarchy, if there is one. The roles of each member of the team must be clear, reducing inequalities and/or unfairness.

Taking into consideration that this company's current clients will in the future be workers who will receive colleagues with disabilities in the routine of their work, it is believed that education for inclusion must begin while they are still in education.

Another observation made during data collection related to the view – which continues to be limited – of the EWDs' needs, such as the difficulties encountered by the person with auditory disabilities.

Regarding training, 10 (62.5%) of the interviewees mentioned not having received any when they entered the company; six (37.5%) mentioned only having received guidance from their colleagues. Although the participants did not consider the lack of training to be a difficulty, this is known to be a necessity in companies which wish to keep themselves up-to-date and competitive, regardless of the area in which they work, and regardless of the type of worker. Reducing errors, accidents and loss of time, as well as improving services and aggregating values, are aspects which are obtained through training<sup>(9)</sup>.

One study in Portugal, undertaken in 2012 by the Ministry for Solidarity and Social Security, indicated that workers with disabilities or incapacity had participated – with the other colleagues of the company/ organization – in an average of 12 training/qualification actions in the last three years<sup>(5)</sup>.

Accessibility is commonly associated with structural changes to an environment undertaken for the benefit of people with disabilities – generally physical. However, accessibility can be divided into six different dimensions. The dimensional architecture relates to eliminating physical barriers which hinder mobility. The dimension of communication refers to language and interpersonal communication, such as sign language, for example. Methodological accessibility is intended to empower the workers, making them knowledgeable and active, reflexive subjects who participate in the work process. On the other hand, attitudinal accessibility refers to the elimination of prejudices and discrimination associated with stereotypes, through raising the awareness of the various participants<sup>(10)</sup>.

One difficulty which remains to be eliminated by the institution, and which was mentioned by the majority of the subjects, refers to the dimension of architecture. The company has various buildings; in many of these, the structure is very old and has more than one storey, without elevators or ramps and with many staircases – besides paved areas which are uneven to the extent that they hinder access for wheelchairs and bathrooms which have not been adapted.

Accessibility in the work environment is a fundamental factor if inclusion is genuinely to occur. Quality inclusion requires many steps and – without these adaptations – the worker will not feel embraced within the company and will not be able to fully develop<sup>(4)</sup>.

# The worker's (dis-)satisfactions and contributions to improving the work process

The attention and politeness in the relationships, mentioned by some of the respondents, were attributed to factors such as the type of institution – which, falling within the scope of teaching/education, is configured as a differentiated company and may not reflect the scenario in other, different, companies.

Although some participants identified the institution's involvement for improving their work process positively, others said that more initiatives need to be taken, such as group work with discussions on the issue, on the difficulties encountered, on interpersonal relationships, and psychological support. Group work, undertaken periodically until 2013, monitored by a psychologist contracted by the company, was the activity with the greatest impact, according to the subjects, and was highly beneficial for the EWDs' adaptation. In addition to this, the constant psychological monitoring was considered essential.

Some participants, in their accounts, addressed the need for training for preparing the colleagues or the EWDs, either through lectures or meetings between the teams.

One study demonstrated that based on the undertaking of meetings with department leaders, addressing issues such as consciousness-raising, the legislation of quotas, types of disability, potentials, limitations, prejudices and integration of EWDs in the company, the development of department leaders contributes to demystification of the relationships regarding the people with disabilities, broadening possibilities for managing conflicts and instituting organizational routines which aim to improve the interpersonal and professional relationships<sup>(11)</sup>.

In Portugal, one study evidenced that, although the measures and programs designed to encourage the employment of people with some form of disability were considered important by the employees, in the majority of cases these were not decisive in the act of contracting. Furthermore, in these organizations with inclusive practices, the staff members' team spirit is optimized, strengthening the values and efforts around common objectives. In the European Union, the promotion of equality of opportunities constitutes a long-term strategic objective in issues of disability and incapacity<sup>(5)</sup>.

It is important that all should have their consciousness raised regarding the fact that changes are necessary, and that they may contribute with improvements not just for the workers, but also for the clients who have differentiated needs.

That said, the subjects' contributions for improving the work process involved those related to accessibility, the continuity of inclusion groups, and the need to set up an inclusion policy – a scenario in which the occupational health nurse could be covered as co-adjuvant in this process, considering that an interdisciplinary group has much to contribute, not only for the workers with a disability, but also for the students.

The discussions regarding the nurse's insertion in these situations remain low-scale, but her importance also lies in the activities preventing harm to health and in promoting health.

The company in which this study was undertaken does not have an occupational health nurse. Few companies have this professional working in their teams. In accordance with Regulatory Norm N. 4, only companies with over 3,501 employees must obligatorily have an occupational health nurse in their staff<sup>(12)</sup>. The insertion of the nurse today takes place in various environments, and her training is being adapted to the social transformations.

According to Brazil's National Association of Occupational Health Nurses, among others, the occupational health nurse's characteristics include: elaborating and carrying out plans and programs for promoting and protecting the employees' health, participating in groups, surveying work-related health conditions and investigating their relationships with work activities, analysis of fatigue, of unhealthy factors, of working conditions and of the worker's physical and mental integrity, providing first aid in the workplace in the event of accidents, illnesses or disorders, foreseeing the materials and resources necessary for the workers' health needs, and training the workers, with the aim of reducing the incidence of accidents<sup>(13)</sup>.

In the light of this, it is necessary for there to be strategic planning of actions which involve not only EWDs, but the company as a whole, which must provide human resources who are trained to assist in these dimensions of the work routine. It was possible to observe the critical and reflexive ability of the EWDs interviewed regarding the needs of the scenario in which they undertake their activities, motivated by the question regarding what the company needs to genuinely include the EWDs.

When a company diagnoses the work environment and is concerned with the necessary adaptations, it strengthens the worker's abilities, embracing her effectively and ensuring her remaining in the company, as well as her well-being and productivity. This is one of the focuses of a study undertaken in a major company, which also reports actions which improved the insertion of the EWDs in its scenario. After planning, the company chose to dispense with mentors for monitoring the EWDs' integration in the company, as well as in

the contribution to resolving possible problems which arose, making use of previous personal experiences. Another important factor relates to recruiting, selection and analysis of accessibility, as well as to a policy of maintaining fixed work positions in the company, set aside for EWDs<sup>(14)</sup>.

Although a company may prepare itself and adapt over the years, it must maintain constant its monitoring and evaluation regarding how the EWDs' work is progressing. Each special need is unique, and each worker must be seen in her uniqueness. Constant reviews of practice, which may sometimes be excluding and discriminatory, must be a habit. In addition to this, it is necessary for the managers pay attention to their own actions and encourage this practice in the area in which they work, in order to identify which central ideologies determine the conceptions of disability, with a view to dis-articulating the individualist perception of disability as an anomaly which emphasizes the limitations, and, further:

For an inclusive social conception, with the production of actions of accessibility and affirmation of work places and tools in order to favor the effective inclusion of people with disabilities, as workers with good potential, to be made use of (15:94).

In this regard, the employment policies, in the work relationships as a whole, require the participation of society, the raising of awareness that changes are necessary and contribute to improvement – not only for the workers, but also for the clients who present differentiated needs.

Only with the participation of all the workers, and even in partnership with society and government, would it be possible to put into effect the inclusion which addresses the needs of those workers who have disabilities. To this end, the work of the nurse in attending these people is important, as she undertakes a functional evaluation of the patient, determining their potentials and thus contributing with intervention strategies based on the context experienced for a qualified assistance which is in accordance with the specific needs<sup>(16)</sup>.

#### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It was possible to identify that the majority of the interviewees did not suffer difficulties in their adaptation in the company. However, some reports demonstrated that there was a need for important improvements that every company should consider when planning inclusion. On the other hand, actions emerged that the company undertakes or has already undertaken, and which were fundamental in the process of adaptation. They mentioned that the company had shown itself to be concerned with adapting itself to their needs, and that they perceive the team's interest in continuously improving the EWDs' working conditions, factors which weigh in the concept which the workers have regarding the institution.

Current Brazilian legislation stipulates that companies should contract people with disabilities, thus favoring the entrance of these into the job market. It is not enough, however, to merely employ a worker with a disability; the problems arising from a forced adaptation to the work environment may be diverse. For this, it is necessary to plan adaptations within the company, with a view to improving this professional's work process.

Although companies which contract occupational health nurses remain few in number, it is believed that this professional can participate actively in creating and maintaining companies' inclusion policies, analyzing the scenario and working in consensus with all of the institution's departments.

It is suggested that studies in institutions of more differing areas might contribute to the situational diagnosis of the problems faced by the workers, as well as to the actions which facilitate the process of including these important personalities.

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