

# Challenges And Opportunities: Autism Spectrum Disorder In The Labor Market

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## ABSTRACT

Understanding the challenges faced daily by people with ASD is of importance not only for public policy managers but for society as a whole. In this sense, this article aims to analyze the barriers faced by people with autism in the labor market, considering issues related to communication, social interaction, flexibility and adaptation. Also, investigate opportunities for inclusion in the labor market for autistic individuals. Methodologically, it was a qualitative bibliographic research, based on primary and secondary data. As a result, it was observed that positive changes have been happening, but there is still a long way to go in the fight for equality of people with ASD in the labor market.

**KEYWORDS:** Autism in the Job Market; Public Policy; Inclusion.

**ABBREVIATIONS:** ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder; DSM: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual; ADA: Americans with Disabilities Act.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Economics of Health plays a fundamental role in analyzing the challenges and opportunities related to resource allocation in all areas impacted by the health sector. In this sense, an increasingly relevant aspect is the issues encompassing autism and the labor market. Autism, by definition, is a developmental condition that impacts communication and social interaction, presenting unique challenges for affected individuals.

Understanding the challenges faced by people with autism in the workplace and identifying opportunities for their inclusion is crucial not only for public policy managers but for society as a whole. Although there is a law guaranteeing the inclusion of autistic individuals in the labor market, which requires a minimum participation of these individuals, Brazil still has an estimate where 85% of adults with autism are unemployed [1].

Not only in Brazil but also around the world, individuals with autism are constantly excluded from the labor market. The formulation and adoption of public policies not only assist but also enable the entry of autistic individuals into workplaces. A significant event was the publication of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007 [2].

ASD<sup>1</sup> [3] is not considered a disability, nor a disease. However, the Law for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with ASD (Law No. 12,764, of December 27, 2012) states that a person with ASD is considered a person with a disability for all legal purposes [4].

Thus, this study seeks to explore the challenges faced by individuals with autism in the labor market and, subsequently, analyze the existing opportunities through public policies already promoted. It also intends to examine the existing barriers and investigate possible strategies and policies that can facilitate the full and effective participation of autistic individuals in the workplace.

Therefore, this article's main objective is to analyze the barriers faced by people with autism in the labor market, considering issues related to communication, social interaction, flexibility, and adaptation. It also aims to investigate opportunities for inclusion in the labor market for autistic individuals.

Finally, it examines strategies, policies, and programs that have been successfully implemented to promote the inclusion of people with autism in the workplace. Methodologically, it was a qualitative bibliographic research based on primary and secondary data.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 AUTISM AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

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<sup>1</sup> Autism Spectrum Disorder is the official technical name for it. According to the Paraná State Department of Health, ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder. It is characterized by atypical development, deficits in communication and social interaction, among others [3].

ASD, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, refers to a community of neurodevelopmental conditions characterized by mutual difficulties in interaction and non-verbal communication, along with stereotypical and repetitive behaviors. Moreover, neurodevelopmental disorders are conditions that occur early in the developmental period, characterized by deficits during this phase that result in damage to personal functioning, interaction, academic, or professional capabilities. These deficits can produce specific limitations in learning, executive function, social skills, or intelligence [5].

Leopoldino *et al.* [6] emphasize that the difficulties in introducing autistic professionals into the job market arise not only from the limitations of these individuals but also from imperfections due to structural and cultural restrictions that cause a decrease in opportunities. The authors stress that such obstacles show that, for part of society, people with imperfections can be consumers but not productive contributors of goods and services. Despite this, Kirby *et al.* [7] state that young people with ASD have high aspirations about their achievements as adults, and many of them possess the ability to work, which is an important aspect of their personal expectations.

The characteristics of ASD can manifest differently in each individual. Some may have difficulties interpreting subtle social cues, such as facial expressions and body language, which can impact their communication and social interaction skills. Additionally, they may display repetitive behavioral patterns, such as stereotypical movements or rigid adherence to routines and rituals. It is important to highlight that ASD is not a condition that solely impacts deficiencies but can also be associated with unique skills and talents. Many individuals with autism have special skills in areas such as memory, visual processing, and attention to detail. These skills can be valuable in the workplace and contribute to the diversity of talents in an organization.

ASD is a complex condition that affects neurological and behavioral development, impacting approximately 1 in 54 children, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States. It is characterized by a wide range of challenges and individual differences that affect how people with ASD perceive the world, communicate, and interact socially. The particularities of ASD may include deficits in communication and social interaction, difficulties in understanding and using language, repetitive behavioral patterns, restricted interests, and atypical sensory sensitivities [5].

Furthermore, ASD is a highly heterogeneous condition, meaning that each individual with this condition is unique in their characteristics. Some may have highly developed cognitive and intellectual skills, while others may have significant developmental delays. The presence of special talents and distinct skills, such as exceptional memory, intense focus, and detailed thinking, is also observed in many people with ASD.

Hull *et al.* [8] identified that individuals with ASD may mask their characteristics throughout their lives through compensatory mechanisms, referred to by them as masking, a disguise aimed at "hiding" conditions of ASD, creating personas in social situations that differ from their true and automatic behaviors. This is because, for professionals with ASD, when seeking jobs and qualifications, opportunities were less accessible while their ASD traits were more visible.

As a consequence of masking, feelings of exhaustion arise, making this mental and physical state more draining, as it requires intense concentration and enormous self-control. After masking, people on this spectrum need a relatively long time to recover, spending time alone and releasing suppressed behaviors [8].

Research to understand ASD has emerged recently and has largely been conducted through the observation of physical signs in children, as it is a neurological developmental disorder. However, it is important to recognize the voices of adults on the autism spectrum, as their experiences can provide insights into the impact of their traits on their daily and social lives. A group of researchers sought to concretely map the barriers that autistic professionals face when entering the labor market, including the lack of professional training, inadequate preparation of autistic employees, and the effectiveness of quota laws, as well as the lack of support [2, 9–15].

## 2.2 AUTISM AND THE LABOR MARKET

In recent years, there has been an increasing body of literature on ASD, and legislation has created mechanisms to facilitate the dissemination of inclusive systems. Despite the abundance of research involving children, it is important to reflect on the aging of these individuals and their needs as adults, to integrate them into independent lives [16]. The National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira observed in its higher education censuses in recent years that there has been an increase in the number of people diagnosed with ASD in Brazilian universities and colleges. According to the classification established by the DSM-V<sup>2</sup> [5] in 2015, 442 students with autism were identified in universities, while in 2018, 1,357 students were identified [5]. By including people with ASD in academia and vocational training, the stigma of incompetence and antisocial behavior can be removed, and they can no longer be ignored [17].

For individuals with ASD, integration into the labor market brings various rewards, such as financial and personal independence, improved social relationships, teamwork, communication, problem-solving, a sense of purpose, and cognitive

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<sup>2</sup> According to the APA [5], the DSM aims to be a practical, functional and flexible guide to organize information that facilitates the accurate diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders. For 60 years, the document has been continually updated and has become a reference for clinical practice in the area of mental health.

rehabilitation. Positive outcomes have also been observed in family relationships to reduce emotional burden and improve quality of life [18–21].

However, few companies seek assistance to employ people with disabilities in schools or specialized institutions, often resorting to traditional employment agencies [22]. In employment, people with autism work fewer hours and earn less than other people with disabilities, but are continuously undervalued, and their construction is largely based on negative traits, rendering their positive attributes invisible [23].

For companies, this type of hiring can enhance the skills of professionals with ASD in specific activities, such as concentration ability, attention to detail, and performing repetitive tasks. Overall, relevant factors for hiring autistic professionals should be evaluated from the perspective of these professionals and the individuals with whom they work. Characteristics that promote success in the workplace for people with ASD include relationships with work teams, support from leaders and peers, permission for changes in the work environment, and the presence of mentors. Challenges include difficulties related to tasks, personal factors, and social difficulties [24, 25]. A study by Hurlbutt and Chalmers [26] states that an important factor for the success of professionals with ASD in the job market is the description of norms, expectations, duties, and responsibilities expected from the professional, as this enables professionals with ASD to succeed in the job market.

Given the exclusion of individuals with ASD and their traits, prejudice against potential employers and discrimination against colleagues, difficulties related to impaired social awareness were more common than those related to work demands. Also, when employees with ASD do not believe in their own potential, they have a lower likelihood of advancing within organizations [2, 11, 12, 14, 15].

According to Sassaki [27], organizations can take some measures to integrate professionals with disabilities, for example, holding seminars and conferences to raise awareness and include disabled workers in career progression programs. Furthermore, Lattimore *et al.* [28] concluded that individuals with autism become more engaged in tasks when they incorporate their interests. By understanding the characteristics of people with autism as opportunities rather than weaknesses [12], and their unique skill sets, hiring professionals in this spectrum can provide organizations with a competitive advantage [9, 16].

### 2.3 PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES OF INDIVIDUALS WITH ASD

Competency management is the tool for planning, acquiring, developing, and evaluating the individual, team, and organizational competencies necessary to achieve organizational goals, selecting the right professionals for each position, developing training, or making strategic decisions [29, 30]. Some concepts of the term "capacity" are available in the literature, for example, "a responsible action knowledge, recognized, that implies the mobilization, integration, transfer of knowledge, resources, and skills, which add economic value, the social value of the individual" [31].

For Boyatzis [32], competence is an implicit characteristic of an individual, which is a trait, skill, knowledge, motivation, or aspect of a person's self-image or social role, not necessarily in a conscious manner. For the author, a particular action or behavior is considered a competence when it aligns with the demands and requirements of the organizational environment. Finally, Parry [33] defined competence as the collection of knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to performance that can be enhanced through training. Maluf [34] added the delivery acronym, characterized by the ability to meet organizational expectations.

Individuals with ASD possess a unique set of skills, motivations, and strengths that make them excellent workers [35]. Although some individuals with ASD, who usually do not need support, can find employment without assistance and decide to keep their disability a secret, in most cases, employers have noticed difficulties that they may not fully understand [36].

People with ASD have many talents compared to other groups, such as concentration ability, competence, reliability, efficiency, honesty, strict adherence to rules, excellent memory, observational skills, self-correction skills, as well as the desire to complete requirements, attention to detail, and preference for repetitive tasks that require focused attention [11, 18, 36–39].

Individuals with ASD believe that their rigidity and difficulty with new things make it easy for them to follow rules and maintain routines, which in turn makes them more diligent and punctual, as well as loyal to a favorable work environment [5, 26, 36, 40, 41]. According to the cited authors, people with this spectrum prefer quiet environments and tend not to waste time with private phone calls and side conversations, which can help improve productivity and accuracy, the authors stated. Individuals with ASD generally prefer visually organized environments and use machines, computers, maps, schedules, and other systems well, and when learning tasks, they perform tasks with high precision.

Overall, considering the work environment from the perspective of employees can provide managers with a tool that can significantly impact various parts of the organization [35]. Individuals with ASD are particularly sensitive to subtle aspects of this environment that can drive their success or lead them to leave work early [40].

A study by Dreaver *et al.* [25] demonstrated the importance of conditioning the work environment as an essential factor in determining its suitability. The authors state that by understanding the needs of professionals on the autism

spectrum, the character of the workplace has become more flexible, with reduced noise, lighting, and movement, in addition to providing opportunities for breaks and flexibility in work routines. This is because it is important to provide instructions to autistic employees visually or in writing.

Regarding communication difficulties, given the obstacles that autistic individuals have in picking up subtle cues, it is essential to provide direct feedback on their performance [36].

### 3. METHODOLOGY

To conduct this study, a qualitative approach was used, as it describes the subject in question in a rich and rational manner, in addition to capturing an explanation of the process in a specific context, assisting the researcher in advancing the initial concept or revising their theoretical structure [42].

Through secondary data, elements related to the daily lives of people with ASD were sought, thus enabling an understanding of the subject. It also allowed the study to extend to public policies created up to that point, perceiving the need for constant attention from managers towards the reality of over 6 million people when looked at a national level.

The analysis of the data obtained from the literature was evaluated based on other studies already conducted. Although much can be found when researching ASD and the Labor Market, especially in scientific databases, little is known about how to proceed with such a pertinent subject. This is because, until now, for example, only three laws and one decree are linked to this issue, reinforcing the idea that very little is done to improve autism inclusion.

It is also observed that legal provisions have not been properly accompanied by structures for the implementation of inclusive processes, when they should be stimulating preparation so that individuals with ASD could go through the professional performance and hiring process [2].

### 4. RESULTS

From the results obtained in historical analyses, explicit prejudice against ASD is evident, given that they are treated differently, either as obstacles or as divine [43]. The prejudice and discrimination in treatment adopted by individuals without disabilities concerning people with disabilities, known as "ableism," is conceptualized by Dias [44] as "the conception present in society that reads people with disabilities as unequal, less capable, or unable to manage their own lives."

For these reasons, supportive and inclusive laws were created, such as Law No. 12,764, of December 27, 2012, establishing the National Policy for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with ASD, and the Brazilian Inclusion Law for Persons with Disabilities, Law No. 13,146, of July 6, 2015, aimed at ensuring and promoting, under equal conditions, the rights and fundamental freedoms for people with disabilities. Furthermore, Decree No. 9,508, of September 24, 2018, provides for the percentage of positions offered to people with disabilities in the public administration. Together, these regulations legally ensure the rights of people with disabilities to social inclusion and citizenship [4, 45–47]. To better visualize the laws and decrees, Table 1 was prepared to synthesize such information:

**Table 1: Laws and decrees created in Brazil that benefit individuals with ASD.**

Laws and Decrees	Description	Year
<b>Law No. 12,764</b>	National Policy for the Protection of the Rights of People with ASD	2012
<b>Law No. 13,146</b>	Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (Statute of Persons with Disabilities)	2015
<b>Law No. 9,508</b>	Reserving for people with disabilities a percentage of public positions and jobs offered in public competitions and selection processes within the scope of direct and indirect federal public administration for people with disabilities.	2018
<b>Law No. 13,977</b>	Amends Law No. 12,764 of December 27, 2012 (Berenice Piana Law) and Law No. 9,265 of February 12, 1996, to establish the Identification Card for People with ASD (Ciptea), and provides other measures.	2020

Source: Prepared by the authors based on Brasil [4, 45–47].

There are also laws that benefit people with this spectrum around the world. Some specific laws in different countries are:

- ADA of 1990 [48] - United States: The ADA prohibits discrimination based on disability, including autism, in various areas, including employment, public transportation, government services, and access to public places;
- Disability Discrimination Act 1995 - United Kingdom: This law prohibits discrimination based on disability, including autism, in areas such as employment, education, transportation, and access to goods and services;
- Disability Discrimination Act 1992 - Australia: This law prohibits discrimination based on disability, including autism, in various areas, including employment, education, government services, and access to public places.

Table 2 also seeks to show some laws from other countries that have been mentioned:

**Table 2: Laws around the world that benefit individuals with ASD.**

Laws	Description	Year	Country
Lei dos Americanos com Deficiências (ADA)	The ADA prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability, including autism, in several areas, including employment, public transportation, government services, and access to public places.	1990	United States
Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (Lei de Discriminação por Deficiência de 1995)	This law prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability, including autism, in areas such as employment, education, transportation, and access to goods and services.	1995	United Kingdom
Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Lei de Discriminação por Deficiência de 1992)	This law prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability, including autism, in a variety of areas, including employment, education, government services, and access to public places.	1992	Australia

Source: Prepared by the authors based on ADA, Australian Human Rights Commission [49], and Gov.UK [50].

These are just a few laws in different countries that benefit autistic individuals. In Brazil, the main law that benefits people with autism is the Brazilian Law on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (mentioned above), also known as the Law for Persons with Disabilities. Below is a reference to the law, which provides protections and rights for people with autism: This law offers protection and rights for autistic individuals: Brazilian Law on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (Law No. 13,146/2015); the Brazilian Inclusion Law addresses various areas regarding the rights of people with disabilities, including autism. Some relevant points for autistics are:

- The right to equality and non-discrimination in all spheres of life, including education, health, work, culture, leisure, and sports;
- Ensuring accessibility of public and private spaces, such as buildings, transportation, communication, technology, information, and services;
- The right to inclusive education aimed at accessing and fully participating individuals with autism in regular schools, with appropriate adjustments and supports;
- Promoting inclusion in the labor market by taking measures to ensure equal opportunities and affirmative actions;
- Developing a comprehensive health plan focused on prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation for people with disabilities, including those with autism;
- Ensuring the right to adequate housing, considering the specific needs of people with disabilities, including housing adaptations.

It is also very important that states and municipalities take sides with national laws and implement public policies. In Paraná, for example, the state where this research was conducted, Law 17555 was sanctioned in 2013, which states: Art. 1: The State of Paraná, when formulating and implementing the state policy for the protection of the rights of persons with ASD, shall be guided by the guidelines set forth in this Law for its applicability and achievement [51].

Moreover, it is even more important that national-level changes occur, as the last law directed toward autism was in 2020, and prior to that, only two others existed, one of which was quite contradictory in classifying ASD as a disability, as this is not the correct way to categorize autism.

Thus, increasingly recent data highlight the ongoing need for attention and concrete public policies directed at individuals with ASD. Inequality in the labor market and the difficulties faced reflect a precarious scenario that requires care from managers.

## 5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The proposal of this article was to analyze the barriers faced by individuals with autism in the labor market, considering issues related to communication, social interaction, flexibility, and adaptation. Subsequently, it aimed to complement the study with an analysis of the existence of public policies at the national level regarding this issue.

The results of this research showed a remarkable advance regarding individuals with ASD in the labor market. There is an evolution on the part of managers, who seek to provide tools for the workplace to become a more suitable and accessible place.

However, there is still a significant difficulty on the part of public policy makers to implement all the demands from the population that faces the barriers of autism daily, given that only three laws in Brazil are directed toward individuals with ASD, and only one decree has been sanctioned.

The study revealed, therefore, that positive changes have been occurring, but there is still a long way to go in the fight for equality for individuals with ASD in the labor market, not only due to historical context but also because of the current scenario, which remains very painful.

**AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

All authors contributed equally to this study.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

None.

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