Strategic Communication and Employer Branding for Workplace Inclusion: Insights from the Integration of People with Down Syndrome

Comunicación Estratégica y Employer Branding para la Inclusión Laboral: Perspectivas desde la Integración de Personas con Síndrome de Down

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ABSTRACT

In today's competitive labor market, employer branding (EB) plays a strategic role not only in attracting and retaining talent but also in promoting inclusive values. However, inclusion often remains at a symbolic level, especially concerning individuals with intellectual disabilities. This study investigates how EB functions as a form of strategic communication that can foster genuine workplace inclusion. It focuses on the integration of people with Down Syndrome (DS) in Portugal as a specific case study to examine broader mechanisms and barriers of inclusive branding. The research addresses three questions: (1) What EB strategies are most commonly implemented to support inclusion? (2) Which are considered most effective? (3) What are the main obstacles to implementing inclusive EB? A qualitative approach was adopted, based on semi-structured interviews with representatives from companies and NGOs. Thematic analysis was used to explore perceptions, practices, and challenges. Findings highlight that continuous tutor support, team training, and partnerships with NGOs are the most effective EB strategies. However, cultural resistance, overprotection by families, and lack of post-school support persist as barriers. This study offers an original contribution by positioning inclusion as central to strategic communication in EB. It advocates for structural transformation and cross-sectoral collaboration to align employer branding with inclusive practices.

RESUMEN

En el competitivo mercado laboral actual, el employer branding (EB) desempeña un papel estratégico no solo en la atracción y retención de talento, sino también en la promoción de valores inclusivos. Sin embargo, la inclusión a menudo permanece en un nivel simbólico, especialmente en relación con personas con discapacidades intelectuales. Este estudio investiga cómo el EB actúa como una forma de comunicación estratégica que puede fomentar una inclusión laboral genuina. Se centra en la integración de personas con síndrome de Down (SD) en Portugal como estudio de caso específico para analizar mecanismos y barreras más amplias del branding inclusivo. La investigación responde a tres preguntas: (1) ¿Qué estrategias de EB se implementan con mayor frecuencia para apoyar la inclusión? (2) ¿Cuáles se consideran más eficaces? (3) ¿Cuáles son los principales obstáculos para implementar un EB inclusivo? Se adoptó un enfoque cualitativo basado en entrevistas semiestructuradas con representantes de empresas y ONG. Se realizó un análisis temático de las percepciones, prácticas y desafíos. Los hallazgos destacan que el apoyo continuo de tutores, la formación de equipos y las alianzas con ONG son las estrategias de EB más eficaces. No obstante, persisten barreras como la resistencia cultural, la sobreprotección familiar y la falta de apoyo postescolar. Este estudio ofrece una contribución original al posicionar la inclusión como eje central de la comunicación estratégica en EB. Aboga por una transformación estructural y colaboración intersectorial para alinear el employer branding con prácticas inclusivas.

1. Introduction

In today's increasingly competitive environment — shaped by innovation and social responsibility — companies have come to view employer branding (EB) not merely as a strategic tool, but as a key differentiator in the job market. EB plays a central role in attracting, retaining, and motivating talent, while also shaping an institutional reputation aligned with organizational values and social commitments (Dev & Padhi, 2023; Reis, Sousa, & Dionísio, 2021; Verma & Ahmad, 2016). It is important to emphasize that inclusion should not be reduced to an organizational marketing strategy. The risk of "inclusion-washing" — that is, the superficial adoption of inclusive discourses without real structural change — constitutes one of the main obstacles to authentic organizational transformation (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). To ensure that the communicated values translate into concrete actions, it is essential to invest in ongoing training, implement monitoring policies, and develop regular evaluation processes on the impact of inclusive practices (Booysen, 2013; O'Donovan, 2017).

The modern employer brand is increasingly built upon inclusion as a fundamental principle. The promotion of inclusive environments has evolved from an ethical or legal requirement into a competitive advantage that fosters innovation, diverse perspectives, and organizational well-being (Brimhall et al., 2017; Tan, 2019). Organizations are now integrating individuals with disabilities as key indicators of their commitment to equal opportunity (Bento & Kuznetsova, 2018). Despite progress in legislation and growing public awareness, the labor market inclusion of people with Down Syndrome (DS) still faces substantial and persistent barriers.

In Portugal, while the discourse on inclusion has expanded alongside regulatory advances, the gap between theoretical commitments and practical outcomes remains significant. Data from the National Statistics Institute (INE) show that the employability rate of people with disabilities is below the national average — a disparity even more pronounced for individuals with trisomy 21. Recent studies and media coverage highlight this gap, especially in terms of professional training, workplace adaptation, and public perceptions of the work capabilities of people with DS (Cofina Boost Content, 2022).

This study responds to this context by offering an in-depth exploration of the perceptions, practices, and challenges surrounding inclusion, directly from stakeholders engaged in the process. It addresses the following research question: "What employer branding strategies have been used to include people with Down Syndrome in the organizational environment?" followed by two sub-questions: "What are the most effective strategies?" and "What are the main obstacles preventing their implementation?"

The contribution of this research lies in three key areas. First, it fills a gap in both national and international literature by focusing specifically on inclusive EB strategies for individuals with DS. Second, it offers an empirical analysis of the Portuguese context, identifying good practices and structural and cultural barriers to workplace inclusion. Third, it proposes actionable recommendations for organizations that aim to align their employer brands with genuine inclusion — beyond symbolic or isolated efforts.

This study emerges at the intersection of Employer Branding and Strategic Communication (SC), aiming to investigate how branding strategies can meaningfully promote the labor inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Although people with DS are increasingly present in public discourse, they remain disproportionately excluded from the workforce — particularly in Portugal. Their inclusion serves as a valuable lens through which to explore how inclusive values are operationalized (or not) in employer identity and communication.

The rationale for this research lies in the need to move beyond rhetorical commitments and toward measurable, authentic practices of inclusion (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Booysen, 2013; O'Donovan, 2017). As such, it not only fills a gap in EB literature — which has rarely considered people with intellectual disabilities as a strategic stakeholder group — but also contributes to broader discussions on how organizations define and enact inclusive values within their brand narrative.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Employer Branding (EB) & Strategic Communication (SC)

The increasing emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in organizational discourse has prompted a reexamination of how Employer Branding (EB) can operate not only as a mechanism for attracting talent, but also as a strategic tool for fostering social transformation. Traditionally examined from marketing or human resources (HR) perspectives, EB's communicative dimensions—particularly those involving strategic and inclusive messaging—remain insufficiently explored in relation to marginalized populations such as individuals with Down Syndrome (DS) (Bento & Kuznetsova, 2018; Gilani & Cunningham, 2017; Mor Barak, 2016).

EB has become a central component of strategic talent management, strongly linked to organizational reputation and the value proposition offered to current and prospective employees (Eger et al., 2019; Zografou & Galanaki, 2024). It encompasses functional, economic, and psychological benefits (Eger et al., 2019), and when strategically developed, it fosters employee commitment and alignment with organizational values (Urbancová & Depoo, 2021). A coherent EB strategy promotes desirable behaviors and communicates core institutional principles (Hanin, Stinglhamber, & Delobbe, 2013; Rys, Schollaert, & Van Hoye, 2024). Critically, EB is embedded within organizational culture and shaped by leadership transparency and effective Strategic Communication (SC) (Urbancová & Depoo, 2021). As Sharma et al. (2024, p. 3) observe, "a strong employer brand not only enhances employee morale but also fosters job satisfaction," ultimately contributing to retention and performance.

Recent empirical research has reinforced EB's strategic significance. Sharma et al. (2024) demonstrate that EB mediates the relationship between HR practices and employee engagement, while Rys et al. (2024) explore how EB is perceived internally during times of crisis. These findings underscore the need to align EB discourse with actual organizational practices to ensure credibility and trust.

Within this framework, inclusive organizational values refer to the institutional principles and behaviors that foster equity, participation, and belonging across diverse employee groups—including individuals with disabilities. In the context of EB, such values must extend beyond symbolic commitments and materialize in concrete practices: inclusive recruitment procedures, workplace adaptations, and inclusive leadership structures (Brimhall et al., 2017; Mor Barak, 2016). This alignment between narrative and practice is vital to building inclusive employer identities that are both authentic and sustainable.

EB also serves as a vehicle for communicating HR policies (Zografou & Galanaki, 2024), enhancing proactive HR functions (Urbancová & Depoo, 2021), and applying marketing principles to attract younger talent (Eger et al., 2019). According to Dalvi (2021), symbolic factors such as reputation and alignment of values often outweigh functional aspects in candidates' decision-making processes. Effective EB enhances trust, satisfaction, and employee loyalty (Azhar et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2024), but strategies must also be sensitive to cultural and sectoral contexts (Hein et al., 2025).

Strategic internal communication plays a foundational role in articulating employer values and promises (Heide et al., 2024; Pološki Vokić, Tkalac Verčič, & Sinčić Ćorić, 2022). Zografou and Galanaki (2024) refer to this as reconciling "talk" and "walk." To be credible, EB must reflect lived organizational realities, not merely external narratives. It is therefore not just a marketing strategy but a key function within organizational communication, aligned with HR and corporate culture (Urbancová & Depoo, 2021).

The role of digital media has become increasingly relevant in shaping and disseminating EB, particularly in times of uncertainty when trust and emotional resonance are critical (Eger, Mičík, & Řehoř, 2018; Rys et al., 2024). Francis (2025) emphasizes that SC acts as a dynamic interface between the organization and its internal and external stakeholders. Consistency across digital platforms reinforces a cohesive employer identity and strengthens brand credibility.

In Portugal, the Randstad Employer Brand Research 2023 identified Microsoft, Delta Cafés, and Hovione as the most attractive employers (Nabais Ferreira, 2023a), followed by Bosch, OGMA, Siemens, CUF, Nestlé, Volkswagen, and Ikea. Reports from media outlets and career platforms highlight sectors such as healthcare, tourism, and ICT as especially appealing (Nabais Ferreira, 2023b). Nevertheless, gaps persist between employee expectations and actual employer offerings (Mateus, 2023).

Key attributes sought by employees include fair remuneration, work–life balance, supportive environments, career progression, and job stability. Despite the centrality of compensation, it is often underaddressed. Generation Z places greater emphasis on flexibility, learning opportunities, inclusive culture, and meaningful purpose (Almeida de Oliveira, 2022). According to Randstad Portugal (2020), younger workers value interpersonal relationships and organizational climate more than job security, unlike older generations who prioritize stability and compensation.

Despite the rising importance of EB in Portugal, many organizations still fall short of meeting internal and external stakeholder expectations (Almeida de Oliveira, 2022). As Randstad's marketing director notes, regular internal assessment is essential to align perceived and actual values (Nabais Ferreira, 2023a). In a labor market increasingly driven by purpose and inclusivity, such alignment has become a strategic imperative for organizations seeking long-term differentiation.

2.2. Strategic Communication & Inclusion

Inclusion, particularly of individuals with intellectual disabilities such as Down Syndrome (DS), has gained increasing attention in both academic literature and institutional policies aimed at promoting more diverse and equitable workplaces. Although diversity is often associated with improved creativity, innovation, and leadership (Tan, 2019), it does not automatically result in inclusion. As Puritty et al. (2017) warn, focusing exclusively on diversity may leave structural barriers and stereotypes unaddressed, rendering initiatives ineffective without an inclusive organizational culture.

Inclusion is the mechanism through which diversity becomes organizational value. Garg and Sangwan (2021) argue that only intentional inclusion—understood as the creation of equitable participation opportunities for all—can unlock the potential of a diverse workforce. Mor Barak (2016) emphasize that effective inclusion depends on policy measures, awareness initiatives, and tailored support strategies. Thus, a meaningful approach requires integrating both dimensions: while diversity ensures representativeness, inclusion ensures respect and engagement. As Tan (2019, p. 30) affirms, "strength lies in difference, not in similarities," but this potential is only realized when individuals are empowered to contribute fully.

Recent empirical studies reinforce these points. Ijezie et al. (2023), in a systematic review, show the persistence of structural barriers to the equitable employment of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Carreño-León et al. (2022) provide evidence that technological adaptations can effectively support the inclusion of people with DS in the workplace.

Building inclusive work environments requires moving beyond physical presence to cultivate a culture of belonging and authenticity (Brimhall et al., 2017; Shore et al., 2011). Inclusion occurs when individuals feel both part of the group and recognized for their unique contributions. Social Identity Theory suggests that perceived similarity facilitates acceptance, but Optimal Distinctiveness Theory posits that true inclusion requires space for differentiation (Brimhall et al., 2017).

In non-inclusive settings, symbolic boundaries persist, generating distrust, miscommunication, and high turnover (Mor Barak, 2016). Unacknowledged contributions and subtle forms of exclusion often result in withdrawal, particularly among minority employees (Suresh & Dyaram, 2020). Experiences of discrimination or marginalization can harm mental health and professional identity (Shore et al., 2011). Conversely, inclusive environments promote empathy, psychological safety, and collaboration, enhancing individual satisfaction and team cohesion (Brimhall & Mor Barak, 2018; Miller & Manata, 2023).

Mor Barak (2016) identifies three core pillars of organizational inclusion: equitable practices, inclusive culture, and active participation. Boehm and Dwertmann (2014) add that inclusive leadership, workplace climate, and HR policies are crucial to enabling these pillars. Leaders who listen actively and recognize diverse needs are fundamental to building fairer organizational environments.

Despite greater public awareness, stigma and misconceptions still hinder the hiring of individuals with intellectual disabilities (Lysaght et al., 2017). These barriers include assumptions about capabilities, fears of additional costs or legal risks, and resistance to adaptation (Ijezie et al., 2023). As Iwanaga et al. (2018) note, there is often a significant gap between corporate discourse and actual inclusive practices.

Training plays a central role in dismantling these barriers. Many employers lack familiarity with the skills and psychosocial needs of people with DS (IBoehm & Dwertmann, 2014; Iwanaga et al., 2018). Similarly, raising awareness among coworkers is essential to foster a respectful and supportive environment. Small inclusive gestures—such as social invitations or addressing inappropriate behavior—can make a meaningful difference (HR Asia, 2019; totaljobs, n.d.). With appropriate support and time, individuals with DS can thrive in the workplace, positively influencing team empathy and cohesion.

Best practices identified by inclusion-oriented platforms (Day, 2019; totaljobs, n.d.) highlight the importance of inclusive recruitment: using accessible language, eliminating non-essential job requirements, and showcasing success stories. Complementary strategies include job fairs, assistive technologies, flexible hours, calm workspaces, and structured feedback systems (Carreño-León et al., 2022; Down Syndrome Australia, n.d.; Ijezie et al., 2023). Physical accommodations and predictable routines are also crucial.

Hiring individuals with DS benefits both organizations and employees. Research and case studies suggest improvements in morale, culture, and team dynamics, while individuals gain self-esteem, autonomy, and social inclusion (Assis et al., 2014; Incluo, 2024). These workers often excel in tasks that require consistency and interpersonal interaction.

To ensure sustainable inclusion, organizational culture must align with principles of equity and diversity. As Dantas and Martins (2009) notes, workplaces based on learning, cooperation, and shared values tend to be more human, efficient, and innovative.

Inclusion is not only a social imperative but also a strategic asset that enhances creativity, innovation, and organizational performance (Brimhall et al., 2017; O'Donovan, 2017; Tan, 2019). As a key axis of SC, inclusion reinforces institutional identity and enhances public reputation (Gilani & Cunningham, 2017; Reis et al., 2021). However, inclusion efforts must be grounded in authentic practice. Structural barriers—such as cultural resistance, overprotection by families, and lack of post-school support—may compromise credibility and impact (Bento & Kuznetsova, 2018; Cofina Boost Content, 2022).

Organizations must therefore move beyond performative discourse and implement inclusive practices that address employees' diverse needs and lived realities (Mor Barak, 2016). SC should be multidimensional—informative, mobilizing, and educational—serving as a foundation for inclusive, equitable, and sustainable organizational cultures.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Problem & Research Questions

Although the concept of Employer Branding (EB) has attracted significant academic attention, a gap remains in the literature regarding its articulation with inclusion strategies—particularly for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Most studies address EB from a marketing or human resources (HR) perspective, overlooking its potential as a vehicle for promoting workplace equity and social value. Furthermore, existing research rarely considers people with Down Syndrome (DS) as a strategic stakeholder group in EB discourse.

This study aims to identify the most common EB initiatives currently implemented in Portugal and to examine which strategies are perceived as most effective in fostering the inclusion of individuals with DS in the labor market. In addition, it investigates the main obstacles that persist in preventing their full integration into organizational environments.

Accordingly, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: What are the most commonly implemented EB strategies in Portugal?

RQ2: Which EB strategies are considered most effective in promoting the inclusion of individuals with Down Syndrome in the Portuguese labor market?

RQ3: What are the main obstacles preventing the inclusion of individuals with Down Syndrome in the Portuguese labor market?

3.2. Methodological Strategy

For the present study, a qualitative methodological approach was deemed appropriate, not only due to its flexibility but also because it addresses a specific gap in the literature: the absence of research that connects employer branding and strategic communication with the lived experience of inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities—particularly those with Down Syndrome. While inclusion is often examined through the lens of diversity management or human resources, its intersection with brand identity and organizational communication remains underexplored. A qualitative design allows for a deep understanding of the strategies and obstacles related to EB in promoting inclusion, and offers the possibility of capturing nuanced perceptions from different stakeholders. Semi-structured interviews were therefore selected to explore these dimensions in detail and generate original empirical insights.

The methodological strategy was divided into two stages. The first stage involved interviews with various Human Resources professionals and experts from organizations that promote equal opportunities for all employees, including individuals with special needs (with specific attention to the presence of Down syndrome where applicable). The goal was to identify the most frequently adopted strategies in Portugal aimed at ensuring inclusive processes and talent retention in this context, as well as to understand the persistent challenges faced by individuals with Down syndrome in the labor market.

The second stage focused on interviews with representatives from associations (NGOs) dedicated to individuals with Down syndrome. This component aimed to gain a more realistic perspective on the

effectiveness of company strategies and the obstacles these individuals continue to face in their efforts to access and retain employment.

For this investigation, purposive sampling was employed, as the researcher deliberately selected participants based on personal criteria. The selected sample comprised companies and NGOs. The participating companies included: a leading energy sector company that requested anonymity and will therefore be referred to as "Company X"; Sodexo; IKEA; and El Corte Inglés. One or two professionals from each company were interviewed, specifically individuals holding positions as Human Resources professionals or Strategic Communication specialists.

In parallel, the selected NGOs included: the Portuguese Association of People with Trisomy 21 (APPT 21); the Trisomy 21 Association of Algarve (APPATRIS 21); Somos Nós Association; País 21 – Down Portugal Association; Vila com Vida Association; and the National Association of Families for the Integration of People with Disabilities (AFID). One or two representatives from each association were interviewed.

The interviews were developed not only in alignment with the study's objectives but also grounded in the findings of the literature review. Accordingly, during the construction of the methodological framework, there was a clear correlation between the research objectives, the interview questions, and the corresponding authors cited in the literature review. This approach was intended to provide a more detailed and structured overview of the investigation, ensuring theoretical consistency and methodological coherence.

Thus, the literature reveals that several practices should be considered essential for effective inclusion. These include continuous support through mentoring or tutoring, the use of inclusive technologies, staff training, inclusive recruitment strategies, flexible schedules, remote work options, calm and accommodating work environments, workplace adaptations, paid employment opportunities, tailored performance evaluations, and structured feedback systems. These practices have been identified by the following authors: Assis et al. (2014), Carreño-León et al. (2022), Ijezie et al. (2023), Bento and Kuznetsova (2018), Aggrey et al. (2025), Iwanaga et al. (2018), Day (2019), Kletenik and Adler (2024), Iwanaga et al. (2018), and Down Syndrome Australia (n.d.).

On the other hand, the literature also highlights a range of obstacles that must be addressed and mitigated to ensure the successful inclusion of individuals with Down syndrome in the workforce. These include stigmatization, negative stereotypes, discrimination, social exclusion, lack of remuneration, temporary and part-time employment contracts, lower-quality job opportunities, limited career advancement, absence of workplace accommodations, scarcity of job opportunities, overprotection by family members, lack of post-school transitional support, and limited awareness or openness among employers. These barriers have been identified by the following authors: Borges and Longen (2019), Boehm and Dwertmann (2014), Pires, Bonfim and Bianchi (2007), Ijezie et al. (2023), Novak, Feyes and Christensen (2011), Jammaers (2023), Collien, Sieben and Müller-Camen (2016), Down's Syndrome Association (n.d.), Bento and Kuznetsova (2018), Gomes-Machado and Chiari (2009), Rahman and Hossain (2024), and Hendrix et al. (2021).

The data collection process, conducted through semi-structured interviews, took place between early January and the end of March 2024. The interviews were carried out via video call, each lasting approximately 30 to 40 minutes. All interviews were fully transcribed. Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were prioritized, with particular emphasis on providing participants with comprehensive information regarding the guarantees and implications of their participation. Prior to each interview, participants were thoroughly informed about the procedures involved in the session, with assurances given regarding the confidentiality and protection of the information shared.

3.2.1. Data Presentation
3.2.1.1. Interviews with NGOs

Based on the responses regarding the employability of people with Down Syndrome in Portugal, it is clear that while progress has been acknowledged, these individuals continue to face significant challenges in entering and thriving in the job market. There is a broad consensus that their current level of employability remains unsatisfactory. Key barriers include the lack of continued support after formal education, insufficient structured responses from the State, and a general fear of the unknown. A particularly pressing issue, frequently cited by respondents, is the absence of fair remuneration in some cases — a factor that contributes to the devaluation of these professionals.

In terms of effective strategies for labor market inclusion, most interviewees agreed that some companies are adopting promising approaches. These include continuous performance evaluation, flexible working hours, workplace adaptation, collaboration between NGOs and employers, training for teams on diversity and inclusion, and close, ongoing support through a dedicated workplace tutor. Continuous support from a tutor was the most commonly cited facilitator, followed by partnerships with NGOs and flexible scheduling. However, challenges remain, such as limited autonomy among workers with Down Syndrome, a lack of corporate awareness and sensitivity, and persistent misconceptions that individuals with trisomy 21 are not capable of meaningful contributions.

Responses concerning partnership development highlight a strong commitment from all NGOs to promote the inclusion of people with Down Syndrome. These organizations are actively forming partnerships and launching initiatives aimed not only at opening employment opportunities but also at building the necessary skills to ensure meaningful and sustained participation in the workforce.

When asked about the main obstacles people with Down Syndrome face in finding employment, respondents identified several critical issues: limited opportunities, overprotective families, societal stigma, discrimination, lack of awareness and education about the condition, reluctance from employers, concerns about productivity, rigid work schedules, financial constraints, inadequate State support, and insufficient transition planning from school to employment. Among these, overprotection from families, poor school-to-work transition support, and concerns about productivity were the most frequently mentioned. These challenges underscore the urgent need for more robust policies, support systems, and a cultural shift toward genuine inclusion and equal opportunity.

Regarding success stories and ongoing challenges, all NGOs reported instances where young people with Down Syndrome were successfully hired. These examples illustrate the positive impact that appropriate support can have on both the employee and the workplace environment. Continuous guidance was the most cited success factor, underscoring the importance of providing sustained support to help individuals develop their skills. Adapting the workplace was also noted as a key consideration. On the flip side, challenges included difficulty in task execution when support is lacking, the high level of commitment required from companies, and the continued need for post-education support.

On the evolution of corporate attitudes toward inclusion, interviewees agreed that there have been notable improvements over recent years. Legislation mandating employment quotas was the most frequently mentioned driver of progress. However, despite these advances, significant barriers remain, and most respondents believe there is still a long journey ahead to achieve full inclusion of people with Down Syndrome in the workforce.

Looking to the future, there is a general sense of optimism regarding increased employability for people with Down Syndrome in Portugal. Many believe that more individuals will gradually find employment as awareness grows. Factors seen as crucial to fostering inclusion include early intervention, workplace adaptations, changes in corporate attitudes, team training, proper enforcement of quota laws, a shift away from parental overprotection, and ongoing post-school support. Among these, changing corporate mindsets was the most emphasized, followed closely by staff training.

Finally, when asked what advice they would offer to companies seeking to improve their inclusive practices, respondents highlighted the importance of team training, forming partnerships with relevant NGOs, adapting work environments, and recognizing the individuality of each young person with Down Syndrome by addressing their specific needs. Maintaining an open mindset and assigning a designated support figure within the workplace were also considered important measures for successful inclusion.

3.2.2.2. Interviews with Companies

Responses about whether individuals with Down Syndrome are employed in the respective companies reveal that their presence in the workforce varies. While some companies currently employ few or no individuals with Down Syndrome, many expressed a clear intention to increase inclusion and actively seek opportunities to involve more people with this condition. This reflects a growing awareness of the value of diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

When it comes to the strategies and programs in place to support inclusion, all participating companies reported implementing multiple initiatives aimed at creating a more inclusive environment for people with disabilities, including Down Syndrome. Highlighted approaches include annual awareness campaigns, inclusive recruitment practices, workplace adaptations, participation in job fairs, open days for people with disabilities,

continuous support from tutors, adapted performance evaluations, and training sessions for staff. Among these, inclusive recruitment and team training were the most frequently cited, followed by awareness campaigns, partnerships with NGOs, and adaptations to physical spaces. Such efforts benefit not only the employees directly impacted but also contribute to greater empathy, understanding, and collaboration across teams.

Regarding how companies communicate their EB and inclusion initiatives, respondents described a wide variety of tools and platforms. Internal communication systems, emails, direct contact, websites, LinkedIn, and forums were all mentioned, with internal platforms and LinkedIn emerging as the most commonly used. These communication efforts reflect a clear intention to engage transparently with both employees and external audiences. Employees' perceptions of their companies' inclusion policies appear largely positive. A strong sense of belonging — the most commonly mentioned outcome — was reported as a key impact of these initiatives. Beyond this, inclusive policies also help promote empathy, team spirit, and innovation, contributing to a fairer, more dynamic work environment. The regular use of employee surveys by many companies demonstrates a commitment to evaluating and improving these initiatives over time.

Despite progress, companies continue to face various challenges in implementing inclusive policies. These include persistent stereotypes, low visibility of people with disabilities in the job market, difficulties in adapting recruitment processes, physical inaccessibility, cultural resistance, trouble establishing partnerships with NGOs, and fear of the unknown. Cultural resistance stood out as the most frequently cited obstacle, followed by the challenges involved in adapting work environments. Still, companies are responding proactively by analyzing job roles and necessary competencies, engaging in inclusive hiring, adapting workstations, offering staff training, and providing ongoing support via workplace tutors. Notably, partnerships with NGOs and team training were the most frequently mentioned strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Companies are also making a deliberate effort to confront discrimination and stereotypes. All respondents acknowledged the importance of taking active steps to address these issues. Among the measures used are team training, collaboration with disability NGOs, and clear reporting channels — the latter being the most commonly cited. There is a shared understanding that any instance of discrimination must be taken seriously, reinforcing the view that diversity and inclusion are core values of the organization.

When reflecting on past experiences implementing inclusion strategies, companies shared that they have adopted targeted measures such as adapting the physical workspace, developing inclusive recruitment processes, and customizing performance evaluations. However, several noted that the absence of a tutor can make these adaptations more difficult. The most commonly mentioned elements were job adaptations and inclusive hiring practices. These examples demonstrate companies' recognition of individual needs and their commitment to ensuring that people with disabilities are successfully integrated into the workplace.

Over recent years, companies have reported significant progress in promoting inclusion. Interviewees indicated that this progress has come through workplace adaptations, training programs for employees, and in-depth analysis of job functions and required competencies. Adaptation of the physical workspace was the most frequently mentioned measure. Nonetheless, obstacles remain — including a shortage of candidates with disabilities or with different life circumstances that may affect job performance, employee adjustment challenges, and ongoing cultural resistance. While the journey toward full inclusion is not yet complete, companies are clearly committed and actively working toward more inclusive and equitable workplaces.

Finally, when asked what recommendations they would offer to other organizations aiming to improve their inclusive EB, respondents emphasized the importance of embedding diversity and inclusion into the very culture of the organization. Inclusion should not be just a slogan, but a practice reflected in actions. Other recommendations included dedicating resources to these efforts, actually hiring individuals with disabilities, ensuring that the employee value proposition prioritizes diversity and inclusion, forming partnerships with NGOs, training staff, providing continuous support through tutors, and communicating inclusion efforts clearly to the market. The most frequently highlighted suggestions were recognizing inclusion as a cultural value, placing individuals with disabilities in meaningful roles, collaborating with NGOs, and offering continuous guidance through tutors. These efforts not only attract a broader range of talent but also enhance a company's reputation as a truly inclusive employer.

4. Data Discussion

The cross-analysis of interviews reveals a cautiously optimistic trend in the employability of people

with Down Syndrome in Portugal. While there is visible progress and a growing commitment to inclusive practices, significant challenges remain. A strong alignment emerged between NGOs and companies regarding key strategies—namely, workplace tutors, team training, and partnerships with NGOs—which are broadly recognized as effective for fostering inclusion. Companies also highlighted inclusive recruitment, workplace adaptations, and awareness campaigns, indicating a sincere effort to build inclusive environments. However, persistent obstacles were identified, particularly by NGOs, including a lack of corporate openness, insufficient post-education support, and family overprotection. Companies also acknowledged cultural resistance as a major hurdle. These challenges highlight the need for sustained, structured action to translate inclusive intentions into impactful practice.

Despite these issues, both groups share optimism about future improvements, emphasizing the importance of ongoing collaboration. Embedding inclusion into organizational culture not only strengthens teams but also enhances employer branding and contributes to a more equitable society. The literature review enriched the analysis by identifying additional EB strategies—such as inclusive technology, flexible work options, calm environments, and structured feedback systems—that were not mentioned by respondents. Their absence suggests these strategies are not yet widely valued or implemented in the Portuguese context. Conversely, workplace tutoring and team training were validated by both groups as key inclusion drivers, while inclusive recruitment and environmental adaptations were noted primarily by companies.

In terms of obstacles, stigmatization, discrimination, and poor job conditions—commonly cited in the literature—were not flagged by respondents, suggesting they may not be perceived as urgent in the local context. Instead, family overprotection, insufficient follow-up after schooling, and limited corporate sensitivity were most frequently noted, particularly by NGOs. The lack of full consensus between NGOs and companies regarding both effective strategies and key obstacles underscores the complex nature of the inclusion process. These divergent perceptions highlight the need for deeper dialogue and tailored EB strategies to foster more consistent and effective inclusion outcomes for people with Down Syndrome in Portugal.

5. Conclusion

Using a qualitative methodology through semi-structured interviews with representatives from NGOs supporting individuals with Down Syndrome (Associação Portuguesa de Portadores de Trissomia 21 (APPT 21); Associação de Portadores de Trissomia 21 do Algarve (APPATRIS 21); Associação Somos Nós; Associação País 21 – Down Portugal; Associação Vila com Vida; and Associação Nacional de Famílias para a Integração de Pessoa Deficiente (AFID) as well as with companies that define their recruitment processes as inclusive (Company X, Sodexo, El Corte Inglês, and IKEA), the aim was to ensure a range of perspectives on inclusion in the Portuguese labor market. These interviews provided valuable insights into both EB strategies and the barriers to the inclusion of individuals with Down Syndrome in the local employment context.

The results revealed that the EB strategies most commonly implemented in Portugal are the use of workplace tutors, team training, partnerships between companies and NGOs, workplace adaptations, and inclusive recruitment. Thus, the ones considered most effective in promoting the inclusion of people with Down Syndrome in the Portuguese labor market are continuous support through a workplace tutor, team training (both cited by NGOs and companies), inclusive recruitment and workplace adaptations (cited only by companies), partnerships between companies and NGOs (highlighted as a shared strategy by both groups), and annual awareness campaigns (mentioned exclusively by companies). It is worth noting that all the strategies mentioned by NGOs were also acknowledged by companies, demonstrating a shared commitment to adopting inclusive practices and continuously improving workplace environments.

On the other hand, the main obstacles identified as hindering the inclusion of people with Down Syndrome in the labor market in Portugal include: overprotection from families, lack of structured follow-up after formal education, and lack of sensitivity and openness from companies (all cited exclusively by NGOs), as well as cultural resistance (mentioned only by companies). Although overprotection and lack of follow-up are not issues companies can address alone, they highlight the need for a collaborative effort involving families, educational institutions, government bodies, businesses, and NGOs to foster more effective inclusion. The lack of openness and sensitivity on the part of companies, as highlighted by NGOs, indicates a significant challenge that still needs to be addressed in the corporate sector. Meanwhile, the cultural resistance identified by companies suggests an awareness of internal organizational barriers that

must be overcome to achieve true inclusion for individuals with Down Syndrome.

The findings confirm existing literature that underscores the importance of continuous support through tutors (Assis et al., 2014), inclusive leadership and workplace culture (Brimhall et al., 2017; Mor Barak, 2016), and structured partnerships between companies and social actors (Iwanaga et al., 2018). They also align with recent empirical studies emphasizing the role of inclusive recruitment and team training in reducing stigma and enabling integration (Carreño-León et al., 2022; Ijezie et al., 2023).

For these findings to be effectively implemented, organizations must meet several conditions: assigning internal responsibility for inclusion (e.g., through designated tutors), ensuring structured follow-up beyond hiring, and allocating resources for ongoing team training. These strategies should be supported by evaluation mechanisms that assess inclusion outcomes beyond mere compliance. The implications of these findings extend to the domains of education and media. In education, the results underscore the need for stronger school-to-work transition programs and inclusive career preparation. In media and public communication, the strategic promotion of inclusive initiatives through employer branding can reshape public narratives about disability and work, contributing to more positive and realistic representations.

As practical recommendations, companies are encouraged to: (1) formalize partnerships with NGOs, (2) invest in awareness training and inclusive communication, (3) ensure work environments are adapted and predictable, and (4) align their employer brand identity with lived inclusion practices. Future research should consider incorporating the perspectives of individuals with Down Syndrome and conducting cross-country comparisons to identify transferable best practices. Ultimately, this study reaffirms that employer branding, when integrated with strategic communication and authentic action, has the potential to serve not only as a tool for talent attraction but also as a driver of social equity and organizational transformation.

6. Limitations & Suggestions for Future Research

This study faced several limitations. The exclusive use of qualitative methods limited the ability to capture broader trends. Incorporating quantitative data could have enriched the analysis by identifying patterns in the inclusion strategies and barriers affecting individuals with Down syndrome in Portugal. Moreover, the sample size—though diverse—was relatively small, especially regarding company participation, due to difficulties in securing responses.

Future research would benefit from a mixed-methods approach and a larger, more varied sample of organizations. Including the perspectives of individuals with Down syndrome and their families could offer deeper insights into their experiences, challenges, and success factors. It would also be valuable to investigate how advancements in artificial intelligence influence inclusion opportunities, and how organizations can respond to such technological shifts. Finally, comparative studies across countries with varying levels of maturity in inclusion policies could help contextualize the Portuguese experience and identify transferable best practices.

Fundings

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