

# Work organization of technical-administrative employees in a federal educational institution: an approach on career, tasks, and interpersonal relationships

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## Abstract

This article explores the experiences and perceptions of technical-administrative public servants in relation to the organization of their work, analyzed here in terms of three interrelated perspectives: career, tasks, and interpersonal relationships. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 participants, employees of a federal educational institution located in the state of São Paulo. The main results indicated that: i) in relation to career; the stability of public office coexists with the instability of working conditions resulting from the precariousness of public service and public education; ii) in relation to the tasks, evidence of underutilization of labor, work overload, lack of employees, and absence of performance evaluation were identified; and iii) in the context of interpersonal relationships, conflicts and the perception of inferiority stand out due to the daily organizational life that, at times, has privileged the teaching activity to the detriment of the technical-administrative activities. It is concluded that concomitantly with the positive aspects, the work organization of the employees is strongly delineated by conflicts between professional expectations and the frustrations of these workers, revealing contentious, symbolic disputes and challenges present in their daily work.

**Keywords:** Work Organization. Precarious work. Public service. Technical-administrative.

## *Organização do trabalho dos servidores técnico-administrativos em uma instituição federal de ensino: uma abordagem sobre carreira, tarefas e relações interpessoais*

### Resumo

Este artigo tem como objetivo explorar as experiências e as percepções de servidores públicos técnico-administrativos em relação à organização de seu trabalho, aqui analisada em função de 3 perspectivas inter-relacionadas: carreira, tarefas e relações interpessoais. Para tanto, foram realizadas 18 entrevistas semiestruturadas com servidores de uma instituição federal de ensino localizada no estado de São Paulo. Os resultados principais indicaram que i) em relação à carreira, a estabilidade do cargo público coexiste com a instabilidade das condições de trabalho decorrente da precarização do serviço público e da educação pública; ii) quanto às tarefas, foram identificadas evidências de subutilização de mão de obra, sobrecarga de trabalho, falta de servidores e ausência de avaliação de desempenho; e iii) no âmbito das relações interpessoais, destacaram-se os conflitos e a percepção de inferioridade em função de um cotidiano organizacional que, por vezes, privilegia as atividades docentes em detrimento das técnico-administrativas. Concomitantemente aos aspectos positivos, a organização do trabalho dos servidores é bastante delineada por conflitos entre as expectativas profissionais e as frustrações desses trabalhadores, revelando contenciosos, disputas simbólicas e desafios presentes em seus cotidianos de trabalho.

**Palavras-chave:** Organização do trabalho. Precarização do trabalho. Serviço público. Técnico-administrativos.

## *Organización del trabajo de servidores técnico-administrativos en una institución educativa federal: un enfoque sobre carrera, tareas y relaciones interpersonales*

### Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo explorar las experiencias y percepciones de los servidores públicos técnico-administrativos con relación a la organización de su trabajo, analizadas aquí en términos de tres perspectivas interrelacionadas: carrera, tareas y relaciones interpersonales. Para ello, se realizaron 18 entrevistas semiestruturadas a empleados de una institución educativa federal ubicada en el Estado de São Paulo. Los principales resultados indicaron que: i) en relación a la carrera; la estabilidad de los cargos públicos convive con la inestabilidad de las condiciones laborales derivada de la precariedad del servicio público y la educación pública; ii) con relación a las tareas, se identificaron evidencias de subutilización de mano de obra, sobrecarga de trabajo, falta de servidores y ausencia de evaluación de desempeño; y iii) en el contexto de las relaciones interpersonales, se destacan los conflictos y la percepción de inferioridad debido a la cotidianidad organizacional que, en ocasiones, ha privilegiado la actividad docente en detrimento de las actividades técnico-administrativas. Se concluye que, de manera concomitante con los aspectos positivos, la organización del trabajo de los servidores está fuertemente delineada por conflictos entre las expectativas profesionales y las frustraciones de estos trabajadores, revelando disputas contenciosas, simbólicas, y retos presentes en su trabajo diario.

**Palabras clave:** Organización del trabajo. Trabajo precario. Servicio público. Técnico-administrativos.

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## INTRODUCTION

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In contemporary capitalism, characterized by the hegemony of neoliberal logic, we have witnessed, in recent decades, numerous changes in the ways of organizing and managing work in public institutions through the importation of managerial practices and modus operandi in the private sector, aiming to make the administration more efficient and closer to the interests of the citizens.

This discussion is widely present in national and international literature, demonstrating that, by enforcing a marketing orientation, such practices seek to make public organizations focused on a logic of results, cost reduction and increased efficiency, aiming to “produce more with less”, legitimizing the maxim that “the market knows what is best” (Mok, 2001, our translation) and instrumentalizing the cult of performativity (Ball, 2005). In this context, citizens are seen as customers, public servants as entrepreneurs and universities and hospitals as companies (Diefenbach, 2009; Motta, 2013; Ribeiro & Mancebo, 2013).

Specifically in Brazilian federal educational institutions (FEIs) – the empirical space of this research –, there is a growing difficulty in developing their social function, materialized in the form of budget restrictions, outsourcing and precarious working conditions (P. F. Silva & Melo, 2018; K. R. Souza et al., 2017; Tessarini, Saltorato, Sigahi, Fontes & Vieira, 2020). It is noteworthy that, in this study, the definition of FEIs includes the federal universities and the federal institutes of education, science and technology.

Literature points out numerous implications for education workers, such as academic productivism; individualism, rivalry and competition among peers; labor intensification; illness and psychological distress, among other aspects that can compromise the quality of life at work, the performance of servers and the social function of institutions (Bernardo, 2014; Oliveira, Pereira & Lima, 2017; Ribeiro & Leda, 2016; P. F. Silva & Melo, 2018; Vilas-Boas & Morin, 2016).

Research, however, has privileged the work activity of Professors, which is understandable, since they are directly responsible for the production and transmission of knowledge that represent the “end activities” - to use a term “market” – of these institutions. But what about the “medium activities” – no less fundamental for that –, essentially characterized by administrative and operational routines that guarantee the necessary support so that the FEIs can fulfill their social role? These activities are the responsibility of technical-administrative servants in education (TAEs), who often have little social visibility within the FEIs and remain outside their processes and management policies (Faria, Leite & G. A. Silva, 2017; Ribeiro, 2012).

Considering these aspects, this paper aims to explore the experiences and perceptions of technical-administrative public servants in relation to the organization of their work. Therefore, a case study was developed on a campus of an FEI in the state of São Paulo. Against the background of the current context of precariousness experienced by FEIs, the research explores the complex relationships established by TAEs in their work under a multidimensional view formed by 3 interrelated perspectives: career, tasks and interpersonal relationships.

## FEIS, WORK AND PRECARIOUSNESS

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Historically, since the 19th century, different governments have tried to bring public and private administration closer together. However, it was only in the last decades of the 20th century that this approximation became more effective thanks to the emergence of so-called “revolutionary” movements, based on a “management ideology” and supposedly capable of promoting greater efficiency to the State (Misoczky, Adbala & Damboriarena, 2017; Motta, 2013).

With this, the managerial logic provoked substantial changes in the scope of the work organization of public institutions. Administrative models and human resource management practices previously belonging only to the private sector, such as total quality management, the focus on the manager, the establishment of goals and remuneration for productivity, greater organizational control and flexible work, are legitimized and have been institutionalized (Motta, 2013; Ribeiro & Mancebo, 2013), making the boundaries between public and private increasingly blurred.

In this context, workers are perceived as manageable and quantifiable elements, and the traditional perspective of public servants suffers from a profound antithesis: while the immense range of workers is subjected to the insecurity and increasingly frantic productivity demands imposed on private companies, or, worse, condemned to unemployment and informality, the public servant becomes the target of the collective imagination, being conceived as a privileged individual for “earning a lot and working little”, in addition to being endowed with career stability and a potential “joint of perks” (Ribeiro & Mancebo, 2013; S. A. Souza & Moulin, 2014).

In Brazilian public higher education institutions, according to Sigahi and Saltorato (in press), the dynamics of the approximation between the public and private spheres can be traced in three successive phases, called by Chauí (2016) as: i) functional university (1964- 1980), when the process of commodification of higher education begins through the Higher Education Law (Reform of 1968), which allowed the creation of isolated private establishments; ii) university of results (1985-1994), marked by the diffusion of neoliberal ideas through reforms in higher education in Brazil; and iii) operational university (1994-present), characterized, among others, by the deepening of the commodification of education, by the adoption of managerialism in public universities and by the precariousness of work.

Under this scenario, according to P. F. Silva and Melo (2018), there is a growing deterioration in labor relations, a flattening of wages, an intensification of the workload of public servants - who start to accumulate administrative functions in parallel with the intensification of activities of teaching, research and extension –, the absence of hiring technical and administrative servants, and the exacerbation of individualism and competitiveness among professors – marked by the quantitative evaluation of the market logic, especially of those who work in graduate programs. About this, Oliveira et al. (2017) highlight that the physical and psychological exhaustion associated with competition can lead to illness.

On the other hand, according to Ribeiro and Leda (2016), many professors legitimize the academic productivity discourse attached to the managerial model, proving to be subservient to these principles, making mobilization in the face of this productivity context unfeasible and fading a collective agenda of confrontation and resistance. Thus, Bernardo (2014) characterizes the organization of contemporary university work as an amalgamation that involves the discourse of Toyotist flexibility and rigid Fordist productivity goals.

## THE CAREER AND THE TECHNICAL ADMINISTRATIVE WORK IN THE FEIS

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The career of TAEs public servants is regulated by Law No. 11.091, of January 12, 2005. It is a broad and fragmented career, both in terms of qualification and experience requirements for admission and in terms of assignments. The career is divided into 5 levels of classification: A, B, C, D and E. In the first 3, there are positions with lower educational requirements – at most elementary school –, such as doorman, driver and cleaner, most of which it has already been extinguished or outsourced, and the opening of new positions is no longer allowed. At level D, there is the largest number of positions, such as assistant administration and laboratory technicians, who have high school or a technical course as a requirement. At the last level are higher level positions, such as administrator, psychologist and librarian. Although each position has specific attributions, it is possible to categorize 5 main types of functions performed by these professionals:

- Administrative Support – Involve diverse tasks in the areas of human resources, finance, bidding, warehouse, information technology and others.
- Academic Support – Comprises tasks in the areas of academic records (secretary), laboratories, library, direct support to students and professors, and administrative activities related to research and extension.
- Specialized – Include regulated professional activities, with university or specific technical training, such as a psychologist, educator, social worker, accountant, translator and sign language interpreter, among others.
- Management – Assigned to employees occupying positions or functions of trust. They represent typical attributions for managing people, work and assets.
- Representation/Inspection – Involve activities considered “extra” to the position held, such as participation in various committees, course boards and administrative councils, in addition to inspection of administrative contracts, especially those related to outsourcing.

Considering this range of activities, the daily work of TAEs is often marked by labor intensification, especially because of the absence of sufficient servers for the good performance of the work, which requires the execution of tasks that eventually go beyond the attributions the position and for which there is no proper training (Loureiro, Mendes & Pinto-e-Silva, 2018; Tessarini et al., 2020). These aspects, in addition to affecting the quality of life of workers (Garcia, 2017), are also in line with the managerial logic, for which reducing the number of servers is an objective to be pursued, disregarding its effects on the health of the current servers or the quality of service itself (Faria et al., 2017).

In a study with TAEs that work specifically in human resource area, Tessarini et al. (2020) found that the work context of these workers is marked by a series of negative aspects, such as the work pace, pressure for deadlines, lack of personnel, poor infrastructure conditions and conflicting socio-professional relationships. The set of these factors lead to experiences of suffering that materialize in demotivation and the need to adopt defense strategies to minimize the possible effects of this context on workers' health. Additional evidence is pointed out by Leles and Amaral (2018) when they highlight some sources of suffering and illness in the technical-administrative activity, such as inadequate working conditions, overload, bureaucracy, authoritarian forms of management, unilateral communication, lack of recognition and routine without challenges.

Garcia (2017) identifies that general health-related aspects are among the main complaints of TAEs, highlighting specific pain, frequent tiredness, sleeping difficulties, anxiety, depression, among others. Similar indicators are pointed out by Mota, Silva and Amorim (2020), who, when investigating the prevalence of common mental disorders presented by TAEs, concluded that the conditions and organization of work are sources of illness and psychological suffering, revealing the need for intervention institutional and the adoption of specific actions to deal with the problem of mental illness of these workers.

Complementarily, studies show that the work context of TAEs is characterized by the feeling of invisibility and lack of recognition in an environment primarily focused on teaching (Leles & Amaral, 2018; Loureiro et al., 2018). These aspects are decisive to increased demotivation (A.V. Silva & Barros, 2018) and for the level of entrenchment in the work of these professionals, who, despite being unmotivated and dissatisfied, remain in the position and in the institution due to the difficulty of finding another employment that offers similar levels of financial security (Pereira & Lopes, 2019). In contrast, studies also identify that the institutional mission of the FEIs contributes to the establishment of an emotional and affective bond that can lead to increased commitment and engagement at work (Sobreira et al., 2021; S. A. Souza & Moulin, 2014).

Regarding human resource management policies and practices adopted by FEIs, Pinto and Behr (2015) analyze how the performance evaluation of TAEs employees is also based on practices and metrics imposed by the management model, developing based on questionable quantitative data and whose evaluation result does not effectively contribute to the improvement of working conditions, to the increase of employees' motivation or to the provision of a better-quality public service.

## METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

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The research was carried out between August and October 2019 in one of the units (campus) of a federal educational institution located in the state of São Paulo. With over a hundred years of existence, the institution is specialized in offering public education in all types of education: from integrated high school to technical education to postgraduate studies. At the time, 65 permanent Professors, 12 substitutes and 36 TAEs worked at the unit.

As a data collection tool, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with civil servants who work at the institution, being 16 TAEs and 2 professors. Among the TAEs, one female servant was a union representative. Although the focus of the research is the technical-administrative work, we chose to include professors who occupied management positions, in order to provide other perspectives and evidence.

**Box 1**  
**Characterization of respondents**

ID	Gender	Age	Educational Level	Length of Service	Main Activity
TAE 1	Female	39	Graduation	Less than 1 year	Academic Support
TAE 2	Male	57	Especialization	Between 5 and 10 years	Management
TAE 3	Male	37	Master Degree	Between 5 and 10 years	Administrative Support
TAE 4	Female	57	Especialization	Between 5 and 10 years	Specialized
TAE 5	Female	43	Master Degree	Between 5 and 10 years	Specialized
TAE 6	Female	44	Master Degree	Between 5 and 10 years	Management
TAE 7	Male	30	Especialization	Between 5 and 10 years	Management
TAE 8	Male	44	High School	Less than 1 year	Academic Support
TAE 9	Female	51	Graduation	Between 5 and 10 years	Academic Support
TAE 10	Female	36	Especialization	Between 1 and 5 years	Specialized
TAE11	Male	40	Master Degree	More than 10 years	Academic Support
TAE 12	Female	40	Master Degree	More than 10 years	Specialized
TAE 13	Male	28	Graduation	Less than 1 year	Academic Support
TAE 14	Female	33	Master Degree	Between 5 and 10 years	Academic Support
TAE 15	Female	34	Especialization	Between 5 and 10 years	Management
TAE 16	Female	33	Especialization	Between 1 and 5 years	Management
PROF 1*	Male	41	PhD	More than 10 years	Teaching / Management
PROF 2*	Male	45	PhD	More than 10 years	Teaching / Management

\*Interviewed occupants of the position of professor.  
 Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The interview guide was elaborated covering issues related to the political, social and economic context experienced in the country, taking into account its effects on the institution’s functioning and the work of the servers; the characterization of work, including the demand for tasks, the organization and division of work, as well as structural and material conditions; the relationship of the TAEs with their work, in terms of the meaning of the tasks; and interpersonal relationships between TAEs and Professors. This guide only served as a guide for conducting the interviews, since, as is typical of semi-structured interviews, there was no restriction only to the initial questions, in order to allow other pertinent themes to emerge throughout the conversation, aiming to deepen the discussions.

The interviews were conducted at the institution’s headquarters and recorded with the permission of the interviewees, totaling more than 12 hours of recording. The number of interviews was not fixed in advance, but defined throughout data collection, using the criterion of “theoretical saturation”.

Data were interpreted through thematic categorical content analysis, which began with the full transcription of all interviews, consisting of what Bardin (2011) calls the corpus of analysis. Thus, we proceeded to explore the corpus through an exhaustive and repetitive reading of each of the interviews, supported by repeated listening to the audios, in the theoretical framework and in the records made during the interviews. This stage represented a thorough process of employing a critical-reflective look to go beyond the mere evidence of what was explicit in the speeches, seeking to understand and reflect on the contradictions, appearances and meanings that emerged from the analysis of the phenomenon. The analysis categories were defined after collection, based on data obtained in the field, which were grouped according to their empirical proximity (similar/opposite discourses) and their confrontation to the literature.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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The interpretation of the results allowed us to explore the organization of the work of the TAEs at the FEI researched into 3 analytical categories: career, tasks and interpersonal relationships.

### The Career

Understanding the reason why public servants decided to enter the technical-administrative career was one of the first aspects explored during the interviews. Three factors were listed as determinants: financial stability, career plan and dissatisfaction with jobs in the private sector and/or in other spheres of public service.

At this point, there are some positive aspects mentioned by the participants in relation to the career plan, in particular the financial additional, named “qualification incentive”, paid to those with a degree above that required for the position; and career progression every 18 months, as indicated by some lines:

I think it's a very popular condition because it's federal. This has a lot of weight: a certain stability. And we also have a career plan. I think it's very positive (TAE 8).

Before, I had to work in 4 schools to earn what I earn here: in the state, in the municipality, in private... There is no comparison (TAE 16).

We have the incentive to qualify, the possibility of progression in the table... We progress every year and a half. I think this possibility is cool, it is motivating (TAE 11).

I never worked in a place that had a career plan. Private company doesn't have that. I am liking it. As we have not had a salary readjustment for years, what saves today is the career plan, the readjustment that we have in terms of progression (TAE 2).

Such excerpts indicate, as pointed out by Albrecht and Krawulski (2011), that the desire for stability, remuneration and career possibility are, respectively, the main reasons for entering the public service, perceived as a kind of “escape” from conditions imposed in the scope of the private initiative.

Despite the recognition of the advantages of public service and the praise for the career path, TAEs also face a difficult reality in their daily lives. Respondents reported living daily with a sense of fear and anguish in the face of a series of political and economic changes that have been taking place in the country in recent years, which greatly affect their jobs and go against the stability sought in the public service. Such transformations have materialized in two main ways: loss of rights and budget restrictions.

The possibility of losing conquered rights is mentioned by all interviewees, who report fear and concern with regard to numerous aspects, such as the possibility of reducing the working hours with a reduction in wages; new administrative and social security reforms; the institutionalization of a single career for the entire federal service, weakening the TAE career; the extinction of positions – frequent action in recent years –; the increase in outsourcing; the wage freeze – which in practice already occurs, since the last wage adjustment was in January 2017, still in the Michel Temer government –; and even the resignation. They live and suffer from it:

I'm apprehensive about the future of our career, very apprehensive. [...] From this new administration, this new president [Jair Bolsonaro], things really started to get more difficult, because of the pressures we are under, constant threats to our category, since we are the smallest of the Executive, minors within the institution as well (TAE 6).

I'm terrified. Everything is uncertain. I'm afraid of what the government can do with the public service, with the public servant, with everything that is public (TAE 4).

Today I prepare myself psychologically for what may come and I try not to suffer too much from it, because I no longer believe in this stability that we have, which was the main focus of my desire to be a public servant (TAE 12).

The budget constraint, on the other hand, is something more concrete, manifest and has serious consequences, including for students, such as the cut in scholarships and student aid – for example, transport and housing – factors pointed out by the interviewees as reasons for the increase in school dropout. Participants also reported the need for changes in everyday practices in the academic environment, in order to allow the institution to operate with fewer resources. Among them are the reduction in the purchase of consumables, including those necessary for practical classes; limitation of hours of use of air conditioning, authorized only in case of high temperatures; repairing old tools and equipment rather than purchasing new ones; limiting the use of official vehicles for business travel; reduction of daily payment for servers; cancellation of academic events and training; reduced investment in research, extension and innovation; reduction of investment in infrastructure works etc.

Despite its particularities, the scenario experienced by the TAEs in the researched institution does not differ from other FEIs or other Brazilian public institutions. Although there has been an evident worsening of the situation in the last 3 years, it should be noted that this is a continuous process of precariousness of work in the public area, which invariably starts associated with the administrative reform of the late 1990s and the introduction of management logic in the public service (Ribeiro & Leda, 2016; Ribeiro & Mancebo, 2013; K. R. Souza et al., 2017).

In the specific case of FEIs, the current attempt to reduce the size of the Brazilian State and to implement neoliberal policies represents a contradiction and a huge challenge to the quantitative growth that such institutions experienced between 2003 and 2013, when there was a massive process of expansion and internalization of public education, especially at the technical and higher level (P. F. Silva & Melo, 2018; K. R. Souza et al., 2017). One of the interviewees, who followed this process, reveals how worrying this scenario is and a source of psychological distress:

We are really experiencing an incredible change. When I entered the institution, I saw a scrapped school become a real science institute, and right now I'm preparing to see the opposite: this science institute become a scrapped school, due to lack of funds, that sort of thing. This psychologically affects me a lot and, I believe, with many people here (TAE 12).

## The Tasks

In this category, general aspects that concern the relationship of public servants with their tasks are analyzed in the midst of work organization. Initially, we tried to understand the meanings that the interviewees attribute to their functions. The results indicate the coexistence of two ends: pride and the perception of underutilization.

On the one hand, the pride of being a technical-administrative servant is given by the opportunity to work in the educational area and by the fact that exercising a federal public position is seen as synonymous with prestige. Pride is also enhanced by the possibility of performing tasks related to academic background and personal and professional interests:

For me [being a servant] is a matter of greater commitment, so you don't have a link to the private interest; it is linked to what should be the greatest interest, which is the well-being of the population (TAE 5).

I feel fulfilled because I never thought I could work on something I studied (TAE 7).

On the other hand, the impossibility of a job that provides some personal meaning to the server, especially due to the routine activity, little challenging and short of skills and training, is the reason invoked for the emergence of a perception of underutilization, as reported:

I feel a little [used] for what I played in the private sector. I thought, "It's not everything I expected." I can do much more, I have many more qualities than my attribution. I could feel more used. I try, in one way or another, to adapt, but there is not much I can do (TAE 13).

My work today is not very important, the tasks are basic and routine, but the sector is not. There are more responsibilities in the industry. I would like to do more things. But honestly, I let it go, I let it go. I don't demand that from the institution (TAE 3).

We understand that this situation, in addition to the staff allocation policies in the institution, is also triggered by the TAE career structure. The career plan encourages the academic development of the individuals - which can be seen in the profile of the interviewees, given that most of them are specialists and masters -, but it does not establish mechanisms so that they can use additional training in the performance of their tasks. This fact generates situations in which a public servant occupying a primary or secondary level position, for example, even with a master's degree, is destined to carry out activities of the same complexity as another who has the minimum required degree.

The findings are in line with the results of research carried out with TAEs in other FEIs, which find that administrative work is a source of pride for servers when considering the social identification and emotional link developed with the institution. This is because, even the execution of a work that is little recognized and valued when compared to Professors, or even facing an accentuated context of precariousness of the FEIs, collaborating with the fulfillment of the educational and social function of these institutions enhances the levels of belonging, loyalty, commitment and engagement at work (Coutinho, Diogo, Joaquim & Borges, 2011; Faria et al., 2017; Sobreira et al., 2021).

Still in the "tasks" dimension, an aspect present in the speeches of 11 of the 16 TAEs interviewed was the work overload resulting from the lack of servants - by law, the institution should have 45 TAEs servants, but at the time of data collection there were 36 -, which leads to the need to perform activities that do not belong to those provided for in the original attributions of the position, causing dissatisfaction, suffering and impairment of physical and mental health, as well as the quality of the service provided:

I think [the number of servers] is very outdated, we are very overloaded, so I often end up doing tasks that are not in my area. There is a great demand, suffering, a lot of work that you cannot manage to do or respond to, but we have to work on ourselves, but of course you leave here tired (TAE 5).

This aspect is related to the logic of precariousness of the public service, with the difficulty of opening public examinations and with the replacement of employees who leave the institution, either through retirement or dismissal.

A final aspect present in the relationship of public servants with their attributions concerns the performance evaluation process - more precisely, its absence. Corroborating previous evidence that such assessments only fulfill the formality of career progression (Pinto & Behr, 2015; Tessarini et al., 2020), the speeches indicate that there is no effective performance assessment process that, in fact, contributes to improve the quality of the service provided and to build a career development plan:

That evaluation form is very bad, it doesn't really evaluate the person (TAE 9).

I don't observe performance evaluation on a daily basis. It's just a certain period. There comes that formal evaluation of the evidence, the progression, the coordinator evaluates, and that's it (TAE 1).

A possible explanation is the absence of an organizational culture aimed at the permanent development of the workers, including those in management positions - who are responsible for the work of others. All managers interviewed stated that they had never received any type of training related to the human resource management. Some managers even go so far as to say that they are afraid of negatively evaluating the servers, as they fear reprisals when they leave the management position:

Sometimes, in order not to get upset with your co-worker when you are carrying out the assessment, you end up lying so as not to harm him, so I think that this type of assessment is not in line with reality (TAE 16).

Such evidence supports the importance of the FEIs establishing management mechanisms that promote the personal and professional development of employees and contribute to improving the organizational climate and, consequently, the quality of the service provided (Pinto & Behr, 2015).

## The Interpersonal Relationships

When addressing the interpersonal relationships between TAEs and Professors, the speeches explained, as defined by PROF 2, “the abyss” and the conflicts between the two categories, an aspect pointed out by both the TAEs and the interviewed Professors:

They [Professors] scream, treat them differently, think we are here to serve. I feel inferior, it discourages me, it irritates me, but we end up accepting it because it’s an imposed thing. Nobody does anything (TAE 15).

There are a very large number of professors who think they are superior to technicians and in their daily treatment they deal with it that way. They think they are superior, because they think that having a doctorate is something different, having a master’s degree is something different. That doesn’t mean you’re better, but they have this vision (PROF 1).

In a research carried out at the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), Nunes, Santos and Tolfo (2018) point out that the relationships between professors and TAEs are conflicting and marked by the belief of subordination of the latter to the former. However, according to the authors, this belief is, in many cases, enhanced by the TAEs themselves when they believe that they really belong to a lower professional category. Although we corroborate this fact, given that the discourses imply the belief in inferiority, especially regarding the attributions - end activities and middle activities -, in our research we found additional evidence: the division between the categories is something more concrete and fostered by the that just a belief of subordination, resulting from different factors, such as legislation, the institution’s internal policies and even union activities.

First, there are normative issues attached to each career. Professors, for example, are paid higher than TAEs, are entitled to longer annual vacations (45 days compared to 30 for administrative ones), and reach the top of their careers more quickly. This sets up a conflicting discussion about “who works the most”. Three TAEs interviewed mentioned that Professors “earn a lot” and teach few weekly classes, revealing a certain lack of knowledge about the totality of the professors’ attributions, who also experience work intensification experiences, an aspect portrayed in a series of studies (Ribeiro & Leda, 2016; K. R. Souza et al., 2017).

Likewise, due to the low interest of Professors in the daily work of TAEs, an aspect mentioned even by the interviewed Professors, and which is related to the invisibility pointed out in the study by Loureiro et al. (2018), the perception is generated that, in fact, the technicians are paid higher than the value of their work. Pejorative comments that the TAEs receive a salary above the average adopted in the private sector to only perform “bureaucratic” tasks were revealed to be common in the institution, which also shows lack of real attributions, according to reports:

They [Professors] have that view that we are their employees and we cannot produce knowledge, we cannot have intellectual work. [A vision] that technician has to stay in the room, behind the computer, making a spreadsheet (TAE 10).

If you ask most professors about the background of our technicians, they won’t know. Most will not know because they are not interested in the technicians’ work (PROF 1).

In addition to the specifics of each career, the division is fostered, in a veiled way, by the institution itself. Respondents believe that its management policies are not equal and only privilege Professors:

Everything for us is like a favor. We always owe something in return. This is very clear. It seems that we are always begging for something (TAE15).

The most cited example is the possibility of full removal from the position to participate in stricto sensu graduate courses. While a notice is open every six months for professors – it is enough to be classified within the number of vacancies for the leave to be granted –, this possibility is much smaller for the TAEs. For illustrative purposes, just on the campus where the research was carried out, in October 2019, there were 15 professors on leave for a PhD and only 1 TAE server. Such discrepancy is even criticized by the professors themselves:

When you place a notice of removal there with 200 vacancies for professors and you will see that the technician cannot leave, the institution itself is causing a dispute (PROF 2).

We point out, however, that the difficulty of full leave for TAEs lies in the impossibility of hiring a substitute public servant. As there are several cases in which there is only one professional in each position, full leave could hinder the progress of activities and increase the demands of other employees. As a palliative measure, the institution adopts a reduction of weekly working time for student servers, although speeches indicate that it is not always possible to take advantage of it.

Another aspect mentioned is the fact that only TAEs register attendance via biometric clocking system, which brings discontent and comparisons:

I think this issue of only the technicians punching the clock is unfair. There was a speech from the chancellor, about the university rector's trust in the professors. Does that mean administrative staff are unreliable? (TAE 14).

The electronic punch clock shows the lack of isonomy that we have in relation to professors who don't punch, and we have to punch. Those minutes that you are extra are not counted in your favor, but the day that you are less is contested (TAE 10).

Finally, conflicts are also fomented, in the view of the interviewees, by the trade union, which supposedly is more active in defense of the Professors' claims, since, in the institution, there is a single union for both categories. This aspect contributes decisively to the formation of a feeling of non-representation that, according to reports, the servants nurture in relation to the union and which in a way explains the low number of unionized servants:

I don't [feel represented] by the union at all. I think they just want to make a fuss (sic), but really solve it, I don't see any resolution, no (TAE 14).

The union, in various manifestations, puts agendas that are only related to Professors, and often these are matters that should include technicians and they do not. This has even been a matter of complaint (PROF 1).

The union representative of the TAEs, however, disagrees with this perception, understanding that the greatest achievements and benefits of Professors are due to greater union between the category.

All of these factors contribute to stimulating division among the servants – a division that, on a daily basis, manifests itself in banal ways. The collective meetings held in the institution's auditorium symbolize an emblematic example of the abyss between the two categories: the TAEs always sit on the left side; the Professors, on the right side. Another peculiar situation is that of technicians who become professors after being approved in a new public examination and, therefore, are perceived differently from other professors, being commonly called "professors with the soul of technicians", as they know the reality of administrative work, are seen as kinder and more empathetic Professors.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

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This paper explored aspects of the real work activity of technical-administrative professionals who work on a campus of a Brazilian federal educational institution. Among the results, despite numerous positive aspects, the work organization is strongly marked by the incongruity between expectations and frustrations that involve acting as a public servant in the educational area.

Initially considering the perspective of career and security, once the great attractions of public service, we observe that, nowadays, these aspects are no longer evident with the same intensity. It is still possible to speak of a supposed career stability, but stability cannot be thought of only in the maintenance of a permanent employment relationship with the State, but in the possibility of, through this link, providing a public service of greater quality, efficiency and that meets the collective interest. However, how to demand more results when the work is inserted in a political, economic and social context marked by attacks on public servants' rights, by the scrapping of the public machine and by the stereotyped diffusion of the stigma of privileged and guilty public servants for all the economic problems of the country? The reality that candidates face when they become public servants – especially in a numerous career and seen as low-level as the TAEs – is not one of stability through which they will build a safer life, but one of instability, whether rights or working conditions.

The results obtained also reflect, to some extent, the organizational culture present in the public university, in which symbolic disputes for power and prestige take root in everyday life, naturalizing and legitimizing conflicts and division between those who, in principle, should cooperate with each other. Thus, is imposed a work characterized by the perception of inferiority regarding an organizational routine that privileges teaching activities to the detriment of technical-administrative activities. Ultimately, such aspects can compromise the health of individuals and the social function of the FEIs.

We emphasize, however, that we do not consider TAEs victims of governmental or institutional actions. In essence, we understand that these workers are protagonists of their reality and agents capable of transforming themselves and the world around them. Thus, this research sought to give voice to the subjects and understand the meanings and interpretations they attribute to reality, highlighting the understanding of lived experiences and the complex processes of social interaction, based on a multidimensional view that recognizes the positive and negative points of organization of work.

In this research, it was not possible to include other variables related to the theme, such as the impacts on health and life “out of work” resulting from the daily experience and greater labor intensification. Another limitation was the non-inclusion of a greater number of interviews with professors, who could bring other views and oppositions to the problem. Thus, as a suggestion for future research, we believe that it is opportune to carry out “comparative” studies – aimed at debate, not conflict – between TAEs and professors, including quantitative research techniques, allowing for a broader scope of investigation. On the other hand, multiple issues involving the work of TAEs still need to be better explored and interconnected, such as general aspects related to productivity, well-being, health, gender, race and others, for which rich qualitative research methods, such as interviews in depth and focus groups will be decisive.

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