New Blood in the Government

The not-for-profit organization Vetor Brasil has created a program to revitalize state and local governments by preparing young, well-qualified talent to work as trainees in public organizations.

When José Frederico Lyra Neto finished his engineering degree at Unicamp, one of Brazil’s leading universities, he had to make a choice that, for most people, would have been obvious: work as a trainee at Gerdau Steel, a Brazilian multinational, or assume a position with the city council of Araguaçu, a town of just 9,000 inhabitants in the interior of Tocantins state. That year, in 2009, Lyra Neto was one of the ten founders of Vetor Brasil, an NGO focused on utilizing the knowledge of freshly minted university graduates to create urban development plans for small municipalities. The plan he helped to draft for Araguaçu was greeted with an invitation by the then-mayor to assume a position as the city’s Secretary of Economic Development. "She said that the plan was great, but that the government did not have a team capable enough to implement the plan," remembers Lyra Neto. In 2010, when he was 25, he went to Tocantins, and in one year, enacted several plans that, until that point, had existed only on paper. He managed to quadruple Araguaçu’s tax revenues in just one year by streamlining property tax collection in the city. He set up a full-time school model and created a website to map urban problems, such as potholes and litter on the street. In the meantime, he learned a lot. He remembers being frustrated by the difficulty of carrying out certain parts of the plans, but learned how to manage public servants. After his experience in Araguaçu, he took up a post at the Department of Education of the state of Goiás to take part in a reform process that led the state to rank first in the country in indexes measuring the quality of public secondary education.

His career progressed so well, in fact, that he was accepted into the Master's of Public Policy program at Harvard Kennedy School in the United States. It was there, during the frigid American East Coast winter that he began working on a project—a trainee program—that aimed to bring younger and more qualified people into the ranks of the Brazilian government. In 2014, Lyra Neto and Joice Toyota, who had previously worked at Bain & Company—a management consulting firm—and was completing an MBA at Stanford University in California, joined forces to revive Vetor Brasil, which had ceased operations. In this new phase, the non-profit now deploys recent graduates to work in departments of state and city governments. The idea flourished and received the support of corporate foundations, including the Natura Institute and the Lemann Foundation. This year, the first group of trainees was allocated to departments of state governments in São Paulo, Pará and Goiás and to City Hall in Salvador. The trainee program this year is made up of 12 young people who graduated from universities including the Technological Institute of Aeronautics (ITA) and the Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV).

The goal for these trainees is that, just as Lyra Neto, they contribute to improving the government. Adailton Lopes seems to be on the way. He studied aeronautical engineering at ITA and did an internship at Airbus in Toulouse, France. When he graduated last year, he received an invitation to work at Embraer. But having heard about the selection process for the trainee program for the government, he decided to apply. There were 1,700 candidates for
just 12 spots. Adailton was chosen to work at the Department of Government in São Paulo, where he helps to monitor the state of mobility works, collecting data that go into the hands of Governor Geraldo Alckmin. "Several of my friends from ITA would happily trade high-paying positions in the private sector for a chance to make an impact in the public sector," says Lopes. "They don’t go simply because they don’t have the opportunity, and they don’t want to do a concurso público (Brazil’s version of a civil service exam)."

Bernardo Vianna, also from ITA, was admitted to the trainee program at Ambev, the most hotly contested in the country. He preferred to work for the Department of Planning in Goiás, where he was responsible for compiling studies to support the grant review process for a multimodal logistics terminal in the city of Anápolis - a project that aims to bring investments of 1.5 billion reais. Traditionally, Brazilian public administration has been cumbersome. The compensation for higher positions usually exceeds that of the private sector, and political influence often disrupts service. Career employees may be resistant to change. One of Vetor’s greatest challenges has been to choose certain government agencies in which to allocate its trainees. The secretary needs to empower trainees. No red tape. Therefore, the departments that received 12 trainees this year, and will receive the 35 that will be selected for 2016, are recommended by corporate foundations and management consulting firms. Some consultants at McKinsey and Bain are mentors for trainees, as well as Lyra Neto himself, now at Falconi, one of the largest consultancies in the country. Joice Toyota became president of Vetor after receiving a grant of 110,000 dollars from Stanford University to run the NGO.

One of the secretaries known for his more modern outlook when it comes to Brazilian public administration was the Secretary of Education in Salvador. The new incumbent secretary, Guilherme Bellintani, was successful in the task of making Salvador’s annual carnival profitable when he was the Secretary of Tourism. A businessman focused on education, Bellintani founded a law school in Salvador, which in just five years, posted the best results among private institutions on the Bar Association of Brazil’s qualifying examination. He just recently created a program with 112 goals to extricate Salvador from its position as last in education in all 27 Brazilian capitals. Two trainees were there. One of them, recently graduated in Public Administration from the Getulio Vargas Foundation in São Paulo, helped identify locations in which to offer more kindergarten openings, overlaying information such as the average income of each neighborhood, the number of mothers on the waitlist and the availability of land on which to construct new schools. The other one, who studied biological sciences at the State University of São Paulo, is managing the creation of a service center for parents of students who come to the office with questions about enrollment and the requirements of Bolsa Família, Brazil’s state-sponsored welfare program. "The trainees have brought a more analytical approach, which is lacking in Brazil’s Departments of Education," says Bellintani. Although the initiative is new, Vetor takes advantage of a known trend. The so-called Generation Y values professional activities that generate social impact, even earning only a fraction of what they would receive at large companies.

Founded in 1989, the NGO Teach for America, which deploys recent college graduates to teach for two years in public schools in the United States, is a shining example. In 2015, more than 4,000 students became teachers at the organization. To date, 42,000 college graduates have given lessons to half a million students. The founder, Wendy Kopp, has become
practically a celebrity. Similar programs have emerged in Chile and Colombia. In India, the NGO Swaniti deploys young people to work with parliamentarians. More than 90 politicians have received fellows who spend 3 to 12 months working on projects in areas spanning education, health and sanitation. "Our mission is also to show that work in the public sector can be attractive," says Joice Toyota. For now, the public officials who oversee the trainees have expressed interest in keeping them after the program ends. The three trainees from the state Departments of Government have negotiated renewals of their contracts. "But I think I can only keep them for a maximum of three years. We have little flexibility to advance professional compensation," says Karla Bertocco Trindade, Secretary of Partnerships and Innovation in the Department of Government in São Paulo. The salary range for the roles in which the trainees are positioned is 4,000 reais. It is a somewhat unworthy beginning, but many departments simply cannot give promotions because career growth is capped. Regardless of whether the trainees continue in government, it will already be a breakthrough if more public agencies destine commissioned positions to young, well-qualified individuals, rather than relying on traditional political appointments.