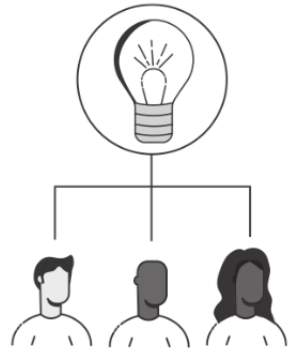# CATCHING INNOVATIVE FEELS

HOW ONE LAB IN BRAZIL IS CREATING THE SPACE AND SUPPORT FOR CIVIL SERVANTS TO INNOVATE
Case by Carlos Centeno, Associate Director, Innovation and Vineet Abhishek, MIT MCP, 2023
Editing: Will Sullivan, Independent Editor

What are the challenges, opportunities, and decision making tradeoffs that bureaucrats face when designing public sector innovations within resource-constrained governments? Over the winter 2022 and summer 2023, MIT GOV/LAB's Governance Innovation Initiative worked with six graduate student fellows and various public sector innovation labs, agencies, and other actors in the Global South to co-produce practitioner-friendly case studies that illuminate context-specific innovations. The first pilot case was researched by Mariama N'Diaye, as part of her Morningside Design Academy Fellowship with the MIT GOV/ LAB, while the first cohort of summer research fellows were launched in collaboration with Priscilla King Gray Public Service Center (PKG) and MIT International Science and Technology Initiatives (MISTI).

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Executive Summary

Amidst all the public innovation labs in Latin America, there's one in Brazil, LA-BORA! gov, dedicated to creating space to expose civil servants to innovative methods and processes. It does not build services for citizens or develop innovative infrastructure. It exists solely to help public servants build trust, foster psychological safety and promote collaboration in the workplace. This is rare: most public innovation labs focus on designing services and initiatives that reform the practice of serving the public.[1] This case explores the challenges and opportunities of launching a lab that instead creates public value by improving the employee experience within the civil service. In this case, we look at how the lab's leadership persuaded senior government figures to launch the lab and how the Covid-19 pandemic was the catalyst that enabled their flagship program to thrive, though not without challenges. We focus on Luana Faria, head of LA-BORA! gov, throughout the case and draw on interviews with 15 mid- to senior-level employees to distill some lessons that we hope will be useful to other civil servants.

MIT GOV/LAB Fellow Vineet Abhishek with LA-BORA! gov and civil servants. Photo: Courtesy of LA-BORA! gov

Learning Case

Background

Brazil's civil service faces challenges common to many large-scale national governments, including constraints in resources such as time, funding, and staffing, which can hinder innovation. In addition to these limitations, a lot of civil servants also don't have the space, time, or support from their supervisors to innovate.[2] While Brazil is a leading force of innovation in the region and a strong proponent of public sector innovation, these two realities may not be as evident in the civil service work environment.[3]

It is within this background that LA-BORA! gov was founded.

Snapshot of Brazil's Civil Service

LA-BORA! gov set out to change Brazil's civil service. So what does it look like?

The Brazilian civil service, with 11.35 million workers or 12.45% of the employed population, faces criticism for inefficiency but falls below the OECD average of 23.48% and even the United States.[4] A 2021 IPEA study shows the wage gap between public and private sectors is not as significant as believed. Job security in the civil service, aimed at protecting employees from political interference, is debated for its inflexibility. Notably, municipal public servants earn significantly less than their federal counterparts.[5] LA-BORA! gov's efforts to bring more meaning to work and connect public servants with citizens are crucial in transforming public service perceptions and debunking myths about the vital role of public sector professionals in providing essential services.

LA-BORA! gov sits within the Ministry of Public Management and Innovation. While it has physical offices, the team often works remotely, embracing some of the changes experienced during the pandemic. The team has adopted similar changes in its flagship program, Free-LA.

But before we get into the granularity of the lab's programs, the question that this case study presents is: how did an enormous central government decide it was a good idea to leave it to a tiny team of civil servants to change how it designed civil service to be more innovative?

Starting with an Itch in the Brazilian Ministry of Health

As we [MIT GOV/LAB] observed in our Learning Case while working with the Ministry of Health in Nigeria, great innovations begin with an itch.[6] Having an itch is an expression often used in entrepreneurship to refer to a problem that is so pressing that whoever is experiencing it will want to address it, or scratch it.[7] Coincidentally, that itch for LA-BORA! gov also started in the Ministry of Health. It's often within this ministry that bureaucracy has its most face-to-face engagement with citizens, given the nature of its mandate and geographic reach.

How did an enormous central government decide it was a good idea to leave it to a tiny team of civil servants to change how it designed civil service to be more innovative?

At the Ministry of Health, Luana Faria, founder of LA-BORA! gov, was assigned to the Secretariat that covers Indigenous communities' basic care health needs. There are around 300 ethnic groups consisting of almost 1 million people living in Indigenous territories across the country. These Indigenous groups are the only groups of citizens in Brazil directly assisted by the federal government for their basic care needs. As a public official, Faria had direct contact with the communities. While the assignment was enriching and fulfilling, the work environment seemed to her to be regressive and toxic. Faria found little to no space for exploring new ideas or leading innovative projects. She was afraid to question the bureaucracy.

As a trained psychologist, Faria identified these and other factors that impeded the professional growth of the Brazilian civil servant. Throughout her career, Faria saw how talents went to waste once an individual passed the Concurso (the public service entrance exams) but encounter a toxic work environment. Public servants are sometimes tied up in so many bureaucratic processes when they join their secretariat or agency, she says. She added that public servants don't lack creativity, tools or will to learn and to transform public service. They lack safe and trusting environments, where they can put their human abilities into practice. And that became her job: to be a part of the solution and to help public servants become the driving force behind a more responsive and inclusive government.

Discussion question:

/ *What would you have done if you were Faria, to change your outlook to be more innovative?*

In an environment marked by fear, distrust, and unsympathetic leadership, what incentive exists to challenge the status quo, particularly when resistance from superiors is the likely response? The Brazilian civil service is often criticized for inefficiency, yet it operates within a highly digitalized government, ranked as the most digital in the Americas and seventh in the world by the World Bank. This digitalization has led to a reduction in public expenditure.

However, extensive regulation can also make processes more bureaucratic and rigid. The Brazilian civil service is bound by the Single Legal Regime, which provides strong guarantees such as tenure and post-retirement benefits but can come at the cost of performance and impact.[8] While each ministry has its own internal resources and is subject to broader regulations, this system can reduce flexibility for substantial changes within a ministry.

In Brazil, the first major reforms were undertaken under the New Public Management wave of the 1990s, which brought in a higher focus on performance and efficiency. More recently, other governments attempted reforms with a format that ignored the importance of public servants and regional diversities, trying to import models from other countries with different contexts, ignoring the real needs of citizens and focusing on pre-established solutions. This approach, of course, does not work, and LA-BORA! gov is aware of this. Complex problems are not solved with simplistic solutions.

LA-BORA! gov team workshopping. Photo courtesy of LA-BORA! gov

Faria's First Idea for the Lab
In the middle of 2019, she was selected to work for the then Ministry of Economy in the Secretariat of Personnel Management and Performance. Soon after, Faria found space where she could express and test her ideas without fear of criticism or judgment. So she presented her case for a lab that would improve employee experience and expose public servants to innovation. She delivered a compelling presentation, based on anecdotal experience and literature.

The leadership didn't bite. It was met with resistance, fear of change, lack of support from leaders, and bureaucratic obstacles. Faria took responsibility for not selling the idea well: She had no data to support the idea, no network and no team.

Discussion questions:
  / *How would you have gathered the data necessary to present the case to senior leadership?*
  / *If Faria's pitch was persuasive, why did senior leadership feel that it needed data to back it up?*

An Idea Doesn't Become a Lab. An Idea Plus Data, on the Other Hand...
She ran a survey with 156 respondents in the civil service based on benchmarks they developed with 15 organizations and teams related to innovation and the civil service.[9] She asked questions about civil servants' previous experience with projects to enhance employee experience; challenges in the work environment; whether they had used innovative approaches before; what a lab could offer to satisfy some of the needs they had identified; and other questions about flexibility to think different and their working environment (See Annex 1 for full questions). Some of the insights were: innovations that come from the civil servants are more likely to take hold; it's not about crafting appealing experiences but about simplifying them for users; the lab should be a catalyst, not a self-serving entity; ditch formalities; individuals, not institutions, are receptive to change; and several insights on the diversity of the workforce to produce innovating outcomes (See a full list of results in Annex 2).

"[The lab] wasn't part of a plan. It was addressing things we were not liking. There was so much human talent wasted (almost 60%), no space for creativity, innovation, freedom. Everyone is tied up in so many rules...So by creating a space like LA-BORA! gov, we were inviting people to express themselves, to exchange ideas and to get out," says Flavia Goulart. One of the first supporters of the lab at the political level.

The insights generated suggested there needed to be changes in people management. But Faria eventually learned, through the years since the first research to found the lab in 2020, that:

"... the focus should be on matters that tangentially relate to people management but do not confine to it. The needs of the users showed that the challenges related to the construction of environments of psychological safety and trust, which are drivers and predeterminants of innovation, occur in all areas, not just confined to people management. Therefore, for a year now, we have been focused on innovation in management, not people management."

Her search for evidence brought her in contact with like-minded people working on similar issues. It helped her develop a larger network, which would prove valuable later on. All the while, Faria had been deepening her understanding of policy design and behavioral economics at the National School of Public Administration (ENAP), where during one of the courses led by Camila Medeiros (Head of GNOVA Lab at ENAP), Faria got introduced to the concept of design thinking. Rodrigo Narcizo (ANAC) also introduced the approach of service design.[10] She was convinced that these were the approaches required for the problems she had diagnosed so far.

Six months later, Faria had gathered evidence and reached out to key people. She finally got the chance to put her plan into action.

A Pandemic as a Catalyst for Change

Just before the pandemic, the lab had run two workshops with civil servants interested in the concept of the lab. During the first workshop, they decided on a mission and a name. During the second major lab workshop in February 2020, civil servants were asked to come up with what the lab could offer, based on the knowledge they had already compiled from the survey. Most ideas were too big to implement, but one idea stuck out. A civil servant who worked in communications thought: What if federal employees could be exposed to innovative projects even when they worked on a team that wasn't that innovative? It was an idea that resembled people's needs because it turns out it is very bureaucratic to move public servants

from one place to another in the Brazilian Public Administration. So, Faria thought: What if we had cross-functional task teams to solve challenging public problems and shifted functional hierarchies to teamcentric and fluid network-based work models?

She proposed a program where civil servants from any team (i.e., ministry, agency, etc.) could work on innovative projects through the lab. The team knew that some civil servants were eager to change things, put their human abilities into practice and would be willing to engage in other work, as long as it was recognized by their supervisors and didn't affect their regular work. They named it FREE LA, as in freelance.

Luana Faria facilitates a session at the 2022 Week of Innovation. Photo: Courtesy of LA-BORA! gov

Months later, the Covid-19 pandemic moved everyone to a remote work format, exponentially scaling the FREE LA program out of necessity. LA-BORA! gov, a lab that had grown out of a documented need to enhance the way civil servants were exposed to innovation, now had a flagship program that was not just nice to have anymore — it was a must-have.

Discussion question:
   / *How do you think this remote work proposal, placing civil servants outside their current teams, would have worked before the pandemic in your civil service?*

How the Free-LA Program Works
It's quite simple, says Isabella Blumm, a social analyst at the lab: "Public servants voluntarily fill out a registration form and can be invited by LA-BORA! gov to work in a project or in a specific public challenge, according to their skills and interest, but they keep their employment ties to their original working place. It scales opportunities for public servants, fosters learning, networking and meaning at work, breaking down silos and stiffing activities to open opportunities for flexible work."

Projects are usually short-term. That's the idea behind the Free-LA; as a civil servant you'll get just enough exposure to experience a project, and you get several projects to test the waters of innovation. A Free-LA project can start in September and finish as soon as October. But it's not so much the dates as it is the hours that are measured. Originally that was 16 hours per week, but the fixed hours became a burden. Too bureaucratic, which is something the lab tries to avoid when possible. Instead, they focused on the experience and made the hours more flexible.

Several months into the Free-LA experiment, they also noticed they were working with enthusiastic civil servants who wanted more than just a month or two of exposure. These became part of the Flexible Team. This split in the program gave rise to the New Models of Work program, which drew a line between two different ways of working with the lab:

/ The Flexible team is part of the LA-BORA! gov team. The civil servants are still in their home agency. Like a loan. " They're not volunteers and don't receive overtime. If extra hours are required, that defeats the purpose. The goal is to bring diverse individuals to the lab, opening it up to new perspectives and questions, and facilitating learning in both directions." says Blumm. The main difference, she says, is it's long-term. They have lab emails and there are few of them, 8 in 2024, unlike Free-LAs, who make up more than 1,800 civil servants.

/ The Free-LAs: It's about exposure and the experience. They are short-term engagements and the civil servants gain a certificate of participation in the project.

Free-LAs work on anything from organizing workshops and facilitating them, to implementing agile models and doing field research. Free-LAs without previous exposure to working with remote teams can learn how to use project management platforms, while also learning about design methods. One Free-LA cited using a SWOT analysis that they learned during their experience with the lab, saying that it unlocked a challenge they were having in their office. Other tools that they learn, according to Faria, are using a project canvas or an agile method.

Simple tools that may never have crossed a civil servant's desk in say, the Ministry of Agriculture, could change the way work is approached and the overall feeling that one is stuck doing something he or she can't find sense or purpose at. This, in turn, can unlock a different way of thinking. If a civil servant can use a SWOT analysis to deal with a challenge at work, they start asking themselves: What else can I use and what else can I change?

Unlocking these possibilities can in turn open up a different way of thinking about their work. It can change a defeatist mentality, when everyone around you says others have tried and failed, to one of "let's try something else." That is an empowering message to send to the civil service, one that is more likely to lead to innovation than the status quo.

What it Feels Like to be a Free-LA
A civil servant of 18 years, who works in northeast Brazil, said their department didn't have funding to invest in their professional development. Then in 2021, through a public innovation network, they learned about LA-BORA! gov. "I don't think in the same way after Free-LA. Last year we had projects — with G-NOVA, and we were selected to participate in the work. Then we created a prototype, a platform, and website — through which we give the public access to a lot of content on our specific area of education. We're trying to use plain language, about budgets, to make public education more accessible."

The other benefit of the Free-LA program is that a civil servant not only gets exposed to innovative methodologies and approaches like agile or design thinking, but is also selected based on the skillset they bring.

"Normally you don't get to use your specialization in your work. Free-LA is an opportunity to use your knowledge in things you like and share. Even if you use 10-20 % of time, it is very important to keep people engaged and happy. This is the major aspect of this

experiment, people-centered, what we need to do for people to be happy, comfortable. They catch people who are interested in the projects very fast. With LA-BORA! gov it is the change, the meaning in work," says a civil servant who has worked for 30 years in the government and is currently part of the president's office.

Surprisingly, the most common benefit cited by the Free-LAs we interviewed wasn't the exposure to tools and/or methodologies. It's the network:

"I have contact with people because of LA-BORA! gov. So, now it's more than a lab ... It creates a broad network of new partnerships. Slowly it is, unintentionally, creating a real network of public management," says a civil servant who works in a project management office.

"The main point is: People don't simply want to be seen as labor. They want to belong, they seek inclusion, connection," says Faria.

This is Faria' priority going forward. Bringing not just the FREE-LA program, but everything the lab does to civil servants in remote areas, in offices with very rigid leadership. The team is drafting the first FREE-LA guidelines

Discussion question:
/ *Although the Free-LA program seems to be succeeding in exposing civil servants to opportunities to learn new skills and apply them beyond their current roles, do you think the program could be detrimental to other aspects of the civil service? What would you do to mitigate this?*

Can you Institutionalize Innovation?
The Free-LA program is now in its third year of operation, and judging by the continued demand for civil servants to join as Free-LAs, (over 1,800 active Free-LAs now), it's likely going to expand now that there are more flexible work opportunities in the federal government. If now one can work partly or entirely remotely in the civil service, what's to stop anyone who wants to be remotely exposed to innovative practices and methodologies from applying to Free-LA? That presents a challenge: How does a tiny lab of fewer than 15 civil servants manage a two-, three-, or four-fold increase in the size of the program while maintaining the quality of the experience and avoiding becoming yet another bureaucratic trap for civil servants?

"It's a real fear that institutionalizing it may make it rigid, not flexible, which is the essence of the program," says Blum. She adds that there's an unfounded fear that it's a way to take work hours from civil servants in other teams to do work for the lab. The lab has a plan to counter this. They have drafted legislation that will institutionalize the program in a way that remains flexible. For example, civil servants will be measured by their results, not by the number of hours they dedicate to the project. In addition to that, the work that civil servants do as Free-LAs could count towards their regular work achievements.

As recently as December 2023, the team was considering launching a pilot within the secretariat in which they sit. But perhaps the best way to get started in bringing the program to scale is to develop a recipe, something anyone can follow, so that Free-LAs can be decentralized and can reach those civil servants who would be less likely to hear about the program. This is Faria's priority going forward. Bringing not just the Free-LA program, but everything the lab does to civil

Luana Faria and the LA-BORA! gov team with civil servants. Photo courtesy of LA-BORA! gov

servants in remote areas, in offices with very rigid leadership. The team is drafting the first Free-LA guidelines. Together with the legislation, they expect the program to sustain itself through different administrations, which brings up a key question: What about the politics?

Brazil is no stranger to polarization, and public sector innovation labs in Latin America are known to succumb to changes in administrations: When a new administration is elected, if it's not the incumbent party, usually initiatives like labs fade either by a lack of interest and champions in the leadership, and/or because funding is not renewed. One of the few labs to have successfully survived through administrative transitions between diametrically opposed parties is the Laboratorio de Gobierno de Chile, the public sector innovation darling of the south. It was created in 2014 and was able to scale its operations between right-wing and left-wing governments. How did it do it? There are several reasons why it was able to thrive, but one in particular seems to continue to politically sustain LA-BORA! gov.

Survival of the Politically Positioned
A lot of public sector innovation labs begin as a need or as a project outside of the norms of the bureaucracy. And they do so under the mandate of a powerful figure, usually a mayor or a president. At MIT GOV/LAB, we've seen this in Sierra Leone's Directorate of Science, Technology, and Innovation (DSTI), under the president; in Mexico City, the Laboratorio de la Ciudad, now the Digital Agency for Public Innovation, under the mayor; and at IBO Lab, in the city of Bogota, Colombia, also under the mayor.

Eventually, these labs have had to demonstrate their value beyond the mandate of their leaders. Those who are unable to, fade as their leaders transition out of their positions with the political cycle. Chile's Laboratorio de Gobierno started under a ministry, then moved to the president's office. While the president gave it power and respect, it could not give it the sustainability it needed, and so the lab was moved once again to a ministry. Faria understood early on that if LA-BORA! gov was to survive, it needed to be supported by leading civil servants.

To do this, Faria is leading the lab deep into the bureaucracy, not as an attachment that belongs to a politician but as a resource for civil servants by civil servants. Much like the

Chileans did when returning their lab to the ministry. In fact, this has been an ongoing process for the past four or so years. The lab has directly reached 58,000 civil servants with innovative experiences, like employee experience engagement, generative listening, storytelling, behavioral insights, all of which are done with an inclusive lens, so as to bring people from, for example, different regions, skillsets, and age groups.[11] Faria says the more diverse the group of civil servants they reach, the more likely that the civil service will be accessible and the more likely that innovation will permeate the civil service that they are trying to change. For example, in one of MIT GOV/LAB's cases we learned about how challenging it can be to innovate processes and services within a ministry if the process is not inclusive and leaves out civil servants who may not be as exposed to design practices, regardless of how well designed an innovation is.

This approach has created an extensive web of supporters, some of them in senior positions, in 86 different ministries, agencies, and subnational government administrations, which can be the difference between fading with a shift in administrations or thriving with the support of so many civil servants.

But other labs have failed even with the support that LA-BORA! gov has amongst civil servants. Like most bureaucracies in complex environments, the lab is not immune to shifts in power. It has managed this particularly well from the start because it has remained committed to its experimental nature without boasting about their work or, as Faria says, "we are not waving flags saying we are better because we are creating innovative experiences. We want everyone to have access to LA-BORA! gov". And therein lies the scalable strength of the lab; it grows without taking anyone's power away. Instead, it is giving civil servants more power, and in doing so, it is becoming a dependable resource for the civil service.

Conclusion

That is something to be excited about, but it also presents a challenge. The lab has been able to survive for four years while their flagship program, Free-LA, continues to scale. As the team prepares to decentralize their New Models of Work Program, they expect this new phase of the lab will expose hundreds of civil servants to other, more dynamic and innovative areas of the government.

But what happens when the program becomes so large that it just becomes one more part of the bureaucracy? When a new civil servant is required to be a Free-LA to be exposed to innovation? Who takes responsibility and who becomes motivated to innovate if it becomes a requirement? What happens when supervisors feel threatened by a program that is energizing their workforce but showing them greener grass, as the saying goes? Will civil servants become dissatisfied and push for change within their less proactive teams? Will they simmer in frustration when they see how much more enjoyable being a Free-LA can be?

In essence, when a critical mass of civil servants can be who they truly are without fear, with autonomy and self-responsibility, is there a strategic plan to shift the civil service to renew itself? Can it do so by enabling more experimentation and allocating appropriate resources for ministries and agencies to reinvent themselves and provide a better service for its employees and in turn for citizens? While answering this question will take time, it'll need to be answered in an environment of experimentation and trust.

Annex 1
Survey Questions for Civil Servants
/ Can you describe your previous experiences with projects and actions aimed at enhancing well-being, engagement, and employee experience within the public service sector? Please share both positive and negative aspects you encountered.
/ Based on your experiences, what challenges have you faced in fostering a positive employee experience and engagement within your workspace?
/ Could you share a specific example or story where an innovative approach significantly impacted well-being or engagement in your work environment?
/ In your opinion, what are the key elements or resources lacking in the current environment that could potentially be addressed by an innovation lab?
/ How do you envision the role of an innovation lab in addressing the challenges and opportunities related to well-being and engagement in the public service sector?
/ If an innovation lab were to be established, what types of programs or initiatives would you find most beneficial in enhancing employee experience and engagement?
/ Can you recount any collaborative experiences where collective efforts led to improved well-being or engagement within your team or broader unit?
/ What are your expectations concerning the balance between structured programs and the freedom for organic, participant-driven content generation within an innovation lab?
/ Looking ahead, what are your aspirations regarding the outcomes an innovation lab could achieve concerning well-being, engagement, and overall employee experience?

Annex 2
Insights from Civil Servant Survey
/ Immersive, hands-on experiences augment the sensation of productivity.
/ When ideas emanate fluidly from the public servants themselves, it helps fostering transformation.
/ The paramount challenge lies not in crafting creative and appealing experiences, but in simplifying them for users and engendering collective resonance.
/ Collective endeavor encourages participants to transcend their own perceptual and interpretive limitations.
/ The lab's services should not be self-contained; they should act as catalysts for fresh innovation opportunities.
/ The services should embody processes of experimentation and learning, which can culminate in long-term value.
/ To engender value, it's imperative to relinquish attachment to anticipated outcomes and embrace the authentic needs of individuals.
/ Curiosity and the quest for novel experiences are common traits among the users of
/ innovation lab services.
/ Engaging with a diverse array of actors fosters a milieu more amenable to conflict and divergent ideas.
/ The participant's perception of the experience significantly influences their propensity to disseminate acquired knowledge.

/ Piercing the "innovation bubble" to reach individuals who deem innovation alien to them presents a formidable challenge for the lab.

/ Employing inclusive tools and techniques can mitigate hierarchical and decision-making disparities.

/ By eschewing excessive formality, individuals can hone their focus on quintessential matters.

/ The act of deconstructing established notions and showcasing vulnerabilities is perceived as emblematic of authenticity and courage, rather than weakness.

/ Individuals require a supportive network and trustworthy environments to more securely navigate new terrains.

/ Individuals exhibit a quicker and less resistant adaptation to change compared to institutions and norms.

/ The perception of the lab's service experience hinges on harnessing the diverse potentials of varying profiles and ideas.

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