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Final published version

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Citation (APA)

Kleiman, F., Rego, R. S. M. H. P., Farias, R. D. S., Nogueira, N. J., Brito, T. B. D. O., Marasca Bertazzi, D. M., & Barbosa, M. M. (2023). New ways for monitoring the public workforce after the pandemic: The management and performance program in the Brazilian Federal Government. In D. D. Cid (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 24th Annual International Conference on Digital Government Research - Together in the Unstable World: Digital Government and Solidarity, DGO 2023* (pp. 349-354). (ACM International Conference Proceeding Series). Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). <https://doi.org/10.1145/3598469.3598508>

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New ways for monitoring the public workforce after the pandemic

The management and performance program in the Brazilian Federal Government

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ABSTRACT

The sanitary emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a push for the adoption of teleworking in both public and private sector. In the Brazilian Federal Government, such effort was supported by a national program named Management and Performance Program – PGD (*Programa de Gestão e Desempenho*). The PGD enabled the country's federal civil servants from the Executive to work from home and was established with three main pillars. First, it supported new ways of contracting deliverables between management and teams. They allowed work to be monitored remotely instead of the old-fashioned procedure of controlling time sheets. Second, to unleash the possibilities of such contracting, governmental units were pushed to map their main service delivery processes and transform them into tasks that could be rationally distributed to teams. Third, new digital systems registered these agreements and monitored their execution monthly. Based on the case study of the PGD, this policy paper describes the development of the PGD within the Brazilian government and indicates challenges to progress with its implementation. We conclude that the PGD might have created the needed structure for the government to step towards new ways of managing the workforce.

This policy paper presented the case study of the PGD, a transformation program within the Brazilian government that enabled remote work in public service in Brazil. The PGD study case was based on documents, websites, articles, and news from the Program's implementation process. Many of the presented discussions are ongoing and aim to support practical and academic discussions on the challenges of implementing government transformation.

The PGD is the Brazilian national Program that comprises legislation, digital systems, and management practices improved during the pandemic to enable teleworking in the government. Besides remote work, it can be seen as a driver for setting new work planning and monitoring practices. The PGD demanded innovative digital systems and generated opportunities for strategic changes in the Brazilian public service.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Applied computing**; • **Computers in other domains**; • **E-Government**;

KEYWORDS

Teleworking, Digital Government, Civil Servants, Digital Systems

ACM Reference Format:

Fernando Kleiman, Roberto S. M. P. Rego, Rogério de S. Farias, Nathália J. Nogueira, Thais B. de O. Brito, Marcelo M. Barbosa, and Danilo M. Bertazzi. 2023. New ways for monitoring the public workforce after the pandemic: The management and performance program in the Brazilian Federal Government. In *24th Annual International Conference on Digital Government Research - Together in the unstable world: Digital government and solidarity (DGO 2023)*, July 11–14, 2023, Gdańsk, Poland. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 6 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3598469.3598508>

1 INTRODUCTION

Governments have been facing the challenges to modernize public workforce management worldwide. Towards this end, they have tried translating ideas from the private sector into governmental practices particularly after the new public management agenda spread in the 1980s [1, 2]. A list of transformations resulted from this movement, from new ways of monitoring budgets to fostering the private provision of governmental services. Human resource management in governments was not different, and some initiatives were taken regarding job specification, labor force distribution, and new ways of engagement. The application of Activity-based Management (ABM) and Results-based Management (RBM) supported these efforts to translate private sector tools for hiring and monitoring deliverables in the public sector [3, 4]. In this case study,



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DGO 2023, July 11–14, 2023, Gdańsk, Poland
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ACM ISBN 979-8-4007-0837-4/23/07.
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3598469.3598508>

we focus on the implementation process of the Management and Performance Program – PGD (*Programa de Gestão e Desempenho*), an initiative of the Brazilian federal government.

PGD was created in the context of an effort to implement new public management agenda in Brazil through the Federal State Reform strategy (1994-2002) [5, 6]. It introduced new rules and regulations aimed at improving hiring and monitoring civil servants' work and reducing red-tape burdens on human resources teams. One of the main goals was to decrease costs and increase government service delivery efficiency [7]. Though some of the new regulations unleashed new management opportunities, most of them were not implemented for decades, given the agenda switch from the succeeding cabinets' unique priorities.

The international sanitary emergency of 2019 triggered a major change. It demanded solutions at different levels to keep businesses running "as usual" while reducing personal contacts at work as much as possible. This resulted in a major push towards remote work [8, 9]. We will not detail the sanitary crisis as this is not the focus of this policy paper. However, we highlight that the push to immediately transfer as many tasks as possible to remote work happened in many economic sectors, demanded better ways to articulate, coordinate and monitor work [10, 11]. PGD in this context became an important tool.

Needless to say that the need for teleworking in the public sector was not different from the private sector [12, 13]. All previous experiences of working remotely supported the building up of new solutions on contracting and setting new work cultures. The expertise coming from programming teams within the information and technology sector was used as a benchmark for professionals in many other fields. This change enabled developing tasks in previously unthinkable remote ways.

This policy paper presents a case study of the PGD and explores the opportunities (and limits) it unleashed in changing the culture of work management in the Brazilian Federal Government [14, 15]. It provides a framework to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic became a critical juncture in tweaking existing legal and technological frameworks to expand the use of telework.

In the next section, we present a summary of the PGD, including its history. The next section summarizes the actions taken through PGD to build new management practices within the Brazilian Federal Government. The last section discusses the opportunities and limits coming from the Program's implementation process. From a practical and academic perspective, the outcomes can be useful to better understand the challenges to changing the workforce management culture in governments, especially in an emergency context.

2 THE MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE PROGRAM

Inspired by the New Public Management trend from the 1980s, the Brazilian Federal government implemented a modernization program for its governmental service [6, 7, 14, 16]. Named the State Reform strategy, led by the scholar Luis Carlos Bresser-Pereira, it comprised a series of mechanisms to increase governmental efficiency by reducing costs and making contracts more flexible [5].

One of its main elements focused on fostering new ways of contracting work within the public service. Decree 1.590/1995 [17], in particular, included a brief provision allowing public employees to forego traditional time sheet controls if their organization implemented a PGD program. The objective was to manage workload based not on the time public employees physically stayed inside government offices (through the use of "time clock"), but on the execution of tasks agreed between workers and their managers in a specified timeframe [14, 16].

It took almost twenty years to regulate this provision, with the first pilots implemented in 2015. The conceptual novelty of focusing on deliveries and not on time spent in the physical offices allowed civil servants to remote work even before the pandemic. The most common experiences rested within the more technology-intense units (SERPRO and DATAPREV), but there were also some pilot projects in other settings (CGU, CADE, and ANATEL)[14]. Likewise, these practices introduced some stress in regulations to allow working-from-home situations based on existing laws.

Inspired by RBM practices, the initiative demanded a schedule connecting work time, activities, and deliveries from each worker in a team. Such schedules result from the negotiation between workers, teams, and managers and are registered in a work plan that can be digitally monitored [13, 18]. Digital systems supported monitoring activities from hierarchical superiors up to the cabinet of the highest authority in each governmental unit.

The COVID-19 pandemic fostered the use of PGD, transforming analog work management routines and tools into digital ones aimed at ensuring that workers maintained social distancing and performed their activities from home as much as possible. The immediate need to exempt workers from traditional timesheet controls resulted in digital systems initially replicating the actual tasks performed by each worker [19]. At this stage, each organization that wanted to implement PGD had to devise lists of activities that each worker could choose to fill up their work plans in consultation with their direct leaders [20]. This transition resulted in a mess of unconnected registers, most of it unrealistic to what workers were doing. Still, the urge to change how things were organized created an unexpected window of opportunity for reshaping governmental management in Brazil. The practice of negotiating deliveries and thinking about activities in terms of their contribution to higher goals was a progress towards better practices in public administration. The improvement in planning practices strengthened by the need to represent actual tasks at the individual level enabled government authorities to monitor activities to attain public service priorities [21].

The evolution of management practices towards digital offices was made possible by a complete set of new tools, which included support for defining digital offices and the use of virtual environments like Teams, Zoom, virtual drives, and other digital solutions to facilitate teleworking. As a result of this shift, the digital office emerged as a virtual space that encompasses all the documents, assets, and interactions necessary for service delivery [22, 23]. In addition to the hardware and software interfaces, digital systems were implemented to facilitate the registration of tasks and deliveries between individuals and managers, with the assistance of a consulting support team and an active network of users. A special

team in the federal government was established to aid new areas in transitioning to this new environment, and many networks were created to ensure work continuity even when the physical office was no longer available. A silver lining of this process was the development of a new work monitoring culture within the public service. Prior to the pandemic, most observers would have deemed it impossible for the public service to operate at such a high level of remote work [15, 24].

2.1 A new regulation, the *Instrução Normativa* 65/2020

Unlike in the private sector, in Brazil the government must operate based on legal permission. In a strict interpretation of public administration procedures, civil servants can only do what is sanctioned by laws [25, 26]. Consequently, transferring as many civil servants as possible to a teleworking situation was a great challenge. As mentioned, the existing rules supported some previous pilot experiences of remote work in the Brazilian federal government, designed in specific institutional settings. Generalizing these practices to all federal administration required understanding the existing limitations and issuing new regulations.

A group of public management experts was engaged in using the experience learned since 2015 to find the legal pathways to foster teleworking in a massive scale. Hence, in July 2020, an additional regulation (*Instrução Normativa* 65/2020) was issued, enabling a general practice of work monitoring that could be performed remotely, overcoming the old-fashioned timesheet control [27].

Every team that could do their activities remotely was now supported provided that two conditions were met [28]: 1) Tasks that demanded physical contact with people or objects could not be transferred to a digital office; and 2) Profiling civil servants that would be available to keep working in a remote setting. When one specific unit could find a fit for both conditions, the new regulation would support their transition to telework.

Behind the legal support came the duty of getting managers to understand their teams' work from a different perspective. They were challenged to translate work hours into deliverables that could be summarized in individual agreements. These agreements set the grounds for monitoring, which also became an innovation in many of the units that started working remotely.

With *Instrução Normativa* 65/2020 PGD remained optional, and each institution could decide which activities could be transitioned to telework and who could participate. Individuals were also free to choose not to participate in telework. The outbreak and evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic certainly helped the rapid adoption of the initiative. Another aspect, however, became important, as PGD became the micro-foundation to map services and tasks in new digital systems. The following two sections will overview these aspects.

2.2 Mapping services and tasks

After the outbreak of the pandemic and with the new normative background, PGD pushed teams and managers to reflect on their activities and on their deliveries, triggering government institutions to have a better understating of their purpose and priorities. Governmental units were encouraged to map their main service

delivery process. The next step was translating these activities into tasks and deliverables that could be allocated to team members [28]. In short, the need for information for the new work agreements resulted in a major incentive towards defining deliveries.

Though performed at a very high level, the process of guiding managers and civil servants to reflect on their activities gave rise to another repressed agenda – effective planning in public service [29]. Top-down planning used to be the most common management system in the Brazilian government. The president's cabinet and ministers would discuss the main priorities, and each sector would use them to derive their roles in delivering them. The Brazilian Federal law defines that a multi-year plan should be issued every four years, the basis for ministries and units to plan themselves. However, this way of planning usually resulted in very broad goals, difficult to analyze or monitor in concrete delivery terms [30, 31].

As previously indicated, the pandemic triggered institutions adopting PGD to set goals and deliveries to the individual level of execution. A large and spread number of singular timed agreements between managers and their teams emerged. The aggregation of these agreements resulted in broad views of activities and deliverables performed monthly within multiple public service teams. In a nutshell, the contrast between the top general multi-year governmental plans and the bottom granular network of individual deliveries gives insights into new perspectives for public management [20].

On the one hand, it can be seen as a step towards more ambitious planning from a civil servant perspective, giving them more meaning if connected to actual government priorities. On the other hand, it can also unleash new ways to distribute work in public service, giving top and mid-managers a clearer picture of what is being done within their units. Undoubtedly, if the top planning and daily tasks are connected, the whole public service has many opportunities and benefits in terms of management, monitoring, and decision-making.

As stated on the Program's website, in the mid-term, it is expected that the Program facilitates these individual work plans to be directly connected to each unit's strategic plans [28]. The goal is to enable the government to monitor activities that support priorities by improving government planning practices and a more accurate representation of tasks down to the individual level.

2.3 New digital systems

The PGD was based on new legislation combined with new managerial practices for planning and monitoring work and resulted in a more flexible public service. However, it needs a lot from digital systems to register tasks and monitor work. Regulation allowed each government institution to create its own digital system to execute and monitor the program, if it sent a specific dataset to a transparency panel.

The result was dozens of digital systems, developed from 2020 until the end of 2022, and hundreds of units opted to adopting the ones that suited them best. Designed by specific government institutions, they were mostly based on their individual requirements and needs [28].



Figure 1: PGD systems screen: Activity, Time, Evaluation, and Monitor [32]

Within these many digital systems, one, in particular, has been developed as the main reference by the Ministry of Economy – Figure 1 [32]. The system also intended to facilitate the monthly monitoring of their execution, focusing on making the register of tasks and agreements easier. Thousands of managers would have a new activity within their already busy agenda: to define, monitor and evaluate the work plan of their subordinates. Nevertheless, from a management and H.R. perspective, it meant empowering teams and units to be in charge of their work and repositioning the central control areas to a more supportive role.

Most importantly, a great deal from the Brazilian Federal Service had its workers enrolled in different programs, actively agreeing to work plans and executing and registering activities in those systems [14, 20, 28]. The urgency of having digital registers triggered a change in the mindset of the teams responsible for labor management [28]. Despite its challenges, making the digital systems work was a strategic success factor within the diverse set of actions to operate the PGD [14].

Another strategic success was found in the way managers rapidly took charge of understating activities, defining goals, and negotiating hours with their teams. It was cumbersome to realize the importance of such definitions to support each unit's work. The PGD, its agreements, and its systems helped to start shedding light on the commitment of civil servants to work. Contrary to what many expected, evidence shows that, in many cases, teams increased their workload and deliveries in the new setting [28]. Instead of leading civil servants to reduce their engagement and productivity when working from home, in many cases the opposite took place.

Once more, the PGD experience happened in a specific context and had different problems through its implementation process. For instance, the extensive list of activities available in the systems used in the agreements was never a perfect fit for civil servants' actual activities. However, an increasing number of civil servants complain over the amount of information produced through these systems, though they are not being used [11]. There is room for improvement in both aspects of defining system requirements (including activity lists) and the information flow (and use).

Regardless of such problems, a change in practices and culture happened. The PGD's implementation demonstrates the possibility of changing daily governmental operations and the importance of making room for experimentation, trial by error, and correction for improving results.

Time and openness for experimentation are also needed to develop the many digital systems supporting the PGD. Some of them are still under pressure for improvement, and new updates are expected to be available in the coming months [28]. Moreover, these new developments are expected to be based on additional methods for mapping tasks, defining agreements, and monitoring practices [11].

3 DISCUSSION: LIMITS AND OPPORTUNITIES COMING FROM THE PGD

Though the PGD was primarily designed to support teleworking in the Brazilian Federal Government, several silver linings resulted from it. Three main layers of innovation emerged in terms of legislation, management practices, and digital systems. Besides some

advances in making remote work feasible in a limited period, many challenges are still in place to fully develop the Program.

First, the case indicated a need for continuous legislative improvement when implementing change. The emerging new work culture seeks support for its dissemination, and further legal instruments can be strategic. Given that most of Brazil's government work monitoring practices are still focused on time sheets, the case suggests that allowing and fostering units to adopt new practices strongly depends on new regulations. For the case, the existing legal framework limits are to be faced by incorporating the experience earned by the federal administration in the last two years.

Second, the limitations on actual planning practices work a legacy system, which is hard to overcome. The case shows that fostering new models, especially bottom-up planning practices, may enable the government and its units to incorporate real-life activities into top-layer plans. These plans can also express tensions between individual feasibility of tasks and the overall priorities of units, reflected in the definition of the plans' layers. The trajectory of the PGD implementation resulted in an opportunity to map service delivery processes in new ways. There is a possibility that such new practices may unleash improved planning, monitoring, and service delivery practices by the government. As mentioned, it might be a feasible step for the program experience to facilitate each unit's strategic plans, connecting them directly to the individual level of work.

Lastly, the PGD implementation in a diverse set of units resulted in various groups of systems. These experiences can be used as input for improving technical back-office challenges, focusing on delivering more user-friendly platforms. New platforms may make registering, monitoring, and evaluating individual and unit work plans easier, a key element for the Program. The systems may facilitate cultural change in the government, using technology to solve the complexity of registers and the use of the produced information.

Despite these advances, the expansion of the program displayed several challenges. For example, the potential in the use of information produced by management systems, which now are completely digital, is still underutilized. Second, in many units, the PGD is still treated only as an element of H.R., disconnected from institutional strategies. More important, many managers found it difficult to understand the new modalities of management based on team performance, relying on traditional models of control in telework.

The PGD resulted in many new opportunities and limits towards improving public service efficiency. Though built in the context of an emergency, the legal, digital, and social structures which emerged from this experience are likely to represent a step towards new ways of managing the workforce and changing public service culture.

4 CONCLUSIONS

As the case study shows, new ways of contracting deliverables between management and teams were supported by new regulations issued in the program context. There are indications that these new practices enabled the government to transition from the former method of controlling time sheets to having work monitored remotely. Grounded by mapping main service delivery processes, tasks started to be rationally distributed between teams, unleashing

the possibilities of new ways of contracting. Through the PGD, governmental units were pushed to develop and use new digital systems, which might become central in registering contracts and monitoring their execution monthly.

Though the main driver for implementing the PGD was the COVID-19 emergency, the case indicates that its outcomes are expected to last beyond the pandemic. The opportunities and limits to increase public service efficiency are available using the systems, legislation, and cultural change that started with the PGD. The Brazilian government, and other governments around the globe, can learn from this experience that put to practice many innovations in workforce management and planning. The PGD case shows that adopting these new ways of planning, managing, and evaluating the use of the public service workforce is feasible, though challenging.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank the Ministry of Management and Public Service Innovation (*Ministério da Gestão e da Inovação em Serviços Públicos*) /Brazilian Federal Government for supporting the work and its publication. All authors work in the implementation of the PGD for the Brazilian federal government and the views expressed here are solely those of the authors and do not represent the official views of any organization the authors may be affiliated with.

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