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Cities Increasingly Recruiting Outside Help.

A growing number of local governments are turning to private fellowship programs to import talent when they need it.

Promoting innovation in government is important but it's difficult to bring in fresh perspectives and talent to complement the expertise and institutional knowledge of existing staff. Complicating the situation is the fact that "workers in the public sector [have] almost double the median tenure of private sector employees," according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, while job growth in state and local government remains among the weakest of any industry.

With low turnover and few new workers, cities are in a quandary when it comes to stoking the innovation process. To address this challenge, cities are increasingly using fellowships to import talent from outside the public sector to support particular projects and initiatives. We're beginning to see the results.

Fuse Corps is a leading example of this approach. In the program, cities identify an urgent, significant need and, if selected, are matched with an individual from the private sector who will bring fresh energy and new skills in a one-year placement. Fuse Corps executive fellows have on average 15 years of experience in the private sector or as entrepreneurs, as well as particular expertise in the city's priority area. The organization recently placed its second group of fellows in cities around the country.

Fuse Corps CEO and co-founder Jennifer Anastasoff says the program is "responding to a real desire in cities to modernize leadership and create transformative change in cities." For example, current fellow Rahul Mewawallah, formerly global vice president and general manager at Nokia, is serving in San Francisco Mayor Edwin M. Lee's office and is working with the city's Office of Innovation on a campaign to make San Francisco the "innovation capital of the world."

He has also played a pivotal role in developing and cultivating the Entrepreneur In Residence program, which has attracted over 200 applications from teams of entrepreneurs around the country and the world — from Detroit to London and Johannesburg — and is currently in the final stages of selecting 3-5 teams to work in San Francisco to solve some of the city's problems through innovation and technology.

The infusion of outside talent into a city provides an important addition to under-resourced teams and initiatives. Local governments are eager for these opportunities. But as Anastasoff notes, fellowships like Fuse Corps are not just simply expanding capacity; they seek to interrupt the existing modes of work and provide the energy and ideas needed to redirect projects for better outcomes. "This isn't just a question of more hands — the champions within city government who are working with our fellows recognize and value that they are here to help change culture," she says.

But city governments wouldn't be signing up in significant numbers for opportunities like this if the results were limited to intangible culture shifts; public sector culture can be resistant to change, and

without seeing real tangible impact, the “interruption” provided by a fellow would likely remain just that.

In cities like San Jose and Washington, D.C., fellows are achieving the kind of outcomes needed to contribute to concrete change. In Washington, D.C., Fuse Corps fellow Lisa Gans developed the DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative’s five-year strategic plan, and helped procure a \$28 million grant for the work. In San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed’s office, Fuse Corps fellow Jeremy Goldberg led the implementation of the Silicon Valley (SV) Talent Partnership, which brings partners from the private sector to help solve problems in the public sector.

“Innovation and collaboration are the hallmark of Silicon Valley, and the SV Talent Partnership is another example of how talented private sector and public sector employees are making an impact in our region. One partnership in particular, the Fuse Corps Fellowship, served a key role in the coordination and management of its launch,” says Reed. “Over the past year we benefited from over 1,000 pro-bono hours on projects including: an innovative design lab at the Stanford d.school [of Design], a strategic marketing project for our Parks Recreation and Neighborhood Services department, and enhancing our city’s online permitting process.”

The work in San Jose, similar to the Entrepreneur in Residence model in San Francisco, mirrors the Fuse Corps model on a local level. This is early evidence of the rapid adaptation and replication of innovative models for impact.

Fuse Corps is not the only national fellowship working to increase innovation in American cities. Code for America’s fellowship, which brings a team of designers and app developers to a city to collaborate with city government on technology-based solutions to some of that city’s challenges, is entering its fourth year. The Detroit Revitalization Fellows (DRF) program, a philanthropic initiative run out of Wayne State University, is attracting national talent for local impact, and in doing so, brings a dynamic set of perspectives and ideas to Detroit. Modeled after the CUREx fellowship in post-Katrina New Orleans, Detroit’s DRF initiative has fostered creative solutions to local problems, and has a high proportion of fellows who continue their work and commitment to Detroit well beyond their one year fellowship.

These programs are improving in real time with input from fellows and hosts. Updates to the selection process, funding model and program structure are aimed at maximizing value and impact. The result is that cities are now in competition for fellows, and in the Fuse Corps program, many cities are prepared to take on the funding burden (previously carried jointly with Fuse Corps and often a corporate employer who allowed its fellow to go “on loan” to a placement) in order to receive new talent.

The agility to learn and adapt is part of what is making Fuse Corps and similar models a success. But it doesn’t hurt that there is a hunger for this kind of innovation, and that connections between sectors are becoming increasingly important as leaders from across the spectrum recognize the potential of collaboration and partnership.

BY ARTHUR BURRIS | DECEMBER 19, 2013