MCSE Fellowship
Summer 2013 Report
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This summer (winter) I interned with Endeavor Brasil, specifically within its Visão de Sucesso project. It was a valuable learning experience and I thank all those who contributed to making it happen.

Endeavor is a global not-for-profit organization with regional independent offices that share the goal of supporting high-impact entrepreneurship. That means identifying—usually large—enterprises that are innovative in their fields and have great potential for growth, and then aiding them to achieve that potential. Support comes mainly in the form of capacity building on best practices and connections to mentors, partners and investors. Endeavor’s theory of change is that such enterprises create both numerous jobs and vast wealth, which are good for the economy. Endeavor then gives more visibility to its entrepreneurs, aiming to showcase them as national role models, thereby promoting more economic growth and inspiring entrepreneurial innovation. Endeavor Brasil has developed several programs that reach far beyond the officially selected ‘Endeavor entrepreneurs,’ one of them is Projeto Visão de Sucesso.

Visão de Sucesso (VS) was developed in partnership with the Inter-American Development Bank, aiming to create positive social impact by supporting enterprises—usually small and in early stages—that either serve the “Bottom of the Pyramid” (BoP) or include it in their business operations. The project focuses on the entrepreneurs themselves, offering as many of Endeavor’s services and connections as possible. However, Endeavor’s metrics of success—revenue growth and job creation—are inadequate to measure VS’s objectives. VS has only two full time staff (one being an unpaid intern) who were too busy with everything else to focus on that issue. That is where I came in.

Work

My role, as I initially understood it, was to measure VS’s entrepreneurs’ impact – later I realized that it rather was to spearhead social impact measurement for VS, and my work’s final deliverable would be an impact measurement toolkit for the entrepreneurs. The greater objective, as envisioned by VS’s director, was that if VS measured social impact, then it would be easier to get Endeavor Brasil to do the same.

My personal main objective when I chose to intern for VS was to learn from the entrepreneurs themselves and to interact with them as much as possible. I was more interested in learning about the people they serve, but I ended up learning more about the—massive—ecosystem of organizations whose aim is to support the entrepreneurs themselves. My first task was to devour as much as possible from the existing literature on impact measurement, distil it and report that back to the VS team.

My daily routine at work was pretty much sitting in front of the computer all day long. Not at all what I was hoping for. Reading—in English, in Spanish, in Portuguese—and making summaries. The
office was a big room with several desks, always packed. People speaking in Portuguese most of the time, but telephoning in English as needed. Everyone very into what they were doing, but always available for a little laugh or to photograph a rare, beautiful São Paulo sunset.

The structure of the “internship” itself was very flexible. There was no actual internship program; I contacted VS through a recent Middlebury grad, Shen, who works for Endeavor Brasil, and they welcomed me to join them. Shen joined the VS team as my immediate supervisor, but I was still largely on my own. I was given desk space in the office and a vaguely defined task to be completed over a perhaps-too-long period of time.

My challenges at work where mainly in regards to concentration and communication. Because it was hard to tell what I should be reading and reporting on, I ended up reading a lot of things that were related and interesting, but not relevant. While I learned from this, it slowed my progress. And it was quite difficult to tell how much progress I really achieved. That was both frustrating and confusing. Even when I compiled all the information I thought appropriate to build the toolkit and I began to distil it to the basics, I had no idea what the final product was supposed to look like. Confusion often led to lack of concentration, and sitting in front of the screen all day did not help. Most days I found it very hard to stay motivated throughout the day.

Communication issues where a combination of a language barrier, shyness and ego. My Portuguese was just basic when I got there. Most of the day I was reading English, but everything else around me was Portuguese. In any conversation I had to concentrate entirely on listening. I could certainly talk in English with anyone, but it didn’t feel organic, and I was shy to talk in Portuguese. So I talked very little at first. I also felt that I was meeting neither their expectations nor mine. (Towards the end I figured that, for better or for worse, their expectations of me where significantly lower than my own.) Getting advice, feedback or guidance depended entirely on me, but seeing that I wasn’t meeting my expectations I felt that I had to work harder, achieve tangible progress, before reaching out. That was a mistake. I should have simply asked more questions.

My greatest satisfaction was working closely with two of the VS entrepreneurs. The aim was to get them as far as possible along the impact measurement path, and to use their experience as an illustrative example in the guide for the other entrepreneurs. Their life stories and their work were deeply inspiring. I was the happiest and most productive when I was doing anything with/for them. Messias Eduardo Barbosa created Neofuturo, which provides tailored training for public school teachers and has a proven record of significantly improving the education quality in the schools where it intervenes. Karla Haidar Muller, with whom I worked more closely, created Kapa+ EcoSocial, which employs housewives from the city’s poorest neighborhoods to work from home, as much as they can/want, to sew reusable cotton bags. The bags are then sold to supermarkets, and other retail stores. Though not a priority to VS, I mentioned the possibility of becoming a certified B corporation and Karla was interested. My supervisor and I helped her fill the questionnaire and she got a passing grade. I recently received the news that Kapa+ officially become Brazil’s newest B corporation. This is a well-deserved recognition, and a big commitment that will make Kapa+ even better than what it already is.
On my last day I presented my work to the VS team and another Endeavor colleague. I talked about both the process, my experience, and I presented the tool kit. I realized there and then, that along they had wanted something simpler. I had distilled a great deal of information into a 10-page, step-by-step, summary on how to create/select appropriate indicators to measure social impact. I thought that it was very user-friendly, especially compared to the several other guides I read (many of which were 100+ pages long), the language much less technical and more accessible. But they found it to be still too technical. And with good reason. These entrepreneurs don’t have that much time for this, as much as they would want to. A guide on its own is almost useless.

I also realized that my work and efforts during the whole previous week were inconsequential to the meeting’s main conclusions and future steps. We could have met a week prior and I would have achieved a lot during that last week. This was quite the aha moment. It showed me once again that closer supervision would have proved to be more fruitful for everyone. But I was satisfied to see that I did my job. Things got started, and that was all that mattered. The rest of the team seemed excited to take it from there.

But there is no way to embark on impact measurement without learning at least some technical terms. That’s particularly true if the impact report is meant for investors, granters, or partners – they will be looking for such language.

Life in São Paulo

I adapted to the city very quickly; my colloquial Portuguese improved significantly, I learned how to pass as a local in the street and how to navigate my part of the city, and very soon it felt normal to be there.

But life in São Paulo was an internal challenge. Firstly, going from sunny Vermont summer to gray São Paulo winter affected me emotionally far more than I expected. Days were shorter and cloudy, and even on sunny days the sun hardly made it through the city’s countless buildings. But it wasn’t cold, so my body asked for sunshine. There was no horizon either. I felt trapped between the white-gray buildings and the gray sky, and this put me in a weird emotional place that I had never experienced before. A sharp contrast from my usual happy, optimistic, and all-smiles self.

Secondly, without planning for it, I ended up living inside a bubble of privilege and wealth, but, unlike at Middlebury, I could very clearly and closely see the lives of those who do not. I was deeply disturbed by the system of domestic serfdom, with hints of racism and colonialist ideas of superiority; the private security complex, with its cameras and security men everywhere; the urban planning that benefits the wealthy and pushes the very poor to the far off fringes; the pervasive homelessness. It is impossible to describe it all in a paragraph, but the way social injustice played out, or at least how I saw it, was new to me, too. I didn’t want to be part of that bubble, I refused to go out to bars or clubs, and avoided expensive restaurants, not only because I didn’t really have the money for that, but because I felt alienated.
As if by luck, with just a few hours’ notice, one day I had to move from my original comfy housing in a wealthy neighborhood and find somewhere else to stay from that night on. I ended up staying a few days at a friend’s very humble student housing in the city center, and eventually I moved in to share a modest apartment with another friend, also in the city center. Though uncared for by the government and not very safe, my new neighborhood was more comfortable. It seemed less sterile and more real. Even the 1.5hr commute to work helped me better understand how life works for most people.

I am glad to have lived both experiences.

**Learning and takeaways**

Firstly, my Portuguese improved a great deal, especially considering that I was not taking any lessons. I am sure I still mix in some Spanish, but I could go work in an only-Portuguese environment with no problem.

In regards to work, I learned that I do not want a 9-5 office work, that the more relaxed the environment the better. I cannot sit all day in front of a computer, I need to move – walk, jump, dance, stretch. Moving between different physical spaces also makes me more productive. Nonetheless, I did adjust to that kind of work life, and I learned a few tricks to make it more bearable. I also confirmed that I am good at completing specific tasks on my own, but that I work better when I collaborate with a team. Work is more satisfying if it involves dealing with people in real life.

I realized how important it is to see tangible progress in my work; otherwise I lose all sense of direction. Since I was largely unsupervised and had no deadlines, I set my own. I learned that I prefer checking off many small tasks than one huge one. This is something I need to get better at. I also realized that I do not like showing my half-finished work. I am afraid of seeming unprepared or incompetent. I realized that a good way of fighting this is simply asking more questions and feedback, all the time. More humility, too.

While the prospect of working in Brazil in the future is appealing, I know that São Paulo is not my type of city. I will keep that in mind, because most work opportunities are there.

In regards to impact measurement, I learned a great deal about who is promoting it, how different measurement techniques and rating systems work, and how various organizations work with each other. Most importantly, while I became no expert, I am now very familiar with the subject, and I hope to further my knowledge of it. In the process I also learned about philanthropy and impact investing, and I realized that as part of my career I want to understand how they work.

I noticed that most of the literature on the topic of impact measurement, even if translated, is originally in English and comes from the US and the UK. Measuring impact is certainly important, but the push comes largely from donors and investors, and there is a risk of focusing measurement on what they want and think is good, as opposed to what the ultimate beneficiaries want and need. The power
dynamics between investors, investees, and beneficiaries, have the potential to damage and create inequality, too.

On the subject of actually measuring the impact of small and medium enterprises, I realized that the missing point is actually working with the enterprises. There is a complex web of organizations wanting and supporting measurement, passing down the knowledge on how to do it, but it all seems to be based on this guide, or that framework, or that other toolkit. A more effective way of doing it, I think, is to pass the necessary technical knowledge to the entrepreneurs in person, to be with them as much as possible, especially in the early stages.

Finally, everything about my stay in Brazil made me confirm that I am very much against the private accumulation of capital. And I am not entirely convinced that we can overcome injustice by using the same system that perpetuates it. I see how business practices are useful in solving certain social problems, but I worry that Social Entrepreneurship could be used as an excuse to proclaim the birth of an inexistent “new capitalism.” That said, capitalism is what we have, and my time in Brazil also made me see the importance of being financially literate and understanding how big money works. Specifically, I want to understand how people with big money see the world, even if being in their bubble makes me uncomfortable. I look forward to go back to Middlebury with this new goal in mind.

Thank you again to everyone who made this possible and those I met in my path. A special thanks to the MCSE team, my co-fellows and the VS team.