

Public Interest Entrepreneurs, why, what and how

Find out how you can start your own "tech for public interest" program



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OUR AMBITION: DIGITAL SKILLS FOR PUBLIC INTEREST

Digital revolution entails many changes: a change in practices, a change in expectations, and a global change of culture. With such changes, come opportunities... and challenges. For instance, **data can be used to innovate and implement data-driven policies**. It is a huge opportunity for the administration, as well as a challenge due to the fact that public service needs resources and talents in order to accomplish this digital transformation.

[Etalab](#) is the French government taskforce for open data, open government and data-science. Our mission is to help ministerial departments in developing data-driven policies in order to improve public service delivery and make the government more transparent.

In 2016, we were missioned to design and develop a new program, called “Entrepreneurs d’intérêt général”, or *Public Interest Entrepreneurs*. Inspired by the [Presidential Innovation Fellows](#), we have built a program that allows public administration to solve problems that usually arise from the field agents and to give digital public service delivery a jump-start.

Public administrations have troubles attracting digital talents, face insufficient funding for ambitious innovative projects, and have a complicated HR process. Despite wanting to work for the public good, **innovators, entrepreneurs sometimes don’t see the interest of working with civil servants nor find attractive conditions** to do so.

Our ambition is to champion the digital transformation of the government by hiring digital talents – such as data-scientists, developers, designers – to the administration. In doing so, we strive to promote innovation in the administration and to change the administration’s culture from within.

We know that there are administrations that are looking to innovate. We know that there are digital talents who wish to work for the public interest. And we know that there are many exciting, data-centered, public interest projects to be carried out. The French *Public Interest Entrepreneurs* program aims at heeding such calls.

Having launched 3 cohorts within which 71 entrepreneurs have taken up 37 challenges alongside 45 civil servants mentoring them, the program has established itself as part of the digital public innovation ecosystem in France.

In this memo, you will find out more about our history, our methodologies and key success factors.

THE PROGRAM: A COMMUNITY OF ENTREPRENEURS AND CIVIL SERVANTS TO SOLVE CHALLENGES AND DELIVER IMPACTFUL DIGITAL SERVICES

During a ten months period, teams of 2 or 3 Public Interest Entrepreneurs work within public administrations on challenges linked to data and digital transformation: that is the key principle of the Public Interest Entrepreneurs program.

A few key elements of presentation of the program:

- **Public Interest Entrepreneurs are employed by the department** they work for. They are not external service providers;
- **Each challenge is championed by an administration** and is linked to a specific public service / public policy. The department hosting a challenge has to facilitate contact with different units (IT, product, communications, etc.) and organize fieldwork, in order for the entrepreneurs to have a good understanding of the problems and design the best possible products and services;
- **Each team of Public Interest Entrepreneurs is mentored** by two civil servants. On a daily basis, an “operational mentor”, part of the department unit hosting the challenge, facilitate their work and ensure their working conditions are optimal. A “strategic mentor”, usually a director, is also sponsoring them at high level.

Public Interest Entrepreneurs form a community of highly-skilled individuals guided by Etalab:

- Etalab has a support team dedicated to the program, which acts as a resource for both the Entrepreneurs and the mentors;
- The support team accompanies them throughout the 10-month program and organizes specific workshops to equip the entrepreneurs with the best methods, guidelines and tools they need to succeed in their challenges. This team is made of 4 people with different backgrounds: project management, development, communications, and public policy.

Why is the program attractive for technologists and digital talents?

The entrepreneurs are hired with a 10 months contract.
They are paid according to private-sector salaries.
They have the opportunity to work on exclusive sets of public data (open or closed) and participate in enhancing public policies.
They are allowed to redefine their challenges and are encouraged to show initiative.
They have to deliver a working solution after 10 months of work, and quick wins are encouraged.
They work in teams and partake in a community of public interest entrepreneurs.



Elise Lalique (entrepreneur) and Bénédicte Pachod (mentor) working on [their challenge](#) roadmap.

Why is the program attractive for public administrations/mentors?

The program is able to attract highly-skilled individuals, who can quickly understand how the public sector works and rapidly give inputs.
We empower civil servants by giving them the ability to develop new skills such as product management, lean UX, development, etc.
We facilitate peer-learning either with entrepreneurs or thanks to inter-administration discussion.
We are developing a community of civil servants from different backgrounds and departments.

HOW IT IS DONE: FUNDING, SELECTIONS, MENTORING, PROJECTS SUSTAINABILITY

No program without funding

The funding for such a program has to take into account various types of expenditures:

- The recruitment of entrepreneurs;
- The technical infrastructure to host projects;
- Training, communications, coworking spaces, etc.

In France, the three first editions of the program benefited from a national investment plan called “[Programme d’investissements d’avenir](#)” (PIA). The total cost of the program is just over 5 million euros in 3 years, coming from the PIA plan and the participating administrations. In order to make the program permanent, we are currently considering other funding opportunities.

Key steps to select projects & entrepreneurs

Public Interest Entrepreneurs is an ambitious program that has its own dynamic. Two key steps are required to select projects and entrepreneurs:

STEP 1 - Identifying high potential challenges – Call for projects

Administrations have a month to make proposals that are compliant with the aim, ambition and specificity of the program:

- The project must have a concrete impact on public policy or public action, either by addressing needs from public agents or enhancing relations between the public and the administration;
- It must be supported by a high representative of the administration;
- It must entail the constitution of a team within the administration dedicated to the project;
- It must strive to be as open as possible. **Open data and open source must be systematically favored in order for the final product to be as shareable with the public as possible.** If the final product can’t be shared with the public, it must at least be reusable by other administrations.

To select the projects, a two-step evaluation:

- **Etalab members qualify and classify the proposals** according to the criteria mentioned above and set a shortlist of potential challenges;
- **Pre-selected proposals are presented to a jury.** Composed of Etalab members, alumni entrepreneurs, civil servants and civil society representatives (experts, entrepreneurs, researchers, activists, etc.), it has a day to make the final selection. A week after the decision is made, Etalab makes it public and moves on to the next step.

Over three years, 94 projects proposals were made by administrations. 52 of them were auditioned and 37 projects ended up being selected.

They took place in 29 units and services, spanning 19 different administrations.

STEP 2 - Finding the right candidates – Call for applications

During one month, the candidates apply for one or two projects -and specify which one they prefer. The official selection of projects is widely advertised in order to get the attention of as many high potential profiles as possible: on [Etalab's website](#), on [the Public Interest Entrepreneurs website](#), on social media, through PR and ecosystem mobilization...

To select the candidates, a two-step evaluation:

- **Once the applications are in, they are evaluated by members of Etalab.** This two-week long evaluation leads to a first selection of candidates;
- **The candidates that have been pre-selected present themselves in front of a jury** made up of members of Etalab, alumni entrepreneurs, civil servants and specialists of data-related questions. This final selection lasts two days. A week after the decision is made, Etalab makes it public and moves on to the next step.

The program is attractive to potential candidates, as 493 data scientists, developers and designers have presented applications over 3 years. 200 candidates were auditioned and 71 were finally selected¹.

Accompanying the Entrepreneurs and their mentors – the heart of the program

During 10 months, the selected entrepreneurs work on the selected challenges in order to deliver a turnkey solution.

Accompanying the entrepreneurs is crucial as most of them have never worked in an administration before. Personalized support pursue two distinct goals:

- **Providing them with the guidance they need to understand how the administration works and all of its specificities;**
- **Creating a strong team-spirit in order to foster peer-learning, collective ownership, and benevolence.**

During these 10 months, Etalab organizes regular workshops, both for the entrepreneurs and for the teams of mentors and Entrepreneurs. The workshops aim at giving them the tools they need to meet their challenges with success. These events are also an opportunity for them to spend time together and develop a sense of community. We also achieve this team-spirit through rituals such as a bootcamp, offsite sessions and weekly updates on all of the projects through [Bulletins, an open source tool](#) created by one of the entrepreneurs ...

¹ We are working to make the participants of the program more gender balanced. So far, 22% of all entrepreneurs were woman.

Outside of these working sessions, the Etalab support team is always available to listen, help, support and champion the Entrepreneurs and their mentors.

Sustaining what has been delivered

As a public interest program, we have a collective responsibility: **ensuring that the 10 month work is sustainable and will not have been done in vain**. There are two answers to this: **implementing the solutions** the entrepreneurs have developed and **making sure these solutions are open for other administrations or organizations to use**.

If the solutions are not implemented, they are not useful. That is why it is crucial to prepare the implementation while project development is still undergoing in the administrations. After the project is done, the support team does follow-ups and keeps up with the entrepreneurs in order to build on this work with a growing public interest community.

As of the first two cohorts, the tools produced are for a majority either in production or within a planned production phase. All the tools that are developed during 10 months are published in open source, so that all administrations can implement, enrich, spread and sustain them.



Meet the third cohort of Public Interest Entrepreneurs!

HOW TO MAKE IT A SUCCESS

“Entrepreneurs d’intérêt général” has been running for three years. The achievements we have had so far and the opportunities we perceive have helped us determine some keys to success.

We cannot stress enough the importance of having highly invested civil servants as mentors combined with a strong political support; it makes the challenge much easier to meet and the solution much more significant and useful.²

We believe that an appropriate technological environment is crucial; without tools and data, the Entrepreneurs cannot work³.

We claim that users are at the center of any digital public service; our Entrepreneurs are taught design thinking, agility, and iteration in order to keep the user at center of their endeavors.

We are convinced that interdisciplinarity paves the way to a better public service; our Entrepreneurs work in teams composed of developers, designers and data-scientist, learning and teaching from and with each other, and spreading new techniques within their host administrations.

Finally, we have witnessed how being active members of the “data for public interest” community allows the Entrepreneurs to learn more, tackle more ambitious challenges and partake in other public interest projects.

² An example of that is the work done by Stéphanie Schaer, mentor of the [Signaux Faibles](#) challenge, who was able to find the right partners to ensure the software created was used across the country.

³ A survey we did for mentors of the first two cohorts showed that over 77% of them adapted the technological environment to host the Entrepreneurs, and 70% of them made changes in the working conditions. And it pays off, as more than 90% of Entrepreneurs who answered said that they were satisfied with their working environment.

CAN WE HELP?

Building on its past experience, Etalab offers support to foreign public administrations wishing to implement EIG-like solutions at home. Such a support lays on three pillars:

- **Remote help to local support teams** on how to proceed, select and monitor a promotion of entrepreneurs;
- **In-person training** including reception of foreign delegations, technical and methodological training as well as exchange programs;
- **Communication:** presentation and political mobilization on public interest entrepreneurs programs in international fora.

We hope this memo has been useful. However, you may have questions that we would be glad to answer.

Feel free to contact the “Entrepreneurs d’intérêt général” team: entrepreneur-interet-general@data.gouv.fr.

Here are a few key resources that might be useful:

[Our GitHub](#): discover tools and scripts developed by entrepreneurs;

[Our website](#): here are the projects, entrepreneurs, guides and blogposts.

Annex: Sample of data from the Public Interest Entrepreneurs program

	First cohort	Second cohort	Third cohort	Total
Public Interest Entrepreneurs (EIG)	11	28	32	71
Civil servant - Mentors	6	18	21	45
Challenges	9	13	15	37
Candidates	115	208	170	493
Jury presentations	30	84	86	200
EIG selected	11	28	32	71
Budget			(Provisional)	Total
Entrepreneur's salaries	756 553,38 €	1 801 326,00 €	2 100 364,09 €	4 658 243,47 €
Communication	- €	74 209 €	80 000 €	154 209 €
Support	25 000 €	37 106 €	220 000 €	282 106 €
Links with research groups	10 000 €	- €	30 000 €	40 000 €

Annex 1: Sample of data over the Public Interest Entrepreneurs program

You can find more data on the Public Interest Entrepreneurs program [online](#) and a commented version in this [blog article](#). Both are in French.



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