Silver Winners | Category: Talent Development

GERDAU | Fundação Dom Cabral

B-Epic: Building Bridges Between Youth, Companies, and the Future of Work

Brazil has been experiencing a decline in competitiveness since 2020. According to the IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook (2024), the country has dropped four positions in the global competitiveness ranking, despite an improvement in economic performance (rising from 56th to 38th place during the same period). Much of this challenge stems from supply-side issues, particularly the scarcity of skilled labour. Companies in Brazil are facing a talent drought, not only from a shortage of skills but also from the country's rapidly aging population.

At the same time, thousands of young people in Brazil face the harsh reality of neither studying nor working daily. According to the OECD (2023), this group, known as "NEET" (Not in Education, Employment or Training), represents almost 20% of the population between the ages of 15 and 29. This results in a concerning scenario: fewer prospects for youth and a growing shortage of qualified labour for companies.

It was in response to this challenge that B-EPIC (Brazilian Enterprise Productivity and Inclusion Club) was born, an initiative co-created by Fundação Dom Cabral (FDC) and Gerdau, with the purpose of turning the inclusion of young people into a driver of business productivity and social impact.

2023

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The Challenge: Invisible Youth and a Shortage of Talent Companies

Brazil faces two interconnected challenges: limited opportunities for young people and the struggle of companies to find qualified talent.

Although the Apprenticeship Law requires companies to hire and train young people, this process is often limited to bureaucratic compliance. As a result, young people do not feel prepared for the challenges of the labour market, while companies see little real value in investment.

Gerdau, with its tradition of innovation and social commitment, saw an opportunity to go beyond compliance: to create a programme that goes beyond legal obligations, focusing on the integral development of young people and the strengthening of leadership among the managers who guide them.

The Partnership that Gave Life to B-EPIC

In 2023, Gerdau and FDC joined forces to turn this vision into reality. From the beginning, it was clear that a robust, scalable model was needed, one capable of inspiring not only the steel industry but also the entire private sector.

The first phase was diagnostic: FDC professors and researchers interviewed executives from 13 major Brazilian companies and managers of training entities. The findings were clear: the main obstacle to hiring apprentices was not a lack of technical knowledge, but the absence of non-cognitive skills, such as reliability, flexibility, problem-solving ability, building positive relationships, and future orientation. These findings became the foundation for programme design.

The Learning Journey

B-EPIC was structured as an 80-hour journey, combining in-person classes, online meetings, and practical experiences. The young participants had access to six key areas of learning for the future of work:

- Emotional intelligence
- Citizenship and diversity
- Entrepreneurship
- Personal finance
- Digital literacy
- Understanding the world of work

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A distinctive feature was the emphasis on mentorship. Each young participant was accompanied by a Gerdau leader trained to act as a mentor. This meeting of generations and experiences transformed not only the apprentices but also the managers, who enhanced their leadership, empathy, and communication skills.

Symbolic moments marked the journey: the 'dream workshop', encouraging youth to envision possible futures; collective activities such as collaborative graffiti, stimulating creativity and integration; and the closing panel, where youth, mentors, and executives together debated the future of work.

Transformative Impacts

The results of the first cycle, held between June and November 2024, exceeded expectations:

- 62 young people participated in the journey.
- 37 were hired at Gerdau, with 4 of them joining as interns.
- The hiring rate at Gerdau reached 73% of those who completed the journey, representing 60% of the total number initially enrolled.
- Some hired participants even received job offers from other companies, demonstrating the value of their training.
- The young people reported increased self-confidence, a sense of belonging, and greater clarity about their future possibilities.
- Mentors highlighted improvements in their leadership practices, the strengthening of an inclusive culture, and a better organisational environment.

73%

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As Carolina, one of the apprentices, said: "B-EPIC was a life-changing experience. I felt seen and valued in places I never thought were meant for me."

More Than a Programme: A Movement

The effects of B-EPIC went beyond Gerdau. The methodology, based on research, co-creation, and experiential learning, has become a reference for other companies interested in redefining their apprenticeship programmes.

From FDC's perspective, the initiative marked an important milestone: broadening the scope of the business school to directly engage with vulnerable youth and connect academic excellence with social impact.

For Gerdau, B-EPIC demonstrated that productive inclusion can be a driver of competitiveness while strengthening corporate culture and creating value for society.

The Future of B-EPIC

In 2025, B-EPIC takes a new step: in addition to a second cohort of Gerdau apprentices, other companies have been invited to join the movement. The ambition is clear: to create a network of organisations committed to the productive inclusion of youth and the construction of a fairer, more sustainable future.

By uniting social purpose and business strategy, B-EPIC proves that it is possible to turn challenges into opportunities. The programme shows that when companies invest in the integral development of young people, everyone wins: the youth, who gain new perspectives; the leaders, who become better managers; and society, which benefits from a more prepared and confident workforce.

As one mentor summarised: "B-EPIC was not just about teaching young people. It was about transforming the way we, as leaders, look at them and ourselves."