

Audit of the Joining Forces programme

Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland and Federal Office of Police

Key facts

The Joining Forces (JF) programme aims to bring federal criminal proceedings into the digital era. Electronic files are the main objective. Three independent organisations are involved: the Federal Criminal Police (FCP) of the Federal Office of Police (fedpol) as the investigating agency, the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland (OAG) for criminal investigations and the Federal Criminal Court (FCC) for the administration of justice. JF intends to combine these forces and develop joint solutions.

Preliminary work and the JF vision started in 2015. The programme was launched in autumn 2017. Of the eleven JF projects planned before the end of 2021, only two have been realised. The programme therefore had to be extended by five years to the end of 2026. External costs amounted to CHF 3 million by mid-September 2020, and the total project is expected to cost around CHF 35 million.

In this audit report, the Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) assessed the value added JF brings in terms of improved cooperation, process simplification and standardisation, as well as achieving digitalisation potential in the federal criminal justice system. In addition, the audit examined whether the programme is managed appropriately.

The JF common vision is convincing. If the JF programme did not already exist, it would have to be created for the digital transformation of federal criminal proceedings. However, the implementation of the vision and thus the standardisation/simplification and digitalisation of the processes have not made much progress as yet. This is a management issue at the programme sponsor and management level. Despite good initial sub-products, JF's programme management needs to be improved.

Federal Criminal Court is missing as a third party for integrated collaboration

The OAG and the FCP (fedpol) cooperate well in the JF programme, paving the way for a future-oriented partnership in federal criminal proceedings. The FCC, on the other hand, is not sufficiently involved. The argument of preserving judicial independence is not convincing in a digitalisation project. The FCC should incorporate its experience and needs more significantly into the JF "product".

Standardisation, simplification and digitalisation of processes still limited

In addition to the groundwork, JF has produced three tangible results: a central service for evidence management with a specialised application for managing seized items, including newly organised evidence storage facilities, a process map and an IT architecture vision. All three were successful. However, viewed over a period of three and five years, respectively, the results are insufficient. If the programme does not improve in the future, even the five-year extended schedule will be ambitious. The most important and largest JF sub-project is "electronic file management". An intelligent file repository for the OAG is to be provided in

the so-called "Implementation unit 1" by the end of 2022. This is rather modest compared to the original vision of implementing a *cross-organisational* system for the digital processing of all federal criminal proceedings shared with fedpol and the FCC by the end of 2021. This sub-project is particularly urgent, as the hybrid file management that uses the JURIS business management system has reached its limits.

The cantonal law enforcement and penitentiary authorities also want to digitalise their files and legal dealings in a separate programme for the harmonisation of information technology in criminal justice (HIS/HIJP) and as part of the Justitia 4.0 project. Opportunities for partnerships and joint product solutions may arise here for JF. Inclusion of the standards developed by HIS/HIJP and Justitia 4.0 must be guaranteed, and the use of standard products as a basis should be examined.

Programme sponsors need more information for their steering role

Initially, it was intended that the OAG and fedpol would jointly fund JF. However, since 2018, the OAG has assumed full funding, with the Federal Department of Justice and Police in turn bearing the costs for the FCP's future investigative system. Since then, the OAG has made some decisions on finances and resources on its own and no longer within the parity-based JF programme structures intended for this purpose.

As a steering body, the programme sponsors receive too little targeted management information on the project's progress. The JF programme management should regularly report the most important key figures to them in the form of target/actual comparisons and/or forecasts on costs, resources and timeline. Only in this way can the programme sponsors fulfil their governance role. Similarly, there is no quality and risk management that is independent of the programme management. This too would help the programme sponsors to carry out their monitoring role more effectively.

Stakeholder engagement and knowledge of agile project governance: success factors that still need to be built up

The JF programme management is committed and motivated, but it relies heavily on external consultants for its expertise and capacities. The OAG secretary general leads the JF programme in a part-time capacity, and the deputy programme manager performs several functions in parallel. For a programme of this size and complexity, a full-time position for the programme manager would be entirely appropriate.

JF is largely run from the General Secretariat (GS) of the OAG and supported by more than ten different consulting firms. The line organisations of the OAG and fedpol are still not sufficiently involved in the programme. This harbours the risk that the GS or the consultants will fail to develop the business. For a change management venture like JF, it is crucial to involve the future users at an early stage. The decision made at the end of 2019 to run JF in an agile manner is understandable, as the programme was overwhelmed with the parallel development of sub-projects. Agile programmes implement their solutions in many small products that are beneficial in themselves. However, the necessary agile expertise is lacking at the management level, which makes it difficult to lead JF successfully. Consequently, an agile specialist is needed to strengthen programme leadership.

Original text in German