

Audit of the digitisation platform

General Secretariat of the Federal Department of Finance

Key facts

The digitisation platform (DIP) is an administrative unit of the Federal Department of Finance (FDF). Since 2019, it has been acting as an IT service provider for the FDF and has been exempt from Article 23 of the Ordinance on Informatics and Telecommunications in the Federal Administration (FAITO) for four years. The DIP develops and operates applications that support the digitisation of processes of service recipients in the department. At the same time, it serves as a laboratory for testing innovative methods and technologies. The DIP has a budget of CHF 7.1 million for 2019. The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) has examined whether the management of activities, the development process, the management of DIP projects and operations are being carried out properly.

Encouraging initial results, but management requires improvements

After some 18 months in existence, the DIP has deployed three applications and micro-services. It has also gained experience in the use of modern development techniques. Further work is underway and, according to the planned objectives, knowledge transfer has begun. The aims of the DIP and its resources are adequately defined for a start-up phase. Nevertheless, the sharing of management resources with the Federal Tax Administration (FTA) and the position and status of the DIP should be considered.

The strategic management of the DIP is the direct responsibility of the Head of the FDF, albeit with the assistance of the General Secretariat and a steering committee. The basis for portfolio management is defined. However, the procedures for selecting project priorities must be more transparent, with a view to increasing the DIP's development mandates. The management aspect should be further improved, in particular monitoring the achievement of objectives and risk management. The SFAO has made a recommendation to this effect.

"Architectural frictions" have emerged during DIP developments. The new technologies that have been implemented partly encroach on the established practices and standards of federal IT. For example, the DIP's PAMS microservice partially competes with the Confederation's standard IAM service of the Federal IT Steering Unit (FITSU). A compromise to find common solutions was only reached after long discussions. Another example is the use of the Go programming language by the DIP. This language is not supported by the Federal Office of Information Technology, Systems and Telecommunication (FOITT) or by any other internal service provider. The maintenance of applications for Go developments may therefore no longer be ensured in the medium term. The SFAO recommends that a mechanism be established to resolve these architectural conflicts.

Project management and development: groundwork is adequate but needs completing

At the DIP, a project methodology for agile developments is followed that incorporates project flow control points. It also contains a list of required documents. Tools are available to systematically monitor work progress. However, various aspects need to be better described in the methodology, including risk management and details of changes in agile developments. In this start-up phase, the SFAO could not verify that the required documents were produced in all cases. In one specific case, the SFAO recommends updating the security documents.

The development stages are adequately defined. In particular, needs processing and tests are carried out systematically and with the participation of the business sectors. However, the SFAO considers that application controls and security aspects are not sufficiently incorporated into the agile development process. It has made a recommendation to this effect.

Technical operation is assured, organisational details still uncertain

Three productive applications are currently in operation. They are located on the FOITT's cloud-based technical infrastructure. From a technical and organisational point of view, the operation of the DIP is separate from the major platforms of the FTA. To date, no impact has been observed on the rest of the fiscal applications.

The responsibilities of the various operational stakeholders are defined. The deployment of changes to DIP applications is largely automated. In addition, the process of transition to production is supported by various validation steps, including user testing. Incident management processes and responsibilities are defined and in place. The monitoring of the platform's operations has been implemented and greater automation is planned. The various stakeholders are in the learning phase of implementing these technologies. Experiences continue to be shared. However, there is still some uncertainty concerning certain details of the division of tasks between developers and operations specialists. Operating responsibilities after the four-year period granted to the DIP are not defined. Details of the working and organisation of the operations are therefore still to be defined.

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