AUDIT

International parallel audit on artificial intelligence

Federal Chancellery, Federal Statistical Office, Federal Office of Information Technology, Systems and Telecommunication, Federal Office of Communications

KEY FACTS

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly permeating many areas of people's lives and the economy. The debate around AI has gained considerable traction in the media and politics. The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) is participating in a parallel audit entitled "Examine the government sector's preparedness for implementation of AI technology". The audit was launched in 2024 by the European Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions (EUROSAI). In further audits, the SFAO assessed the extent to which the groundwork has been laid for the adoption of AI in the Federal Administration. It examined two areas of action: institutional AI frameworks and specific AI projects.

The AI initiatives launched by the Confederation create a framework for institutional AI which provides a firm foundation for the adoption of AI. At the same time, the Confederation has launched numerous AI projects, some of which have already been put into practice. However, pioneering AI projects should be visible to the public and demonstrate the responsible use of AI in the Federal Administration. There also needs to be effective coordination between the two areas of action, to ensure the targeted further development of AI, and to keep pace with the rapid advances in AI technology. Moreover, closer coordination reduces the risk of shadow IT, in other words IT solutions that are developed outside of authorised use and validated infrastructure. It is difficult to regain control of uncoordinated and redundantly structured IT infrastructures at a later date, which impairs both IT security and the administration's economic efficiency.

The institutional framework is being refined and many projects have been launched

The report "Challenges of AI" by the interdepartmental AI working group was the initial spark for the design of the institutional AI framework[4]. Various AI initiatives were subsequently launched, in order to embed the use of AI technology in the Confederation strategically and in terms of regulations. Important milestones have been reached and are now being consolidated. This includes the implementation plan for the Federal Administration's AI strategy, the preparatory work on implementing the Council of Europe's AI Convention and the establishment of a concept to further develop the coordination of federal AI. Together with analyses on infrastructure topics, a sound institutional AI framework will be finalised by the end of 2026.

The "AI projects" area of action demonstrates a great deal of initiative on the part of the Confederation, as over 100 sub-projects have been launched. Specialist offices are using their expertise to develop and run their own AI projects. These bottom-up initiatives include innovative applications such as SwissPollen from MeteoSwiss and the Swiss Energy Dashboard from the Federal Office of Energy, as well as AI-based dialogue systems – chatbots. However, there is a lack of pioneering AI projects which could play a leading role in the Confederation. This would include projects that – irrespective of their size – are practical and show clearly how AI is used in the Confederation, even in sensitive areas of application. They would be essential to demonstrate the responsible use of the new technology and promote acceptance of AI within and outside the Federal Administration.

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4   Report by the interdepartmental working group on artificial intelligence, for the attention of the Federal Council (downloaded on 13.05.2025)

Governance and digitalisation incentives under scrutiny

Federal efforts focused primarily on the design of the institutional AI framework, while AI projects resulted from initiatives by the specialist offices. There is scarcely any overlap between these two areas of action. However, the further development of the AI framework would have to be focused more towards pioneering AI projects, in order to make the precise design more specific. Conversely, the know-how already obtained should flow into pioneer projects which, for example, develop AI-supported, automated systems for decision-making and their preparation. Yet such projects, which can optimise repetitive administrative tasks, are vastly underrepresented.

The efficacy of digital transformation governance should be re-evaluated by the Confederation. The steering model, which provides guidance on digital topics to people in the Federal Administration, has been in place for four years. The aim is to adapt the decision-making powers, so as to strengthen shared progress in the area of digitalisation. This is a desirable approach that is indispensable for a cross-cutting issue such as AI. At the same time, incentives are being sought to make more consistent use of the potential for efficiency gains – notably through the use of AI. If the new governance structure for digital transformation proves useful, it would strengthen the efficiency and competence of the federal government in AI matters.