

The Flemish Department of Work and Social Economy works more efficiently with data at a lower cost



A strong desire for innovation and an expiring IT contract made the Flemish Government's Department of Work and Social Economy dream of a new analytics infrastructure. They therefore asked Algorhythm to help them make the switch to a modern data architecture with new tools and broadly applicable frameworks and templates. The department can now unlock data faster via the cloud at a lower cost to satisfy the ever-growing demand for information.

Innovation is rewarded

Until recently, the Department of Work and Social Economy ran all their Business Intelligence activities on-premises. But they saw the end of their existing contract as a good opportunity to innovate and evolve into a data-driven organisation. 'It's something that's widely supported within the team,' explains Ilse Boons, Data Cluster Manager for the Department. 'Our team always wants to be at the forefront of new technologies in government. We briefly considered our current supplier's cloud solution, but it was technologically outdated and quite expensive. We therefore went in search of an architecture that allowed us to be more innovative with self-service BI, for example, and embed dashboards externally.'



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Partner with expert knowledge

The Department called on their partner, Algorhythm, to help them search for and implement the right tools. The two organisations have been working together for several years already, as Boons explains: 'A few people from Algorhythm are already working with us – some for seven years already – and we're very happy with their work. They also have in-depth knowledge of our department and its funded operations. We felt sure they'd be the best partner for this renovation process.'

Snowflake and Tableau are a perfect fit

Together with Algorhythm, Ilse's team went in search of the right tools. Following extensive research, they settled on the combination of Snowflake on AWS with Tableau. Boons: 'Snowflake offered the best guarantees in terms of privacy and security in the cloud, which is essential for a government organisation that deals with a lot of very sensitive data. For Tableau, the difference with competitors was less evident, but we ultimately opted for this tool because the learning curve wasn't so steep. We want to make sure that everyone in the Department can work with data, so we need to increase familiarity with the concept, and an application that's easy to learn can be a great help here.'

Lower total cost of ownership

'The money we're saving with our new tools is very appealing,' adds Boons. 'Snowflake cuts our costs for hosting data by several orders of magnitude. It's a bit different with Tableau because we have an 'all-you-can-eat' licence, which comes with quite a hefty price tag. There's not a huge difference from before if you compare the total figures side by side, but we're getting a lot more for our money now: an unlimited number of users, the ability to embed dashboards externally, and so much more. The final total cost of ownership will be lower over the entire lifecycle.'



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Towards self-service BI

The Department's previous data platform was a kind of black box which only the data engineers could access. Data was delivered to the analysts fully prepared. 'One of our aims was to allow more people to access and load their own data, and our new architecture makes this possible. With an unlimited number of users, now everyone can use their own data to make dashboards in Tableau, which ultimately results in reports that are better aligned with requests from the Department. We're still fine-tuning the most important reports a bit, so that we can continue to offer them centrally – and open up the path to self-service BI and a data-driven organisation.'

Broad expertise ensures flexibility

There's a clear reason why the people from Algorhythm have been members of Boons' team for years: 'What makes them especially valuable is their broad expertise and enthusiasm to delve into new areas without specific prior knowledge. The BI analysts from Algorhythm are all very familiar with SQL, for example, which in turn allows their consultants to be very flexible. They're also happy to develop their expertise on our behalf. For instance, there was no one in their team who knew Tableau to begin with, but when we selected this software, they threw themselves wholeheartedly into learning the new tool. I think that's really great and we're already reaping the rewards of these efforts. And if that wasn't enough, they're simply just really lovely people to work with.'

Training, governance and more

This year, the process has focused largely on technical issues such as migration. And there's more work to do next year. 'New subsidy measures are coming into force, so we need to set up new reports and we also want to further refine our data governance. The main thing is to focus on our users and provide the necessary training so that they're included in this process. We're very happy that we can call on Algorhythm again for their help with all these matters,' concludes Boons.

Lessons learned

Convince the end user

The users aren't actually requesting the new software, but the change has quite a big impact on them. That's why it's so important to convince them of the benefits and offer support, and also the reason they've been involved right from the start of the process – being asked about their specific difficulties and wishes.

Not every feature will improve

It's important to remember that not every feature will improve in your new tool. Boons: 'Tableau isn't the right tool for exporting lists, for example, and it's easy to overlook smaller issues like this. So it's good to keep that in mind and know there's always a workaround.'



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