



Government services track visa applications correctly thanks to BizTalk ‘message broker’

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profile

The FPS Home Affairs has to prepare and implement the policy of the Federal Home Affairs Minister in the following areas: police and civil security, risk management, registration and identification of natural persons, the management of institutional and regulatory issues and the exercise of democratic rights. It also implements the policy of the Minister and the State Secretary for Migration and Asylum Policy.

challenge

The European member states are contending with the phenomenon of ‘visa shopping’, which means that people apply for visas for different countries within the Schengen zone to increase their chances

The IT staff at the Federal Public Service (FPS) Home Affairs had to work out a solution to be able to work with the European Visa Information System (VIS). The VIS is a central database that contains all information about applications for short-stay visas for the Schengen zone. The centralization will help prevent the phenomenon of ‘visa shopping’, so that all the applicants have an equally fair chance of obtaining a visa within a reasonable time.

The FPS decided to work with RealDolmen and CODit, which developed a ‘message broker’ solution based on Microsoft BizTalk Server. So with ‘BelVIS’, Belgium is one of the first countries to be ready for the European project, and it is just a matter of waiting for the central system to be activated.

Belgium is already benefiting from the new technology at the national level. The ‘message broker’ streamlines communication between the FPS Foreign Affairs, the Immigration Department and the Federal Police. They now have access to a traceable record of their communications. Moreover, it allows them to keep correct statistics for supporting policy decisions.

of obtaining a visa. So they are working on the European Visa Information System (VIS), which has a centrally managed database containing all the applications. The project is supported by the External Borders Fund and has the appropriate slogan "Towards smarter borders".

solution

The FPS Home Affairs linked up with IT partners RealDolmen and CODit to help it to work with the VIS. They took care of the necessary integration with the aid of Microsoft BizTalk Server. Even before VIS becomes operational, the Belgian component "BelVIS" is already being used for streamlining the internal communication between the various Belgian partners.

benefits

- Ease of use
- Fast development
- Standard environment for development
- Streamlined procedures
- Traceability
- Correct statistics
- Staff deployed efficiently
- Visa applications processed on time
- All applicants have an equal opportunity
- Complies with European legislation

software&services

Servers

BizTalk Server 2006 R2

Developer Tools

Visual Studio 2005
.NET Framework

Windows

Desktop Applications

Business Solutions

Microsoft Services

Microsoft Technologies

Microsoft Security

Thanks to Microsoft BizTalk Server, the communication of the Federal Public Service (FPS) Foreign Affairs, the Department of Immigration Affairs (a part of Home Affairs) and the Federal Police is running considerably more smoothly than before. The integration project was an offshoot of the developments for the European Visa Information System (VIS).

"The VIS project is primarily aimed at combating so-called 'visa shopping' for short-stay visas," says Filip Pynckels, director-general ICT of the FPS Home Affairs. "It is possible to go to different consulates and apply for a visa at each one. After all, there was no overview of the applications under review at the European level. So the applicants were increasing their chances of obtaining a visa, after which they could live in any country within the Schengen zone. Thanks to the European database, which will have hundreds of users, all countries will be able to see immediately whether there is already an application under review elsewhere. This gives everyone the same opportunities and there will also be fewer applications, which will mean a reduced workload for the consulates and applications being processed within a reasonable time. Moreover, the tracking can be done in a more streamlined way, even though every country has specific issues."

Biometric database

The VIS will receive not only the alphanumeric data on short-stay visas, such as the application, issue or refusal of the visa, but also biometric data such as photographs and fingerprints. All this information will allow people at the border control to carry out efficient identity checks when the visa holder wants to enter a Schengen country. "It will be the largest biometric database in the world – even larger than that of the FBI," says Filip Pynckels.

They called in IT partners RealDolmen and CODit for the Belgian component of the system, called "BelVIS", and the partners submitted a joint proposal. "RealDolmen was the system integrator and we took on the technical responsibility. We complemented each other perfectly," says Danny Buysse, project manager of CODit.

"The CODit/RealDolmen conglomeration certainly turns out to be the ideal partner, with a good price-quality ratio," confirms Thierry Vandenberghe, project manager at the FPS Home Affairs. "We also prefer to choose certified players with extensive technical knowledge. Their financial



Filip Pynckels: "Messages are not going to get lost and we can also keep statistics."

strength also played a role, since this offers a bigger guarantee of continuity in services."

The best possible solution for this integration project seemed to be a 'message broker', software that allows the users to exchange messages from different systems and applications. The decision was to go for Microsoft BizTalk Server. "BizTalk Server is user-friendly and offers a standard development environment," says Filip Pynckels. "It's also important that we can find developers who can work with BizTalk without too much trouble, both now and in the future,"

Data exchange between different services

The project started in 2007 and was completed in March 2010. This makes Belgium one of the first countries to be ready for the VIS database. However, the project is not yet finished at the European level. Still, people can already reap the benefits of recent developments at the national level because the investments were also used for streamlining the internal communication between the consular posts abroad, the Immigration Department and the Federal Police.

The FPS Home Affairs Immigration Department (Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken or DVZOE) is the department authorized to grant access to Belgian territory. This means the issuing or refusal of visas, revocation of visas, extension of visas, border control and

the issuing of visas at the border. In practice, most visas are issued by the consular posts of the FPS Home Affairs, which is responsible for representing Belgium abroad. The consular posts are often authorized to issue visas without first consulting the DVZOE. However, if there are any doubts about a visa application, the DVZOE must make the final decision about the refusal or issue of a visa.

The Federal Police (FedPol) have a dual role here. On the one hand, FedPol is responsible for border control at airports and seaports. In principle, this is always done in consultation with the DVZOE. On the other hand, FedPol can also issue visas at these borders if the DVZOE requests it. The granting or refusal of a visa is in principle always in consultation with the DVZOE.

"The three partners are now constantly exchanging information," says Thierry Vandenberghe. "Thanks to this centralized information, the users now have a much better overview of the data flow. They can exchange correct and unambiguous information quickly and they can react effectively to any problems or delays in the processing of a visa application. Moreover, they have a better idea of what information was sent from where and by whom. It is possible to trace the path taken by a file. We cannot trace the content of the messages because of the personal data protection act. Anyway the new method of working complies with the European legislation."



Danny Buysse

"The IT staff of the FPS Home Affairs themselves can take care of the day-to-day management and any minor adjustments."

For more information

For more information about the Microsoft products and services described, call +32 (0)2 503 31 13 or visit www.microsoft.com/cases. There you will find other companies that use similar applications.

For more information about CODit, call +32 (0)3 844 31 72 or visit www.codit.eu

For more information about RealDolmen, call +32 (0)2 801 55 55 or visit www.realdolmen.com

For more information about the Federal Public Service Home Affairs, visit www.ibz.fgov.be

Keeping statistics

Thanks to the new 'message broker', the messages are not going to get lost and the users can also keep a record of the statistics. "For instance, if the government makes a decision aimed at influencing the number of visa applications, we can verify this with the statistics," says Filip Pynckels. "It also allows us to see very clearly if we need to recruit additional people to process the applications on time, or give some of the staff other tasks if their workload becomes too light. We also tried to keep statistics in the past but then we stored and processed the figures manually, so of course errors crept into the statistics. Not surprising, since we process about 200,000 visa applications in half a year. So it is very important that the system works well and fast. For certain visas, such as the visas for the crew of container ships, speed it even more important. If these people don't receive their documents on time, they are not allowed to leave the ship and this can lead to substantial economic damage for the shipping company."

All the developments for BelVIS were carried out by RealDolmen and CODit, with the help of Microsoft Visual Studio and .NET. "We also provided the 'CODit Dashboard' toolbox, so that the IT staff of the FPS Home Affairs themselves can take care of the day-to-day management and any minor adjustments," says Danny Buysse.

"The project went without a hitch," adds Filip Pynckels. "So as far as we are concerned, the partnership can continue for a long time. We have always looked for solutions together, instead of pointing the finger at each other when there were problems."

Expanding Business Intelligence

In the future, people would like to upgrade to the latest version of BizTalk. It is possible that the functionality will be extended, so that the users can also exchange information with other government services. "Now the system is working very well and stably and that's why we want to continue expanding it," says Filip Pynckels. "We also want to further exploit the Business Intelligence capabilities. In any case, our message broker turns out to be very flexible to modify and extend, and this is also thanks to the fine work of CODit and RealDolmen."