Public administration is impressed by the solutions produced by Sun and its partners.

A shot in the arm for document management.

The Migration Office of the Canton of Zurich is functioning in a much healthier and more efficient way and is once again capable of client-friendly operation. The credit for this goes mainly to ARTS, the capturing, archiving, document-management and workflow system produced by Sun's partner UPTIME services AG. Walter Steiger, Deputy with special duties of the Migration Office of the Canton of Zurich, and Patrick Richter, Federal Financial IT Specialist and Director of UPTIME services AG, reported on this fascinating project.

In addition to other functions, the Migration Office of the Canton of Zurich issues immigration and residence permits, extends visas and issues return visas. Since 1 September 2001, it has been based in the 'City Bernina,' a futuristic commercial building in Zurich-Oerlikon. Over 120 employees work on two storeys and over 3000 m² floorspace. They have modern workplaces, some of which are modeled on the open-plan office system.

This has not always been the case, though. The previous home of the Migration Office, in the city center, was called the aliens' office. There space was at an absolute premium. The government was hard put to manage approximately 240,000 files with 8 million pages, spread over three floors. Each day, the workforce of approximately 100 officers had to refer to around 1700 files and create 400 new ones. Day by day, with 800 postal items received, the stack was increased by approximately 2500 pages.

Gradually, all of the old files are being digitalized.

The influx of paperwork almost brought about collapse.
When a telephone inquiry was made, the officer had to make a telephone request to the archive for the required file, and then wait for it to arrive by pneumatic tube. Management of this flood of paperwork was extremely labor- and cost-intensive. And there was a constant increase in demands placed on the office, to the extent that employees were hardly able to cope with the workload. Finally the times of accessibility for phone calls had to be reduced. Consequently, the officers were available for telephone calls for only one hour in the morning and one hour in the afternoon.

This new situation was not only unsatisfactory for all those involved, but led to continuously increasing political pressure. Everything had to move very quickly in 2001. Beginning on 1 September, not only did the Migration Office move to new premises, but also introduced a new organization and – last but not least – the electronic archiving system ELAR, which will be described in this article.

They are entitled to a sense of satisfaction for a successful project. Left: Walter Steiger, Deputy with special duties of the Migration Office of the Canton Zurich. Right: Patrick Richter, Federal Financial IT Specialist and Director of UPTIME services AG.

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Open to new concepts.

In 1999, Steiger carried out a WTO-Gatt invitation to tender, to which he received 15 enquiries and 22 tenders. "We deliberately refrained from imposing any restrictive rules such as – for example – a full-text search, because we were open to new concepts and wanted our future partner, in its capacity as a specialist, to take a global approach to the problem."

It was in the process of a long evaluation phase with reference visits and product demonstrations that Steiger heard about ARTS. "The flexible concept was one that appealed to me, because I had often found other systems on offer to be too rigid. From the outset, I had a good impression of UPTIME services AG. Here, I found that people listened, there was an interesting exchange of views, and I immediately became involved in a fascinating, shared process of development and learning."

Sun's reliability is a must.

A decisive feature for Steiger was that ELAR had to run on UNIX®: "If other applications should occasionally fail, it wouldn't be so bad. But ELAR is commercially critical, particularly if we want to operate on an entirely paper-free basis. Secondly, I wanted to get everything from one source from one prime contractor, so that there would be no to-and-fro between hardware and software suppliers."

Consequently, the Sun Solaris™ platform offered by UPTIME services AG came just at the right time. "Sun Microsystems is a very valuable partner for us. Here, we find hardware which is quite capable of dealing with our applications with respect to performance, reliability and scalability. We have had the best experience imaginable with Sun's systems," says Richter.

Steiger, too, has nothing but praise for Sun: "Since 1 September 2001, the Sun Enterprise™ 450 server has been running continuously and absolutely without a problem. Performance values are excellent. All digitalized documents are stored on the 600 gigabyte RAIDS system which offers us ample reserve capacity for five years."

The project is characterized by its reliability and good prospects.

So, what was the situation for the Migration Office, at the beginning of April 2002? Step-by-step, electronic files are replacing the old hardcopy files, so that the officers can make the transition more easily. Currently, all new, incoming documents are digitalized on scanners and are indexed. Automatic comparison with existing documents helps to avoid capturing errors. Files then reach an electronic postal input for one of the 100 officers. 15,000 files are already in digital form. The process will be accelerated with effect from autumn 2002, because this is when the Migration Office plans to digitalize files which return to the archive from each officer. For security reasons, the original documents are still being archived until further notice.

Security is the key word for the ARTS concept, for example thanks to its refined authorization system. The triple-stage access authorization process prevents abuse: users/groups, documents and index terms. Case monitoring provides recording of all open and terminated transactions, and also detects errors, i.e. documents which remain in the electronic mailbox and can't be processed.

Acceptability is enhanced thanks to a user-friendly concept.

Initially, officers had problems with ELAR, and some people didn't like it. That was inevitable, because they had got used to the familiar hardcopy which they could feel and handle, and all of a sudden they had much more screen-based work to do than before. The half-day introductory session, which itself was conducted under time pressure, was much too short.

"But now, the level of acceptance is far higher, and I am receiving positive feedback," Steiger confirms. "One reason for this is definitely the astonishing speed, where 98 % of all documents are flashed up on screen for the officer in less than three seconds. Then there is the user-friendliness of the concept and the diverse views provided by ARTS. For example, if an officer opens a document in the mailbox, he can see the entire file with all existing documents as well."

If required, the officer can group documents together according to case circumstances, or attach memos. Outgoing post is placed directly in the archive by means of applications such as Lotus Notes or MS Word. ELAR also puts an end to having to search for files which were temporarily irretrievable despite the best organization efforts.

Positive bill of health.

"ARTS is a technically refined, high-grade document management system," confirms Steiger with some satisfaction. "An example of its high flexibility was with the integration of the host application ZAR, the Central Aliens' Register which is operated in Bern. In ZAR, too, you can look for a file in ARTS and incorporate figures directly from ZAR into ARTS."

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"I also found it very pleasant and interesting to collaborate with UPTIME services AG. This is a reliable partner with whom we have successfully mastered a complex task and achieved the highest objectives set. It has also fulfilled the maintenance agreement in an exemplary fashion. New software releases are often surprising in terms of the welcome additional functions which our officers can now have. Also, with ARTS we can fulfill future requirements, for example for connection to the Internet, because the application will also run on any standard commercial browser."

Efficient, client-friendly mode of operation.
Here, the Migration Office provides the ideal boundary conditions for improved communication and efficient, client-friendly work. Telephone enquiries can once again be received seven hours per day. This has been achieve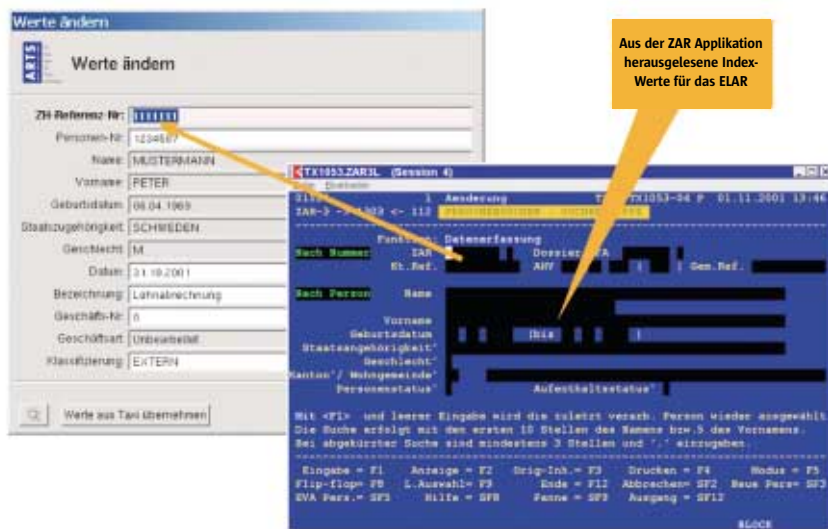d thanks not only to ELAR but also to the generous space margins and the new organizational structure. For example, telephone enquiries are now being answered by a freshly set-up information center which takes a tremendous load off the officers' shoulders.

Would Steiger do it all again? "Yes, without a doubt. More and more benefits and advantages are coming to light each day. I have to recommend ARTS in conjunction with the Sun platform. This is a powerful solution which makes it possible for official centers of various types to manage their documentation rapidly and securely. However, I would rather not have to manage moving premises, reorganizing and introducing ARTS on one and the same day again," he says with a laugh.

Peter Wilhelm
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File display in Explorer mode.

This collaboration with other applications within the Migration Office was very successful. For example, upon scanning, the index values for ARTS can be directly incorporated from the host application for ZAR (Central Aliens' Register of EJPD).