"We're getting there"

North Rhine-Westphalia's CIO Hartmut Beuß has a conversation with T-Systems Account Executive Guido Hollasch on the digitization offensive in the country, the need for standardization instead of 'small, small,' and having the confidence that the way through the "chicken ladders" does not always have to be analogous.

INTERVIEW —— Thomas van Zütphen

Mr. Beuß, NRW wants to fan the fire of digitization. Where is "catching up" especially needed and what will that look like?

My focus is the digitization of administration, which is where catch-up is badly needed in accelerating the conversion process. The coalition agreement sets an ambitious target requiring additional efforts and resources. Not by 2031, but as soon as 2025, the state administration should be fully digitized. This means we must cut the time window nearly in half. The acceleration is, therefore, particularly necessary in the process optimization, that is, the improvement and digitization of internal processes.

If we start from the top – when will the first digital "model ministry" that your finance minister recently spoke about in the FAZ come to fruition and has a selection already been made?

A formal decision has not yet been made, but it will happen here at the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Innovation, Digitization and Energy. First pilots in the sense of a model ministry are already underway. A pilot example involving the central department, my department, and the top management is electronic transaction processing or, in other words, electronic circulation folders in connection with e-files.

How is the pilot designed?

The participating units practice – after previous training – electronic transaction processing on a pilot basis, since we have the technical requirements for both e-files and e-circulation folders. But dealing with both requires practice and, of course, the pilot also serves to recognize and remedy any shortcomings of the application. After all, the state administration oversees upwards of 600 agencies with about 120,000 computer workstations (i.e. employees). It is important to launch pilot projects so that the subsequent introduction and rollout in other agencies is not met with the same introduction and conver-

After the change in administrations in 2017, full authority for digitization was given to one central agency – the Economic Affairs Ministry in NRW – for the first time in history.

sion difficulties that come up and are worked out during the pilot. However, it is not so much the technology that proves to be a special challenge, but the transformation process itself. This has a lot to do with organization, but also becoming accustomed to a different way of dealing with hierarchy.

Back to "catching up" – is NRW lagging compared to the rest of Germany?

Again, I would like to limit myself to the digitization of administration when addressing this question. NRW is not lagging behind in Germany… Germany as a whole is lagging behind. We are not in Europe's rearview mirror, but by no means have we reached the pole position. In other words: We are not yet where we want to be.

In what areas do you feel NRW is on track?

We are on the right track, but we need to move faster. Since the beginning of the year, an "access hub" has been up and running that enables electronic access to the state agencies, so that processes can be distributed and processed quickly. The same applies to the "service account," which I can use as a citizen if I want to process a service electronically. Also, by the end of 2018, we will have the basic components for e-payment built into our services so that, as a citizen, I will not have to pay the five euro fees in person.

We are working on all other basic projects simultaneously: E-billing is another example. The legal basis must be established, the technology needs to be set up, and internal processes must be adapted. In the future, simply being able to accept invoices electronically will not be an advantage. Efficiency increases only when the invoice can be further processed electronically. Only then is there potential for saving time and money.

At the core is always the question: How can administrative processes be made easier and faster – for the employees themselves, but also most importantly for their "customers"? Citizens and businesses should be able to reach the service or information they seek in a maximum of three clicks. At this point, the right step is to intelligently link the portals of the municipalities and the state portal we are currently building. This will allow everyone to find their way easily and quickly.

NRW CIO Hartmut Beuß plans to replace disjointed IT silos with standardized, unified solutions wherever possible.

The state administration of North Rhine-Westphalia works in time windows that would be considered to move at a "moderate speed" in the free economy. Is this impression wrong?

As I said: We are on the right track, but we need to move faster. And, of course, we always need to keep an eye on technical developments. It may well be that other technological developments offer new possibilities by 2025. We must preserve our openness to react to technology. Blockchain technology, for example, does not play any special role in our administration today. This will change in my opinion.

'Processes' is a good keyword. Since 2017, digitization is no longer assigned to the Ministry of the Interior, but to the Ministry of Economic Affairs. What has changed for you as a result?

For the first time, the predominant topic of the future is the topic of digitization under one roof. This is a good step, but it does not mean that "digital" technology is necessarily the sole responsibility of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Innovation, Digitization and Energy. Digitization plays into all areas of life and this affects all departments – telematics and transport, e-health, 'digital education,' just to name a few examples.

Nevertheless, what does this bundling and the new significance of IT with regards to the CIO's room for action, his budget, and his ability to intervene mean when it comes to 'centralized IT control vs. departmental jurisdiction'?

The bundling does not lead to changed competences for the CIO. And, of course, there is always the "classic conflict" between central IT control and departmental jurisdiction. We are still working too much next to each other with individual IT solutions and have too few universal, standardized solutions. But today there is a much greater willingness to interpret departmental jurisdiction to achieve something more for the greater good.

What for example?

A few examples are: When we introduced the e-file, except for the judicial system, which was already using electronic legal transactions, all departments were obliged to play catch-up to implement the solution. That would have been unthinkable ten years ago, maybe even five years ago. We also have one solution for all other so-called basic components such as the electronic circulation folder, the access hub for electronic inputs, and the service account. Plus, there is a central budget for implementing our e-Government Act,

Bio

Hartmut Beuß was made the North Rhine-Westphalia State Commissioner for Information Technology back in autumn 2013, when he had a long track record as a departmental manager in the Interior Ministry. As the NRW CIO, the 62-year-old Cologne native has been reporting directly to NRW Economic Affairs Minister Andreas Pinkwart since the new administration took over last year.

that is, the digital administration program. This means: We are responsible for the program, but we agree on the timetable and the use of resources with the departments, of course.

To what extent do you need to consider the different needs of your ministries and that they sometimes also like to orient towards the federal level?

That is definitely a factor to keep in mind. Financial administration, justice, police – there are areas that are involved in nationwide agreements. We must accept this in NRW, but it naturally also increases the need for votes. However, when it comes to compatibility, they are done in a very constructive way these days. Different solutions must at least be able to work and communicate with each other.

"Constructive" – what does that have to do with it?

So that all participants have gained insight into a dynamic process: We will fail if everyone tries to tackle problems with conversion to digitalization on their own. And those who outsource their administration will neither understand nor accept this.

But the question is always the same: How to get there? Within companies, different departments often have different views on how to digitize what and in which order. Does this "silo" way of thinking exist in the NRW state government?

The term is not completely unknown to us in public administration. But as I said: The understanding that we need to not only work together much more closely, but also develop universal standard solutions is much greater today than just a few years ago.

Sounds good. In plain language, this means: Cloud computing remains a no-go for the state administration?

No, not a no-go, but we are still hesitant when it comes to public clouds. We deal with the topic intensively, but we look at it in a discerning way. There are areas that do not deal with very sensitive data, but still raise concerns about data protection and privacy. Cloud solutions are a serious alternative, not least for cost reasons.

The topic of the public cloud is not yet trending, but is it gaining momentum?

The outlook is really good. We must deal with the subject, which is exactly what we are doing. The constantly increasing amount of data storage alone is forcing us to do so.

You recently said at the "e-nrw" congress that North Rhine-Westphalia needs not only a digital, but also a mental transformation. Does this refer to the hierarchy which you originally spoke about?

Absolutely. The administration hierarchy of the future will look different from what we are accustomed to. The classic journey of a paper document is as follows: it is written by the clerk, then sent to various colleagues or superiors for "advance notice," where it is countersigned

Guido Hollasch, Account Director
North Rhine-Westphalia, T-Systems.

120,000

Over 30 percent of the 300,000-plus people working in North Rhine-Westphalia's 600 government agencies use a PC workstation.

and then passed up agency management. This path is useful for informing and involving all relevant parties. But today, information is requested and delivered so quickly, top down, and vice versa, that the classic 'chicken ladder' does not always work. And all hierarchical levels must learn to handle this.

What will be the "next big thing" in terms of public administration?

With our 'Digital Administration Program,' we are committed to a vision to make one thing clear: Why are we doing this? We must ask this, because it is an immense challenge for everyone working in administration. Which, in turn, causes some worries. Therefore, it is so important for everyone to understand the goal: It's about making the lives of employees and our customers easier. If we complete this process by 2025 – with noticeable success already achieved – then customers should be saying: 'Working with agencies in NRW is outstanding, fast, and efficient.' And at the same time, employees should be saying: 'Administration work is fun, and we are good at what we do.' That would be the 'next big thing' for me personally. And here we come!

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