



Flanders government agency rapidly rolls out application to help businesses survive coronavirus crisis

Client name: Government of Flanders

HQ: Flanders, Belgium

Industry: Public sector

Challenge

- Enable Flemish entrepreneurs to quickly access government payments during the COVID-19 pandemic situation
- Introduce a web application that would support high demand for payments
- Design a process in the midst of a crisis, with employees working from home

Solution

- DXC Modern Application Development services, supported by a multidisciplinary DXC team
- Application design, testing and integration services, using existing services as building blocks
- Collaboration with technology partners for cloud hosting, monitoring and network management

Results

- Delivered the new system in 10 working days, processing 50,000 applications in the first 4 days
- Reduced applicant waiting times from 10 minutes to 6 minutes
- Enabled full tracking of applications through each stage of the process, resulting in an estimated 95 percent satisfaction rate

As the coronavirus (COVID-19) swept across Europe in March 2020, Entrepreneurial businesses had to close overnight, and they needed financial help quickly to survive.

In response, the government implemented the Corona Hinderpremie program, which includes a €4,000 contribution to each business impacted by COVID-19. The Flanders Agency for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, (Agentschap Innoveren & Ondernemen) known as VLAIO, needed to distribute the funds to the businesses as rapidly as possible. The agency worked with DXC Technology to roll out a new web application in less than 2 weeks to help Flemish entrepreneurs.

Mark Andries, VLAIO administrator-general, says the DXC application development team performed exceptionally well under pressure. He and other VLAIO employees met with DXC at 7:30 p.m. daily to track the status of the project.

“I feel less and less like a customer and more like a real partner of DXC,” Andries says. “I feel strongly about that. This happened almost entirely as a co-creation. Given the circumstances, this was the only way.”

The need for speed

On Friday, March 13, the day that the Flemish government enacted Corona Hinderpremie, VLAIO turned to DXC for help. As a long-time partner, DXC understood the government’s needs and could support Flanders under the existing framework contract.

“We would have looked for other ways if DXC hadn’t convinced us that they could handle this,” Andries emphasizes. “The application had to be very fast. It had to be simple and easy to access for small businesses, and — above all — the applicants had to see the money quickly in their account.”

Normally, the development of new applications takes several months. In this situation, it was a matter of doing it in 10 days.

Reusable web applications

The long relationship between the Government of Flanders and DXC helped ensure the project’s success. Previously, DXC had built the highly successful MAGDA platform, which enables Flemish citizens to enter their data only once to access all public services. The platform consolidated millions of transactions for 200 government entities, saving citizens €97 million in administrative costs and improving security.

DXC had also developed a web application for an earlier Hinderpremie government bonus given to entrepreneurial businesses that had to close due to unexpected events, such as road closings by the public works department.

DXC used these existing applications as reusable building blocks to create a highly automated system that would process the flood of applications with minimal manual work.

“There was no way we could look at them all individually,” Andries explains.

DXC built the cloud-native application to run in the AWS cloud, with the ability to rapidly scale to meet demand. The new system includes application monitoring by DXC partner Dynatrace and network management by Proximus.

Responding to delivery pressure

Rarely had VLAIO been under such enormous pressure to deliver a new service. For many entrepreneurs, especially small self-employed businesses with no financial buffers, contending with the crisis was a matter of survival.

The biggest risk was system overload due to the anticipated high demand. To prevent this problem, a queuing mechanism was implemented to control the flow to the application. At peak times, up to 1,000 users simultaneously accessed the system.

Applicants also were given the opportunity to register in advance through the VLAIO website. Initially, about 80,000 entrepreneurs a day were given access to the application before the launch. The moment of truth came on Friday, March 27, when the application went online for all. It worked: VLAIO processed 50,000 applications in the first 4 days.

“It was a great moment when lots of appreciation came in from customers,” Andries says. “Minister Hilde Crevits for Economy and Innovation has praised the agency on several occasions.”

An additional advantage of VLAIO is its ability to serve new clients. VLAIO was well known to startups and companies focused on innovation, but less well known in industries such as retail and hospitality. These entrepreneurs will likely continue to make use of the agency’s services in the future.

Automation and tracking

For the first time, VLAIO was able to use robotic process automation (RPA) to help employees process files more quickly. RPA automated a number of manual tasks associated with handling files that required additional verifications. Once again, it meant time savings. VLAIO also gained efficiencies by automating the submission of files for entrepreneurs who were entitled to Hinderpremie payments but were previously unable to submit applications digitally.

The agency can now gauge the satisfaction level of its customers with each request through a central Dynatrace dashboard. The dashboard enables VLAIO to continuously monitor the stability of the high-load system, usage of the system across Flanders, as well as the efficiency of submitting applications into the system. No surveys needed to be completed: Based on indicators, Dynatrace automatically estimated a satisfaction rating of 95 percent.

The next challenge related to the coronavirus crisis will be compensating companies that have suffered large-scale losses. VLAIO will once again partner with DXC to deliver a solution that will quickly support the affected companies.

“The coronavirus crisis is, of course, terrible for the personal lives of citizens and for the economy, but the way in which we have been able to respond was evaluated positively,” Andries adds.

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