

Without a cultural change in administration, e-signatures are of no use

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<https://www.inside-it.ch/ohne-kulturwandel-in-der-verwaltung-nuetzen-e-signaturen-nichts-20231109>

The Swiss Confederation has purchased a huge package of e-signatures for up to 17 billion francs. Expert Peter Janes classifies and explains how the exorbitant price comes about. Switzerland will invest between 2 and 17 billion francs in digital signatures over the next 7 years. The contract was awarded by the organization eOperations, which aims to develop joint IT solutions for the federal government, cantons and municipalities. We discussed how the immense amount comes about and how the eOperations approach should be evaluated with Peter Janes, who has managed several projects in the area of e-signatures.

Have you ever seen an e-signature project of this size?

No, but that also has a unique character. All participating Swiss municipalities and cantons can use the surcharge. Everyone can introduce electronic signatures according to their needs, either as a SaaS solution or on-premise. There will certainly be many individual projects, but hopefully in the interest of economies of scale there will also be a few large joint projects.

Does this mean that all interested authorities can launch their own e-signature project under the negotiated conditions?

Exactly, a federalist approach with several providers was deliberately chosen. This brings with it a lot of freedom, but the price is that there will be many different solutions, which could lead to interoperability problems. I would avoid having each community work on their own project. This leads to additional costs and probably also to longer implementation times.

But what is the reason for the enormous sum?

The basis for this is the calculated number of digital signatures. The tender expected 43 million qualified signatures, 43 million advanced signatures and 32 million electronic seals across all approximately 3,000 points of need and over the entire period of 7 years.

Are these numbers plausible?

They are primarily theoretical. But I'm surprised that more qualified and advanced signatures are expected than seals. Seals are not only much cheaper, but also more practical because, depending on the legal basis, they do not require the identity of each signer to be verified, unlike signatures. There are also only a few documents that require a qualified signature by law.

Which are they?

In civil law there are - very few - documents that require written form, such as legal transactions in tenancy law, proceedings before civil status authorities or certain agreements in employment

contracts. In administrative law, these are typically orders, although the applicability depends on the applicable legal basis. It is currently clear that the best practices for the applicability of digital signatures are still missing.

Depending on the provider, a qualified signature costs between 2 and 4 francs.

How is this price made up? From the one-off initial costs of the implementation project, the annual operating costs and license fees as well as the volume-dependent costs per signature, which must be paid to the trust service provider. Depending on the quantity scale, the latter amount to around 1.50 francs per qualified electronic signature and is a substantial cost factor and also a cost driver. Because: More signatures equal higher costs.

Who are the trust service providers in Switzerland?

There are 4: Swisscom, Swissign, the Federal Office for Information Technology and Quo Vadis. Swisscom is the largest provider. But a digital signature for 2 to 4 francs is much more expensive compared to the postage for an A Mail letter. Of course that is only part of the truth. Analogue processes are much more expensive and also take longer. Printing it out, collecting it, signing it, enveloping it, franking it, taking it to the post office and sending it all adds up quickly and can cost up to 30 francs. And when lawyers and couriers are involved, things quickly become more expensive. These costs also need to be taken into account, but are not as visible as the individual amount for a qualified signature.

What advantages does a qualified signature bring compared to the analogue paper process?

It can be verified that the document has not been changed after it has been signed. In addition, the authenticity of the sender can be checked. This can be relevant, for example, for certificates or official register extracts.

And what disadvantages?

Digital signatures do not tolerate media disruptions - it is important that digitally signed documents are not printed out. Then they lose their legal validity because the digital signature can only be transported digitally in the document. Therefore, it is not enough for a municipality to carry out an e-signature project. In addition to the technical implementation, there needs to be a cultural change in administration - with increased digital skills and digitally thought processes. This is the only way to realize the full benefits of digitalization. I assume that we will be in a transition and therefore in a hybrid world for a long time.