

Abstract

EFFICIENCY OF THE IT ALLOCATION IN FEDERAL PUBLIC DEPARTMENTS

In order to keep computer staff on board during the completion of the transition to the year 2000 and of the introduction of the euro the Federal Government allocated extra money of over twenty million euro from September 1998 to the end of 2001. In the end, this decision apparently failed to reach its objective. Not only because Government spent twice the amount planned, but also because the initially low staff turnover rate increased. The Belgian Court of Audit recommended that in the future more careful thought be given to how such measures should come about and an effective control and follow up should be ensured. The Federal Minister for Civil Service answered he was planning to introduce a royal decree.

In order to keep computer staff during the completion of the transition to the year 2000 and the introduction of the euro, nearly all federal public departments allocated extra money to staff with computer tasks from September 1998 to the end of 2001. To this effect, the Council of Ministers had approved a royal decree on 6 September 1998.

The Court examined whether this policy measure proved efficient.

It was first noticed that departments had no prior reliable picture of staff turnover. There had not been any investigation into why staff had resigned voluntarily, thereby making it impossible to propose valid solutions to counter this process. Moreover, from the very beginning, the only alternative considered was to give an IT allocation without pondering whether this was the better option. The description of the objective and of the target group in the royal decree did completely leave out the original objective, which consisted in solving the computer issues related to the transition to the year 2000 and the introduction of the euro.

The royal decree proved difficult to implement and was hardly subject to an implementation review. Several articles create confusion, thereby giving in case of doubtful cases exclusive prominence to the interpretation given by the senior officials of the department involved and/or the Minister for Civil Service in his reply. Moreover, the subsequent amendments to the decree did not always match the original objective of the policy measure: support staff also benefited from the extra money allocated as well as the staff seconded to a minister's private office.

The implementation of the royal decree did not always meet the standards. The target group was insufficiently informed and the Civil Service Department did not ensure the follow-up of the implementation, so that there was no targeted adjustment and assessment possible. Besides, the IT allocations paid out largely exceeded the budget: at an initial stage, the Council of Ministers gave its approval for an amount of 9.4 million euro while the final amount turned out to be more than twice that amount (that is 21,579,263 euro).

Many departments concerned by the measure could not supply the Court with all the information requested and unexplainable differences were noticed in the amounts paid out. This could indicate that the conditions required to obtain that IT allocation were not always complied with. No careful distinction made out who should be the beneficiaries mainly in the case of workers without any computer degree.

In addition, the extra money allocated failed to reach its objective: staff rotation did not decrease, quite on the contrary. Between 1998 and 2001, it went up to 4.1% from 2.2%. The number of claimants increased systematically during that period, which is an indication that there was no serious recruitment problem. Findings from an investigation of the data available showed that the extra money allocated had effectively hindered the increase in staff rotation but had not prevented it.

The Court stressed the need to give more careful thought to how such measures should come about and to subject them to a better review and follow up. This should be preceded by a reliable examination into the need for such measures and a realistic cost price assessment. In the regulations,

there should be an accurate description of the target groups and of the modalities of implementation and control aspects. In the case of measures relating mainly to public staff, the Federal Public Department for Staff and Organisation should ensure a follow up, a review and, if needed, an adjustment of the policy measure.

The Minister for Civil Service replied that he agreed that the outcome of a policy measure depended on the quality of the regulations. He was preparing a royal decree with a view to improving the way budget control and administrative and internal control are organised within the federal departments. The introduction of an experimental project to ensure staff data electronic management is also expected to allow a more efficient follow up and assessment.