

Conclusions of the National Audit Office

Information system projects of the police and the judicial administration

The audit was targeted at three information system projects of the police and the judicial administration. The projects audited were the ERP (enterprise resource planning) system project VITJA of the police, the case and document management system project AIPA of the National Prosecution Authority Finland and the general courts, and the operational development and client data system project Roti of the Prison and Probation Service of Finland. The projects were intended to replace legacy information systems that had reached the end of their life cycle and to form an interoperable entity that would reform and enhance the public authorities' core activities in the criminal procedure chain. Of the information systems, only Roti has been fully deployed, and the system has entered the further development phase. AIPA is partly in production use. The VITJA project, in turn, was discontinued while the audit was underway, before the system was completed, and the targets set for the project remained mainly unachieved. The project's functionalities will continue to be promoted in another development programme.

When the audit was started, it was already known that the original timetables and budgets of the projects had been clearly exceeded. The main purpose of the audit was to find out the causes for the problems in the implementation of the three long-term, interrelated information system projects. The aim was to produce information on the factors affecting the success of public-sector information system projects. The audit highlights critical factors to which particular attention should be paid in the planning and implementation of public-sector information system projects.

The projects ran significantly over time and budgets

Each of the projects audited exceeded the original timetable by several years. After the projects had run into problems, decisions were made to continue them, and their completion date was postponed repeatedly. The projects were launched between 2009 and 2011. Of the three information systems, Roti was deployed in 2022. AIPA has been deployed partly, and the last pilots of the system, i.e. limited production use, are planned for the second half of 2024. The VITJA project was discontinued before the system was completed in 2023, and only a part of it was completed.

The projects also ran significantly over budgets. By the end of 2023, the costs of the projects totalled over EUR 200 million. Compared with the initial cost estimates, the costs had almost tripled. In the initial phase of the projects, the Ministry of Finance granted all of them a productivity appropriation, which was intended to cover a significant part of the project costs. As the project development costs have exceeded the original estimates, the estimated productivity benefits of the projects have either decreased or fully disappeared.

The original objectives of the projects had to be compromised during the implementation. In AIPA and Roti, functionalities that were originally to be implemented in the actual project were carried over to the further development phase. As the projects were prolonged, the life of the legacy systems had to be extended in some cases, which also caused costs.

The objectives of the projects were too extensive, and planning was inadequate

The objective of all three projects was to carry out an information system reform with significant impacts. In each project, the original objective was too extensive. The actual extent of the projects became evident to those who carried out them only after the projects had been launched. This was the result of inadequate planning during the initial phase of the projects.

Based on the audit, it must be emphasised that expert planning based on a realistic assessment is extremely important in order for the project to be completed within the timetable and budget. This requires both expertise in the administrative sector and ICT competence from the project office.

The management groups were active but should have addressed the problems of the projects more efficiently

All projects were led by a management or steering group. It was found in the audit that the management or steering groups had been active. They met regularly and discussed issues relevant to the projects. The groups were provided with a lot of material to support their decision-making, even though the audit found that from time to time, the problems faced by the projects came to them as a surprise.

However, although the management and steering groups were active, they did not address the problems encountered by the projects efficiently. The projects were prolonged, and the problems remained unsolved. Substance expertise was emphasised in the composition of the groups as well as in the project offices. It seems that less emphasis had been put on ICT competence. The user groups of the system under development were not represented in the groups in a correct proportion.

Interoperability has not been achieved so far

The key objective was to build a whole of three interoperable information systems. The projects genuinely aimed at building interoperability through various ways, such as hiring a coordinator for the projects. However, because of the problems faced in the separate projects, the objective of interoperability was overlooked from time to time. The methods used for building interoperability were not sufficiently efficient to help to achieve the objective. Because the VITJA project was discontinued, information will not be flowing freely, as originally planned, between the authorities and the information systems in the near future, although some interim solutions have been built.

The responsibility for steering sector-specific projects lies with the competent administrative sector and the agency implementing the project. This is also the case if the project is linked with projects outside the administrative sector. The Ministry of Finance is not responsible for the coordination of sector-specific projects of different administrative sectors. It is the projects that are responsible for organising and coordinating the cooperation. However, as regards separate projects' possibilities of doing this, the audit findings are not encouraging in all respects. The situation could be improved if the Ministry of Finance, as a condition for the grant of productivity financing, required interrelated projects to have such project management structures that make it possible for the projects to cooperate successfully and effectively.

Communication, user engagement and ICT competence remained inadequate

In the AIPA and Roti projects, the people recruited to the project offices included especially experts in the administrative sector, who had a good idea of the tasks that the system to be built should support. Despite this, the project offices failed to take into account all user groups and to communicate sufficiently well that the objectives had become more limited as the projects had proceeded. Communication could have been more active, especially when the deployment of the information systems was postponed. As a result of the users' excessive expectations and inadequate engagement, user approval remained weak. The expectations for the completed systems (AIPA to the extent it was deployed and Roti) were not met, and criticism from end-users has been quite strong. The projects faced IT challenges that could perhaps have been partly avoided if the project staff had had better IT competence starting from the project planning phase.

Critical points in information system projects

Based on the audit findings, the following should be paid special attention in information system projects:

1. The project objective must be feasible. It must also be defined in detail. In addition, it must be clear what is covered and what is not covered by the project. The policy lines must also be adhered to during the implementation phase of the project.
2. The project must be phased and piloted. The outcome must be built in small manageable parts (agile development). The project planning must be based on the Minimum Viable Product (MVP) approach.
3. The timetable and budget of the project must be realistic. This requires both substance expertise and ICT competence. The timetable and budget must be planned competently, carefully and transparently.
4. The project office staff must be selected in such a manner that it has competence in the substance, information systems and project management.
5. The project must be supported by the top management of the organisation. For example, the project objectives must not be expanded so that they

become unrealistic, and the project must be provided with the necessary resources. In addition to the management's support, this requires expertise in information systems and their deployment.

6. The project must inform the project's management group openly about the status of the project. When the project encounters problems, they should be addressed without delay. The top management's support to the project is important in this as well.
7. Future users of the information system to be built must be involved in the project, for example through methods of change management and through correctly timed user training. Their needs must be heard already in the planning phase. Communication must be systematic and open, and it is important not to give a false (e.g. overly optimistic) impression of the system that is being prepared. It is important to communicate on the progress throughout the project and especially when the completion approaches.
8. The internal audit of the organisation can, at best, support the internal control of the project through training. In addition, the internal audit can bring the problems faced in the project to the attention of the organisation's management.