

# Carefree growth in Combell's cloud

Over a mere ten-year period, Federgon has gone from being an organisation for temporary employment agencies to a federation for all types of HR service providers. This brought about the inevitable growing pains, also on the level of IT. Now that its data and applications are running in the cloud, more precisely in an environment hosted by Combell, Federgon can again fully focus on its core business: taking to heart the interests of its members.



"We are basically no more or less than an organisation that collects information, processes it and makes it available", says Paul Verschueren, manager of the economic service with Federgon and project leader of this cloud project. "Thus, controlling the information flow is essential. But over the years, this task had become increasingly difficult. You know how it goes: it all starts with a traditional ICT architecture, then an intranet is added, then a CRM system, while a parallel customer database as well as a system based on Outlook contacts are still running. All this amounted to an obscure jumble for which nobody really had a full overview of the file structure anymore."

## No growth scenario

There was another reason to restructure the ICT environment, adds Paul Verschueren: "We got the impression that some of our partners didn't invest anymore in the technology behind our software. This made us very conscious of our vulnerability: should anything go wrong, we weren't sure if anybody would have been able to help us out anymore. Under these conditions, developing a growth scenario was totally futile as well."

So Federgon went in search of a solution that would prove an asset in the long run and wouldn't make the federation too dependent on one single party. In other words, a solution based on standards that would also preferably be implemented quickly and allow for intuitive usage. Finally, a combination of Microsoft SharePoint and Microsoft Dynamics CRM was chosen and adapted to Federgon's needs by respective software partners Spikes and Qurius (Proware).

## Federgon's ISSUE

Federgon wanted to use the necessary software upgrade as an opportunity to also modernise the hardware infrastructure. And preferably on a scalable platform that requires as little maintenance as possible.

## Combell's SOLUTION

- For members management, Combell's servers host a CRM solution, which was developed by software partner Qurius.
- The SharePoint environment for sharing files is also hosted on Combell's servers.
- Last but not least: Combell also provides a hosted desktop environment – a private cloud so to speak – via Microsoft Terminal Server, including Exchange Server for e-mail and agenda features and Active Directory for a secure access to all applications, with one single login.

All this can benefit from the supplementary protection of a back-end firewall and is stored on a separate SAN storage environment, on which everything is once again stored – during working hours – without impacting the performance of the applications.

The ISO 9001 label of the service guarantees customers that Combell performs continuous quality management. Moreover, Combell also obtained the ISO 27001 label, which guarantees optimum security and performance.

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### Outsourcing allowed?

Simultaneously, the federation became conscious that a thorough migration was also an opportunity to question the situation on a hardware level: “Hardware partner AXI could convince us that it was advisable to virtualise our servers and storage hardware because, at that point already, the unused capacity was too important”, recounts Paul Verschueren. “But we also had to dare ask ourselves another question: was it really necessary to keep our own server room and continue to take care of daily backups and maintenance ourselves? For our accounting and for the maintenance of our PCs, offices and even plants, we used third parties, so why not do the same for our servers and storage? Someone always had to take care of these tasks on top of his own duties and drop everything to do so, because ICT problems are always extremely urgent.”

### Clear SLAs

The benefits of hosting soon became clear and together with software partners Spikes and Qurius, Federgon went in search of the best suitable hosting partner. According to Paul Verschueren, Combell was an immediate candidate for the following reasons: “Both our software partners had recommended Combell based on their prior experiences with the company and we were charmed straight away by its SLAs.”

The migration took a little longer than planned. “But that was mostly due to the notion of scope”, stresses Paul Verschueren. “The project was too fundamental to devote less than our full attention to it. For instance, we created a complete proof-of-concept together with AXI, in which all partners were involved, like e.g. Isabel.” But the result went accordingly: the actual transition – during the first weekend of December 2011 – was almost spotless, exactly owing to this precise preparation in which all risks had been mapped and tested.

### On clouds

Since then, Federgon lives on clouds so to speak, also where ICT infrastructure is concerned. Paul

Verschueren: “Combell has been managing our system since late 2011 with no mentionable incident whatsoever: the support is outstanding, all SLAs are perfectly fulfilled and there also isn’t any downtime, unless scheduled beforehand, in which case it never exceeds the agreed duration. Three to four times a year, we come together to discuss progress, because moving to the cloud is certainly not an end phase but quite the contrary. For instance, we have also decided in the meantime to move on to thin clients: they cost less, are easy to use and also very hard to break.”

The operational benefits for the organisation are equally impressive. Paul Verschueren sums them up: “At all times, we can securely access all files and applications from home as well as on the move. Public transport strikes therefore no longer impact our productivity and our travelling staff members are as productive as all our office workers.”

Moreover, Federgon also availed itself of the best possible support. For first-line support, the organisation can as always count on its ICT partner AXI. For problems with the Internet connection or the support of hosted applications, Federgon is forwarded seamlessly to Combell’s helpdesk.

### Not more but better home working

This doesn’t mean that people work more from home than they used to, says Verschueren. “Home working hasn’t become more frequent, but its quality has markedly increased: no more hassle with VPN connections, and no more having to decide which files to put on the USB stick to go on working in the evening.”

Besides availability, Federgon also enjoys other benefits of the cloud. Such as scalability, for instance. Verschueren: “The cloud is only enlarged when you need it to be. Moreover, you know that you are constantly up-to-date with the latest technological advances. So, you can keep on the cutting edge without having to make special efforts and you acquire a professional image without heavy investments.”

## COMBELL'S ASSETS according to Federgon

The most reliable platform Federgon could afford is located in the server rooms of its hosting partner. Also, Federgon can keep on working with the latest technology and can count on the enthusiastic support of a young and dynamic company like Combell.

## FEDERAGON'S IDENTIKIT

Federgon is a federation of HR service providers with over four hundred active members in recruitment, outplacement, temporary employment, training, service vouchers and other domains of HR service. Federgon represents these sectors e.g. during negotiations with the government and unions, but the federation also supplies quality information on the sector and provides counselling or training to its members. The federation has about 25 staff members.

Federgon’s clients are the members who pay the federation a fee to represent their interests. They range from temporary employment agencies to selection and outplacement service providers over training companies and service voucher companies.

## Better informed members

The members also benefit from the new environment, Verschueren adds. "The extranet is a mirror image of the intranet and since the latter is kept up-to-date more efficiently thanks to the hosting environment, the members also have more recent information at their disposal. Also, lines are less overloaded with Combell and there is less downtime. Access management is handled more smoothly with the SharePoint environment and delivering information via e-mails and alerts also works better than before."



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Was it a learning curve? "It certainly was! We understood that, despite all the technical aspects, this migration has mostly been one big project for change. You have to teach people how to cope with new situations, show them that the 'share' in SharePoint isn't an empty concept. They have to learn how to share files instead of keeping them all to themselves. To convey this idea to your staff, you sometimes need external people, from whom this type of information will be accepted more easily.

With this said, we should probably involve consultants for change management sooner. Because technology always gets there, but the same doesn't necessarily go for acceptance. It isn't flipping the switch that is the key moment, but the morning after, when end users start using the new infrastructure for the first time."

## On the right track

Nevertheless, Paul Verschueren looks back on the entire project with satisfaction. And he faces the future confidently: "It's very reassuring to know that, thanks to your technology partner – especially with a company as young and dynamic as Combell – you are on the right track to be able to keep up with the speed of information.

"And it is always possible to go further... As a matter of fact, Federgon recently had Combell host a critical application for calculating end-of-year bonuses for temporary workers on its private cloud.

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