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Using artificial intelligence in Swiss public administration

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About the study

This study is based on interviews with experts from Swiss public authorities and administrations, industry, and academia on use of artificial intelligence (AI) within Swiss public administration. Responses from experts who wish to remain anonymous have been included in the study on an unattributed basis.

A representative survey on the broader use of AI was also conducted between 12 April and 13 May 2024. 394 public service employees and 934 Swiss citizens took part.



Overview and key findings

This Point of View presents the key findings of a wide-ranging survey of public service employees and Swiss citizens, supplemented with expert interviews. The study sets out the opportunities and challenges associated with using artificial intelligence (AI) in Swiss public authorities and administrations and makes recommendations for the roll-out of AI projects. The headline findings below give a brief overview of the key insights and conclusions from the analysis.

Potential and opportunities represented by AI

- Tackling skills shortages: Against the backdrop of skills shortages and the imminent wave of retirements in the public sector, the use of AI offers a significant opportunity to boost both efficiency and productivity.
- International role models: Successful AI projects in other countries provide valuable inspiration and impetus for its roll-out in Switzerland.

Positive attitudes to AI

- Keeping an open mind: Almost half of public service employees and Swiss citizens are positive about the use of AI in public administration.
- Familiarity with AI: Around three-quarters of public service employees surveyed are already using AI as part of their job, in particular to compose emails and draft reports and for problem solving.

Risks and challenges associated with integrating AI

- Ethics, data protection, and job security: While AI brings advantages, survey respondents are concerned about ethical issues, data protection, and job security.
- Quality and security: Both public service employees and citizens in Switzerland have concerns about the quality of Al outputs and the security of Al systems against cyber attack.

Trust and transparency

 The importance of transparency: Transparent use of AI and robust decision-making are important to gaining the trust of citizens. Acceptability of AI services: More than 60% of Swiss citizens surveyed say they are willing to use AI-supported services to speed up administrative processes such as renewing their driving licence or applying for planning permission.

Conclusions

Integrating AI into public administration in Switzerland offers huge potential for significant improvements in both the efficiency and the quality of public services. The positive attitude to AI reported by survey participants and the fact that it is already being used by public service employees form a solid base for its broader roll-out. However, making greater use of its potential requires careful approaches and targeted initiatives. Below, we set out in detail the factors that will contribute to the success of such initiatives.

Artificial intelligence rolled out in public administration

The rapid growth in artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and the recent boom in the popularity of generative AI have not only brought about massive increases in investment but are also prompting individual organisations to recognise and make greater use of the potential of AI and the efficiency gains it represents.

Using AI represents opportunities for public authorities and administrations. The growth in the technology coincides with the retirement of a significant proportion of Swiss public service employees over the next few years. Public bodies are facing both a labour shortage and a skills shortage in a number of areas¹, and that, combined with rising expectations of government by citizens, makes AI an apparently timely solution, combining greater efficiency with higher productivity and improvements in services.

Public authorities and administrations are already using AI successfully in their work in areas ranging from energy, the environment, defence, and national security to health and social care.³ International comparisons reveal, however, that despite this clear will to use AI, Swiss public administration still represents significant untapped potential for its wider use.⁴ As the 2024 Deloitte survey shows, almost half of all Swiss public service employees (46%) and a similar proportion of Swiss citizens (43%) are positive about the use of AI in public administration. A large majority of public service employees surveyed (76%) are actually already using AI as part of their work. However, 24% never use it, a much higher percentage than is assumed by the general population – our survey of Swiss citizens shows that they estimate the proportion of public service employees not using AI at just 4%.

«The volume of data that public authorities and administrations have to process is set to rise rapidly over the next 10 to 15 years. The skills shortage and the loss of staff to retirement over the same period will further increase workloads in the public sector. Al applications offer enormous potential here for tackling monotonous and repetitive tasks.»

Prof. Dr. Marcel Gygli, Institute for Public Sector Transformation, Bern University of Applied Sciences

Defining artificial intelligence

An AI system is a machine-based system that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers from the input it receives how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations or decisions that can influence physical or virtual environments. Different AI systems vary in their levels of autonomy and adaptiveness after deployment.

Source: OECD, 2024²

The survey findings shed light on another interesting aspect: as Chart 1 shows, public service employees who report never using AI are most negative about its use within public authorities and administrations. By contrast, the more public service employees use AI, the more positive they are about its impact on their day to day work.

The survey findings also shed interesting light on the uses to which AI is put in public administration. Just over two-fifths of Swiss public service employees (41%) report using AI to compose emails or draft reports and other documents. 30% use it to summarise and synthesise content from internal and external sources, while 28% use it for problem-solving, for example through brainstorming. These figures are deceptive, however, as using AI poses particular challenges with regard to data protection and transparency.

As well as establishing how Swiss public service employees use AI, the Deloitte survey also explored why they do so. Just under half of those surveyed (46%) report that they are already using AI at work to save time and resources. If AI systems are to take over more tasks, make forecasts, formulate recommendations and support decision making, ethical standards will be increasingly crucial. And citizens' rights must be addressed responsibly if popular trust is to be maintained. This requires both sensitivity and expertise on the part of public service employees.

To sum up, the use of AI in public administration offers significant potential to boost efficiency and use resources economically – particularly against the backdrop of skills shortages and upcoming wide-scale retirements from the public sector.

«Unlike the relationship between private sector businesses and consumers, the relationship between the state and its citizens is one of compulsion, not choice. The state must therefore deploy AI transparently and be able to justify the decisions it makes: citizens expect better data protection and greater privacy than when they make commercial purchases, for example.»

Dr. Dorothea Baur, expert in ethics and artificial intelligence

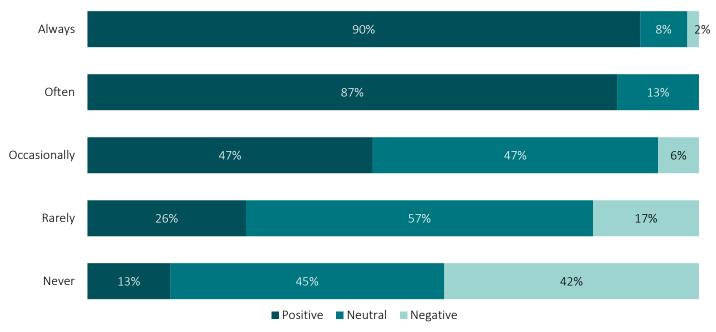


Chart 1. How often do you personally use artificial intelligence (AI) as part of your work? And how do you rate the current use of AI in Swiss public administration?

Source: 2024 Deloitte survey of Swiss public service employees

International case studies serve as inspiration

Al's rapid development and its increasing integration in administrative contexts represent a major opportunity for public authorities and administrations in Switzerland. Al has the capacity to analyse huge volumes of data and offers scope for automating repetitive processes. Rolling it out successfully enables organisations to make public services more efficient and to combine technology with human resources to improve the quality of their interaction with citizens. Al also offers potential for developing innovative solutions and optimising public services by tailoring information to service users.

A number of interesting approaches around the world show how AI can support the delivery of public services. In Latvia, for example, the national Register of Enterprises has launched a chatbot called UNA to answer frequently asked questions about registering a company. UNA uses AI and is available 24 hours a day. Performance indicators show that 44% of the enquiries made using UNA are of a general nature and straightforward enough to be answered by the chatbot. Nonstandard enquiries continue to be handled by employees, who now have more time to focus on more complicated enquiries and the more complex aspects of their role.⁵

In Belgium, the Flanders Child and Family Agency has developed an AI system that can predict very accurately which childcare facilities should be subject to quality inspections. This means that limited inspection resources can used more efficiently, improving the quality of childcare and enhancing child welfare.⁶

The Estonian Agricultural Registers and Information Board, finally, has launched an AI system that uses satellite data to analyse whether grazing land is being used in line with legislation and regulations. Public service employees in the country were initially concerned about privacy and job losses but now recognise the value of AI in this context. And because this is not an autonomous AI system but one designed to support the expertise of the Board's staff, pilot projects and training have boosted trust and confidence: agricultural inspectors now acknowledge that AI has changed their jobs rather than making them redundant.⁷

Large towns and cities across Switzerland and individual Swiss cantons are also harnessing the latest trends in AI. The city of Lausanne, for example, uses AI to automate repetitive business processes, such as completing forms and carrying out straightforward analyses or compiling routine reports. This frees up public service employees to spend more of their time on creative tasks that add value, reducing monotony and achieving a demonstrable improvement in their job satisfaction.⁸ The cantons of St. Gallen⁹, Aargau¹⁰ and Zurich are among those to have taken such an approach. Zurich, for example, has run pilot projects in the area of machine learning and the use of large language models (LLMs) and is now rolling out the development of natural language processing (NLP) and solutions including AI-supported handwriting recognition.¹¹ The Swiss federal government, too, has been trialling AI systems, and the Competence Network for Artificial Intelligence (CNAI) website lists a large number of current or completed projects across a range of departments. One example is Switzerland's meteorological service, MeteoSwiss, part of the Federal Department of Home Affairs: it is running projects based on machine learning, including COALITION-4, a project to forecast storms in real time, and SwissPollen, a project to automate the national pollen monitoring network.¹²

Examples of international good practice and pilot projects across Switzerland demonstrate that using AI in public administration can create considerable efficiency savings. These case studies should serve as inspiration for the roll-out of similar projects across the country.

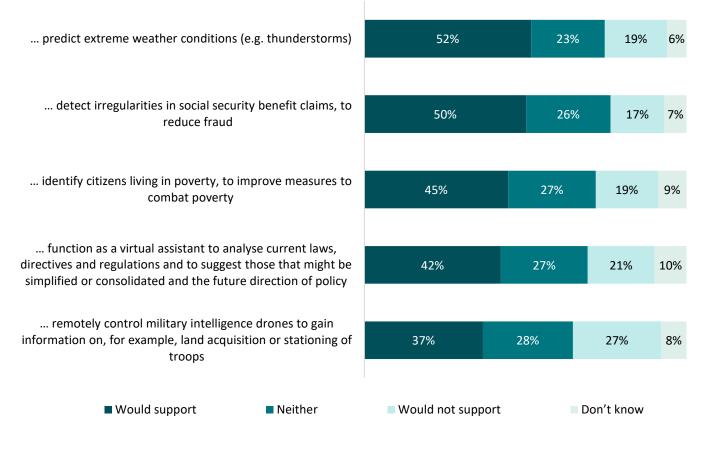
«Administrations should run small-scale projects to pilot the use of AI for repetitive tasks. This will build internal know-how and help alleviate employees' concerns. However, many organisations lack managers who can take a long view and know exactly where AI can be deployed to best effect and where it cannot. Public authorities and administrations are fundamentally risk-averse and prone to inertia.»

Prof. Dr. Marcel Gygli, Institute for Public Sector Transformation, Bern University of Applied Sciences

Positive attitudes to AI open up opportunities

The Deloitte survey finds that this kind of approach meets with approval within public authorities and administrations. A majority of Swiss public service employees surveyed (52 %) rate the use of AI applications to forecast extreme weather events positively. 50% are also positive about how AI can improve the detection of fraud in the social services sector. However, there are very few examples of this kind so far. Survey respondents are also generally positive about measures to combat poverty, yet CNAI lists just one current project in this area – an initiative designed to determine whether machine learning could be used to calculate smallscale indicators of poverty at canton level in Switzerland.¹³ In general terms, though, the public service employees surveyed are broadly positive about the use of AI across all the examples listed in the survey questions.

Chart 2. How strongly would you support the following statements about the ethical and secure use of AI in Swiss public administration?



Public authorities and administrations should make more use of AI to...

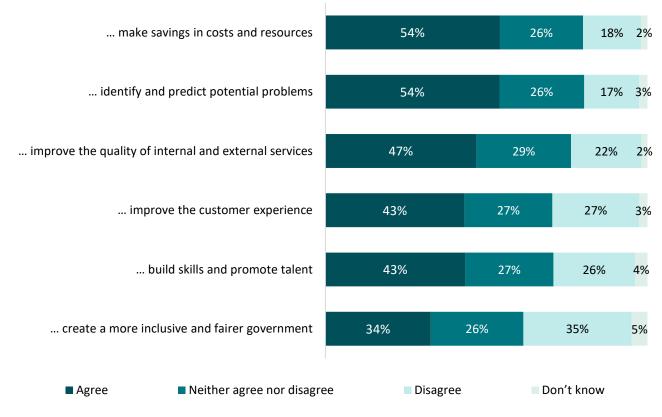
Source: 2024 Deloitte survey of Swiss public service employees

The examples listed above demonstrate that the Swiss public sector is now beginning to experiment with the use of AI. This technology has been developing at pace over recent months, and the first few projects have reduced some of the initial fears and concerns about its use, so it is unsurprising that, along with experts, a significant proportion of public service employees surveyed (39%) think that AI represents almost unlimited potential for Swiss public authorities and administrations. Alongside its use within specific sectors, public service employees think that public administrative bodies should make more use of AI and that its greatest potential lies in identifying and predicting problems (43% of survey respondents), boosting efficiency (44% of respondents), and improving the quality of existing services (45 % of respondents). Swiss citizens surveyed see potential for AI in the same areas and are even more positive about the wider use of AI to identify and predict problems (54% of respondents), make savings in costs and resources (54% of respondents), and improve services (47% of respondents). The area in which both public services employees and citizens voice the greatest concern is whether AI should be used to create a more inclusive and fairer government: 30% of public service employees and 34% of citizens are opposed to using AI for this purpose.

«In public administration, AI is generally under closer scrutiny than in the private sector. If something goes wrong, both the costs and the loss of trust are higher. Successful implementation of AI in public administration depends on clearly defined organisational structures and roles, functioning control mechanisms (e.g. in the form of guidelines, regulations), training and further education of administrative staff and cross-administrative collaboration.»

Ayisha Piotti, Head of Al Policy Summit, ETH Zurich and Managing Partner RegHorizon

Chart 3. Please rate your agreement with the following statements about the potential of AI within Swiss public administration.



Swiss public administration should make greater use of AI to ...

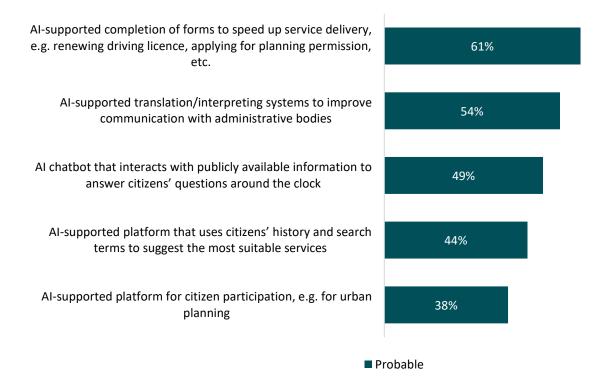
Source: 2024 Deloitte survey of Swiss citizens

Despite this optimism, using AI's potential within Swiss public administration depends on a number of factors, including the technological expertise of public service employees, financial resources, and the availability of data and, hence, scalability of AI systems. Another crucial factor in the successful deployment of AI is the trust and confidence that both public service employees and citizens have in its use in public sector contexts. Trust and confidence can be built and maintained by ensuring AI systems are transparent, deliver quality, and are reliable and by guaranteeing compliance with data protection rules.¹⁴ It currently seems that the Swiss population, at least, trust AI and are willing to use AI-supported services. Over 60% of Swiss citizens surveyed would use AI to speed up public services, such as renewing their driving licence or applying for planning permission. More than half (54%) say they would use AI-supported translation and interpreting systems to improve their communication with public administrative bodies, while just under half (49%) would also use AI chatbots that have access to publicly accessible information and can answer queries 24 hours a day.

The survey findings on the use of AI in public administration show that Swiss citizens have a generally positive attitude to the greater use of AI to optimise public services. Public service employees, too, rate the potential of AI as high and are open to and positive about meaningful use of the technology.

The foundations are therefore in place for public administration to make greater use of the potential of AI, but its long-term success depends on the ability of authorities and administrations to tackle and, as far as possible, minimise current challenges and risks. The deployment of AI in public administration requires not only maintenance and upgrading of technological infrastructure but also the careful navigation of ethical and statutory aspects.

Chart 4. How probable do you think it is that you would use the following AI applications within Swiss public administration?



Source: 2024 Deloitte survey of Swiss citizens

Integrating AI: risks and obstacles

Al offers opportunities, including greater efficiency, but also scope to redesign current roles to make jobs more attractive and the prospect of improved services for citizens. However, there are some serious challenges with regard to using AI in public authorities and administrations: the requirements for accessibility and user-friendliness are similar to those in the private sector, but the benchmark for accountability and transparency is higher in many public bodies. This aspect therefore requires careful attention not only to technological and statutory considerations but also to ethical and social implications. The challenge for public bodies wanting to deploy AI responsibly and efficiently is to find the right balance between adaptation and innovation on the one hand and compliance with the rule of law on the other.

In common with other disruptive technologies, the trends around AI go hand in hand with uncertainty and fear. Both the Swiss public service employees surveyed and the population more generally have concerns about AI despite being

generally positive about its use. Just under half of each group (44% of Swiss public service employees and 43% of Swiss citizens) say they are very concerned about compliance with ethical principles when AI is used in public administration, fearing the risk of manipulation, distortion, and bias. It is striking that a majority of public service employees think aspects such as job security, data protection, and transparency are important. Survey participants also rank the security of AI systems against cyber attack and the quality of Al outputs as somewhat or very important. Ultimately, quality of outputs is related directly to the accessibility of data within the administration and requires investment in IT infrastructure and systems.

Citizens have similar priorities but rate some aspects as even more important: 74% say security against cyber attack is somewhat or very important and 73% rate data protection as somewhat or very important (see Chart 5).

Chart 5. How important do you think the following issues are in relation to the use of AI in Swiss public administration?

Job security (ensuring existing jobs do not disappear as AI takes over roles)	65%	22%	6%	7%
Transparent use of AI (understanding which AI-related projects are being implemented in public administration and which are not)	63%	23%	8%	6%
Data protection (protection of personal and confidential data)	64%	21%	9%	6%
High-quality outputs (ensuring that AI outputs are of good quality)	62%	21%	10%	7%
Security of AI systems against cyber attack	62%	21%	11%	6%
Explainable outputs (understanding of the AI models used)	59%	22%	13%	6%
Impartial outputs (ensuring that the data on which AI models are based is representative and unbiased)	56%	24%	13%	7%

Somewhat important/very important Neither important nor unimportant Somewhat unimportant/very unimportant Don't know

Source: 2024 Deloitte survey of Swiss public service employees

«The difficulty for public authorities and administrations is to balance meaningful automation with genuine service to citizens. And that means, above all, eliminating queues and delays and using digital technology to make services flexible. Citizens want to be seen and heard rather than simply to interact with a robot state.»

Dr. Dorothea Baur, expert in ethics and artificial intelligence

These findings indicate that there is still a lot of work to be done towards digitalising public authorities and administrations in Switzerland, particularly in the areas of cyber security and data accessibility. Another important consideration is the need for awareness raising and training for public service employees. A majority of this group (57%) rate the need for training as somewhat or very important, and it was, for example, crucial to the success of the Estonian case study (see above) that employees were open to the new technology and acknowledged the opportunities it represents.

Public service employees tend to be risk-averse when it comes to the ethical and secure use of AI in public administration. Just over half (52%) support or strongly support passing legislation and regulations to ensure that AI is used transparently and responsibly within public administration; 59% support control mechanisms to monitor the use of AI systems; and 56% support the formulation of ethical and moral principles. Experts from academia also advocate strongly for these areas but take a more nuanced view of possible regulation. They recommend involving external stakeholder groups – those directly impacted by change – on an ongoing basis, so that their input can be used to frame practical and feasible regulations. Singapore is often cited as a pioneer in this context.

The regulatory process should also distinguish between AI technologies in terms of their context and their nature: these factors may require differing levels of transparency. Distinguishing between 'high-stakes contexts' and 'low-stakes contexts' with differing transparency criteria not only encourages innovation but may also help further to allay fears and concerns and identify the advantages of using AI in public administration. However, regulation always lags behind technological advances, so it usually makes sense to draft regulation in a way that is open to different kinds of technology. Awareness raising on an interdisciplinary basis

that includes statutory, economic and European policy aspects – of the kind the Swiss government has commissioned – is the first point of call in this respect.¹⁵

As well as fundamental regulatory and ethical issues related to the use of AI in public administration, Swiss citizens and public service employees also cite structural obstacles to cyber security and the quality of outputs. Switzerland's federal structure means the country has many different administrative systems and processes at canton and municipality level. The example of the canton of Zurich¹⁶ shows that a heterogenous approach to innovation can be useful, but differing data standards can make developing and deploying standardised AI technologies across levels of government more complex.

The success of AI in public administration depends crucially on the existence of a solid ethical and statutory framework. Data protection, transparency, and job security all need to be ensured to win the trust and confidence of public service and citizens alike.

«Since the launch of ChatGPT at the end of 2022, there has been increased scrutiny over the implications of AI use in Switzerland. Whilst the Swiss government is contemplating a response, there is currently a lack of clarity regarding AI regulation. In my opinion, AI should not be regulated as a technology in itself but regulation should be based on the context within which it is used. Moreover, these rules should be developed in cooperation with a broad range of interest groups.»

Ayisha Piotti, Head of Al Policy Summit, ETH Zurich and Managing Partner RegHorizon

Recommendations for deploying AI within public administration

On the basis of the survey findings and the examples of good practice above, we list below our recommendations for helping public authorities and administrations to make use of the opportunities that AI represents.

1. Be proactive rather than reactive when it comes to implementing AI projects

The survey findings show that public service employees want clearer statutory guidance on the use of AI. The Swiss Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications is currently exploring whether additional legislation is required along the lines of the EU AI Act and, if so, what it might look like. Its investigation runs until the end of 2024. Switzerland's current data protection legislation and the protection against discrimination guaranteed by the Constitution and criminal law, protection of privacy, federal legislation on unfair competition, and Swiss labour law all form a solid statutory foundation to build on. Given this, it does not seem necessary to wait before taking further steps. An agile process involving pilot projects – something that is already under way in many administrative units across the country - is recommended and would also enable organisations to gain valuable experience within a clearly defined context, devise new approaches, and identify synergies with other areas. AI projects can already be rolled out as part of the existing statutory framework, supported where necessary by additional statutory instruments.

2. Set priorities and take a holistic approach

Al projects are not purely technological initiatives but strategic ones, calling for a holistic approach. A well designed pilot project can generate practical and long-term solutions, making use of the advantages that survey participants identify and ensuring a return on the investment of resources. Crucially, this requires prioritising Al applications according to clear success criteria in terms of their added value (expressed as a percentage of cost savings), time savings and/or improvement of the user experience while also taking full account of feasibility and risk. To ensure high-quality outputs from Al systems, however, data accessibility is always crucial, regardless of the organisation concerned. Integrating Al systems must therefore form part of any organisation's overall digitalisation strategy and will often require investment in IT infrastructure and systems.

3. The human voice - more important than ever

For all the focus on the use of automated AI systems to boost efficiency and guality, human input remains crucial. To realise the added value AI promises, organisations must start by ensuring that teams are interdisciplinary and have a range of specialist expertise, experience, and approaches. Projects move beyond proof of concept (PoC) and succeed only when they incorporate technological, statutory, and customercentred views. Alongside development, the success of AI systems depends not only on citizens' acceptance but also on the public service employees running them. And proactive change management is central to this, tackling fears and uncertainties head-on and demonstrating the direct advantages of AI systems, such as reducing the monotony of day to day tasks and improving services at grassroots level. Employees need to see that AI will not destroy jobs but will instead change existing tasks and roles – as has been the case, for example, in Estonia - and may make them more interesting for the people doing them. To gain employee buyin to projects, organisations must prepare their staff for changes in job profiles, help them gain the right skills, and provide training. Employees' motivation to ensure the success of AI projects depends not only on the skills and expertise they have but also, and increasingly, on the quality of the outputs of AI systems. The 'human in the loop' - ensuring that a human takes final responsibility - must remain fundamental, especially to the use of AI in public authorities and administrations.

To sum up, integrating AI into Swiss public administration offers enormous potential to improve both efficiency and service quality. However, success relies crucially on proactive organisations, comprehensive training, and compliance with the statutory framework and ethical principles. Targeted pilot projects and prioritising high-impact applications will enable Swiss public administration to make optimal use the opportunities AI offers – and to win the trust of the country's citizens.

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