Business challenge

To continue its history of providing innovative services to customers, Assura wanted to open up its IT infrastructure to contemporary developer skills and easier integration with the latest solutions.

Transformation

The insurance industry is all about being prepared for anything. Assura seized the opportunity to practice what it preaches, embarking on a modernization of its business-critical systems. With help from Itheis, the company transformed its database environment, lowering risk and increasing agility while maintaining exceptional performance.

Business benefits

Reduces
risk by introducing documentation and future-proofing the platform

Extends
lifetime of technology investments, which continue to offer great performance

Lays
the foundations for innovation and enhanced use of data

Assura
Ensures the future is bright by embracing a high-agility approach

Founded in 1978 and headquartered in Pully, the Assura Group is the fourth largest health insurance group in Switzerland, serving more than a million customers. It employs 1,200 people and achieves annual revenues of around CHF 3 billion (approximately USD 3.1 billion). Figeas S.A. is part of the Assura Group, and was founded in 2005 with the aim of providing support and advice to companies within Assura to allow them to focus on their core business.

"We've opened up access to data, helping us make the most of the IBM Power Systems platform."

—Laurent Crelier, Lead Architect and Deputy Director of the IT Department, Figeas S.A. (part of the Assura Group)

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Thinking long-term

When something is working well, it is tempting to continue as normal. But, as insurers are keenly aware, circumstances change and it's important to be prepared. Assura, the fourth largest health insurance group in Switzerland, turned its attention to the IT platform at the center of its operations.

Laurent Crelier, Lead Architect and Deputy Director of the IT Department, Figeas S.A. (IT service provider and part of the Assura Group), takes up the story: "The insurance market is moving fast, so no one can predict precisely what's around the corner. Assura has a history of offering innovative services to customers. To ensure that could continue, we needed to make sure we could adapt the technology behind the scenes quickly and easily."

IBM® Power Systems™ servers running the IBM i operating system has long been Assura's platform of choice, providing exceptional performance and reliability throughout the years. However, the company developed its database environment using data description specifications (DDS) and some of the code was no longer up to date.

"IBM i on Power Systems has served us well: 800 users handling tasks such as customer enquiries can work simultaneously on our systems with no performance issues, and we have experienced near-100 percent uptime," says Crelier. "We wanted to retain these advantages, but modernize our environment so that it no longer required specialist skills— since most of the people who have those skills are retiring within the next few years.

"Specifically, we wanted to enable easier integration with new solutions, paving the way for integration with services such as cloud and mobile. We also wanted to address the lack of detailed documentation around our database landscape, which increased the risk of issues when our long-serving developers retired."

Switching to a smarter policy

To modernize its systems while minimizing disruption to operations, Assura sought to re-engineer its monolithic IBM Db2 database to SQL without recompiling its programs. The company soon discovered the ideal solution and consultant to help it do so: Xcase for i from Resolution Software and IBM Business Partner Itheis.

"By extending the lifetime of our IBM Power Systems running IBM i environment, we can continue to benefit from the outstanding performance and reliability of the platform while ensuring it is ready for future needs."

—Laurent Crelier, Lead Architect and Deputy Director of the IT Department, Figeas S.A. (part of the Assura Group)

"Xcase for i caught our eye as one of the most mature tools for automating the move to SQL," recalls Crelier. "We were impressed by the fact that it doesn't add dependencies, and therefore complexity, to our systems. With more than 1,000 tables in our database, we worried our environment might be too complicated, but Itheis conducted a PoC [Proof of Concept] exercise that proved it would work. It was an easy choice to outsource management of the modernization project to them."

Working closely with Itheis, Assura re-engineered the environment in three releases, developing, testing, staging and rolling out each into production. The entire project took nine months, and was achieved with just 15 hours of planned downtime and no impact on operations.

"Itheis helped us address some irregular behavior we encountered during the testing process, so once each modernization pack was rolled out into production, we preserved the exceptional performance our users are used to," comments Crelier. "By creating two instances of the same database, we had a safety net in case anything went wrong. Along the way, we eliminated many redundancies and integrity issues, and developed detailed documentation. We also discovered that Xcase for i is a highly effective management tool, so we still use it to maintain the database."

Premium cover for every eventuality

By bringing the platform at the center of its operations up to date, Assura has succeeded in reducing risk, and can look to the future with increased confidence.

"We now have a database environment for IBM i on the Power Systems platform that is documented and open to a newer generation of developers," explains Crelier. "It is also much more straightforward to connect it to best-of-breed solutions, including cloud and mobile services. In this way, our work with IBM, Itheis and Resolution Software has future-proofed our IT landscape. Best of all, all this was achieved without interrupting 24/7 operations, so there was no disruption for customers looking for quotes or seeking information on our wide range of policies."

By enabling integration with a larger range of software and applications, the project is helping Assura boost returns on its investment in IBM Power Systems solutions.

"We see IBM Power Systems running IBM i as an essential part of our business for a long time to come, so extending the lifetime of our current platform was a valuable move for us," elaborates Crelier. "We can continue to benefit from the outstanding performance and reliability of the platform while ensuring it is ready for future needs."

Assura is a step further in its journey towards enhanced agility, laying the foundations for the development of innovative new services for customers.

Crelier concludes: "Re-engineering our database is one stage in a larger modernization program, and we are excited to see where it will lead us next. We've opened up access to data, helping us make the most of the IBM Power Systems platform, which has already been such an impressive engine for our business."

Connect with us

Take the next step

To learn more about IBM i on IBM Power Systems solutions, please contact your IBM representative or IBM Business Partner, or visit the following website: **ibm.com**/power/i

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