

Builder of Swiss Covid system offers it free to World Health Organisation

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October 15, 2021

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Getting the over-75s and the immune-suppressed to the front of the queue in Switzerland and 18 of its 23 cantons was the task for Romain Boichat and his team at Soignez-Moi faced last winter. The urgency is shown by the pace. Given the go-ahead on December 23, 2020, the online booking system for mobile phones was up and running on January 4. But the official sign-off awarding the contract didn't arrive until March 31, 2021. Boichat is now keen to offer the software to developing countries and is offering it free to the World Health Organisation.

The system enables citizens to fill in an online questionnaire and they do not need to mess with passwords and user names. "All they had to give was a mobile phone number," says Boichat. A rules engine at the backend sorted out citizens by priority based on age and medical history. People were then sent texts with appointment times which they could change online. The system was built to ensure that more than a million people could register per hour without any queuing.

Cantons also opened hotlines for elderly people who didn't have mobile phones. Boichat says: "Elderly people had sometimes trouble with text SMS. One mistyped 85 times in a row his mobile phone number. People also were surprisingly confused about their dates of birth!"

Boichat says people were desperate to register to get their first dose when there was a shortage of vaccine. With 50% of over-12s registered by May 2021, the system switched as more vaccines came available, and people were then able to choose slots and postpone and modify dates. He is now ramping up to include the booster shots. The system also dispatches Covid certificates to those who have been vaccinated.

You can also add your certificate to your electronic patient record. But all this was developed separately from the Swiss electronic patient record system which Boichat describes, as of today, as "useless". "It is very complex and only a few thousand people have registered on it out of a population of almost 9m. It is extremely complex." There are other problems: "Family doctors have all the patient data and are not obliged to link it into."

Boichat indicated that the biggest lesson learned was to manage the stakeholders, especially in tumultuous times when there was huge political pressure to give access to vaccination centres in the order people registered. With their experience, handling the booster should be much easier.

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