Smals Empowers Government, Healthcare, and Social Services Innovation with EDB Postgres® AI

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CUSTOMER: SMALS

EDB customer since 2015

Dirk Deridder
Director IT Infrastructure & Services, Smals

CHALLENGE: With a mission to modernize the data architecture for Belgian government agencies, Smals needed an open source alternative to their legacy commercial vendor that would allow them to innovate without constraint. Automation and high availability were critical requirements.

EDB SOLUTIONS: EDB Enterprise Plan with Production Support.

RESULTS: With EDB Postgres, the Smals team is able to embrace new technologies to better serve the Belgium public, with deep visibility into performance metrics, live system updates, and a plan to incorporate AI assistance.

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OVERVIEW
Modernizing data architecture for the greater good

As a joint ICT organization of public institutions in Belgium, Smals delivers innovative Information and Communications Technology (ICT) services for government, social services, and healthcare. Their work involves modernizing the data architecture for Belgian government agencies, and making them more efficient, cost-effective and resilient.

"We are simply there to serve the needs of the citizens and professionals, and to ensure that the digital processes that run in the engine room of our society don't come to a halt," says Dirk Deridder, Director of IT Infrastructure & Services at Smals.

It became apparent to Dirk and his team that this mission was at odds with the commercial direction of their legacy database vendor, which limited their technological freedom and the solutions they could employ.

> *When we start new [data] projects, EDB Postgres is the number one choice*

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Director IT Infrastructure & Services, Smals

"In the social security sector for example, the IT systems are not meant to sell products to citizens or companies. We also don't make a profit out of it. Our value proposition is fundamentally different, and we see a misalignment, or a misunderstanding, at least, of where they're headed and where we want to head," states Dirk. "They were no longer delivering the value we were looking for."

In order to move forward and continue serving more than 300 Belgian member institutions, Dirk and his team started exploring open source alternatives that would enable them to innovate without limits. That's when they discovered EDB Postgres.
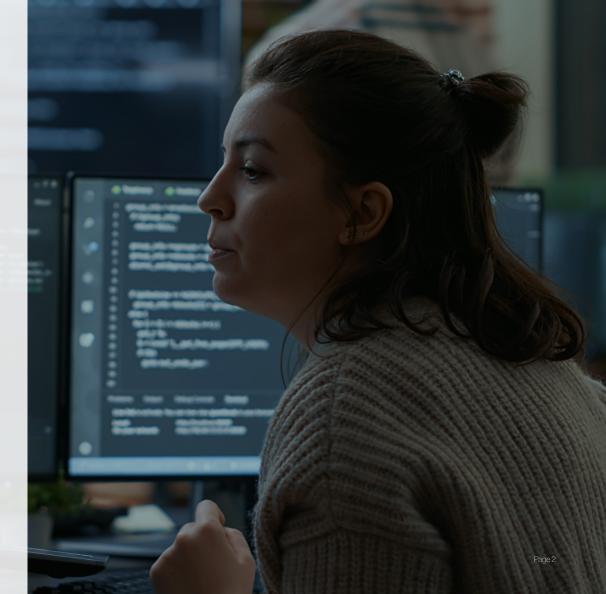
Unlocking infinite possibilities with open source

Dirk and his team found Postgres to be the ideal database solution, as it provided the resiliency they needed and the freedom to construct their own data ecosystem based on open source technology.
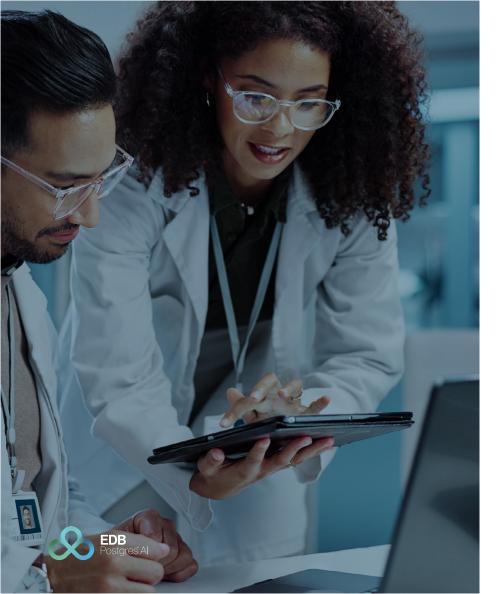
"Nowadays, organizations typically adopt a more hybrid, more heterogeneous approach to their technology toolbox. A critical component in this toolbox is open source. Also in the context of public cloud open source still has a crucial role to play, to ensure cloud portability across the hyperscale providers. This is where open standards come into the picture," says Dirk.

According to Gartner research, a majority of governments are operating workloads using hyperscale cloud service providers. Belgium is leveraging the cloud too. Smals is participating in G-Cloud, a community driven initiative focused on synergy between government agencies and operating an on premise community cloud.

Because Postgres helps accelerate innovation, Dirk and his team are able to embrace new technologies to better serve their clients and the Belgium public.

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Prescribing digital resilience for Belgium's eHealth platform

Ninety percent of governments are in the process of scaling digital government or have already done so. In Belgium e-government initiatives are quite advanced, eliminating the need for paper-based processes as much as possible. A good example of this is Belgium's eHealth platform, which facilitates amongst others the exchange of all medical prescriptions, patient files, and other medical data. For this modern ecosystem to work, zero downtime is essential.

"If the digital healthcare ecosystem has an issue, even for a couple of minutes, pharmacies all across the country, doctors and hospitals will be impacted," says Dirk.

That's why a highly resilient database architecture is so critical, and why Dirk and his team rigorously observe and monitor the performance of the eHealth platform and other systems for their public sector clients. EDB Postgres allows them to take full control of database monitoring and deepen visibility into the performance metrics.

Smals also does all of their system updates live, because, as Dirk relays, "We no longer can say to people in the pharmacies and the hospitals, sorry, today you will not be able to deliver medication to people because we're doing a database upgrade."

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The future will be containerized

Ten years ago Smals started with an on-premises container-based platform. "In those days, the concept was very new. It started with a vision that everything will be a container. And that containers will deliver all the DevOps benefits without further thought," relays Dirk.

"The vision was there, but the tools and the technology or at least the mindset and the processes were not there yet, or not yet mature," he says. Fast forward to today, and EDB is helping organizations use containers to package and isolate applications and all the files necessary to accelerate development, test, and production cycles.
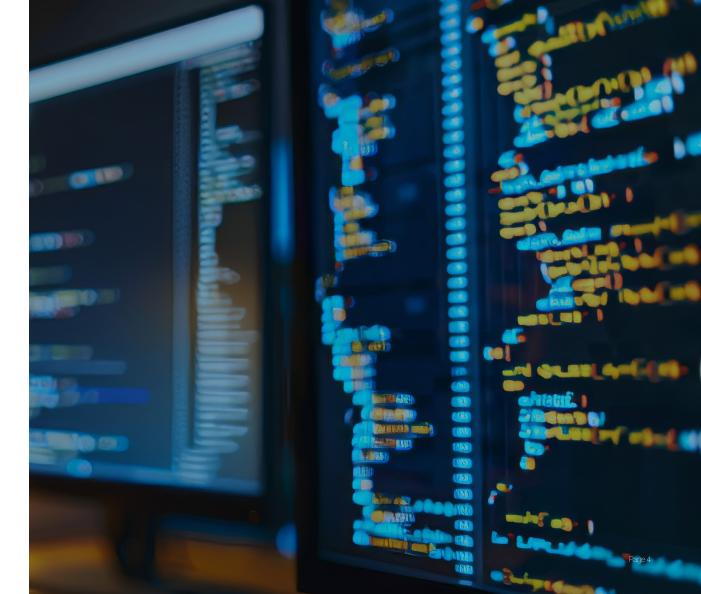
"I was really happy to learn that EDB is innovating in terms of using containerized databases with the Postgres operator," says Dirk. "It's on our strategic roadmap. I'll be glad to see it running in production, because that will actually help us bring our platform ecosystem to yet another level," he says.

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Safeguarding operations with AI

Governments today are using AI to gain new insights and unlock the value of existing data. While using AI for conversational chatbots is one use case, Dirk sees other critical use cases such as detecting social fraud and helping to secure the operational systems that power the digital government landscape.

"We no longer can do manual triage of all the security alerts we are getting," Dirk says. We are really depending on AI algorithms under the hood, and we will need AI when the ecosystems become even more complex and critical," he says.

"AI can actually help us to figure out the top ten problems to address now, in order to avoid an incident tomorrow," he says.

How will this affect IT careers? Dirk says he doesn't believe AI will endanger jobs in IT, but instead will complement what he and his team do already.

"There's a huge boom in IT projects, and AI is actually needed to be able to continue this growth, to continue this innovation and this technological adoption," he says. "And a lot of value can still be realized in the domain of data science, which continues to be a critical use case for AI in governmental organisations."

Partnering to fuel transformation

Smals continues to value its partnership with EDB, which enables the organization to meet many of its strategic goals without legacy lock-in.

"We are very happy with the collaboration and with the support that we get from EDB and the technology," says Dirk. "When we start new [data] projects, EDB Postgres is the number one choice."

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