For many years, the Government of the Canary Islands has been working to modernize its justice system. The initiative, which aims to improve the government's flexibility and efficiency, focuses on two essential elements—organization and technology. For the Canaries' deputy regional minister with responsibility for justice, Pedro Herrera (pictured right), these two inseparable elements should be part of a growing emphasis on better serving the needs of citizens.
Prior to his role as deputy regional justice minister, Pedro Herrera was a magistrate. He identifies the year 2000 as the turning point in the justice department’s approach to new technologies. According to Herrera, throughout the twentieth century the tools and processes used remained virtually unchanged. With the dawn of the new millennium, technology took center stage in the courts – a role that is now being reinforced.

Within the judiciary system of the Canary Islands, this technological advance takes the form of ATLANTE, a system which has introduced an exponential evolution in processes. A new version, ATLante II, is now being rolled out, with added integration and further maximization of the justice service’s citizen focus. In this interview, Pedro Herrera discusses not only technology, but also organization, teamwork, an ambitious strategic plan and the firm progress being made by the Judicial Branch [Oficina Judicial].

Modernizing the justice system is a recurring challenge for government. How does the government of the Canary Islands view the process? Rather than a recurring challenge, I believe it is an essential one that needs to be taken on by any government. We need our justice system to be more and more effective for citizens. This process of modernization must encompass two areas: technological and organizational. Our government sees modernization as a key challenge and it lies at the heart of our program of action. We are currently making good progress in the technological area. Now, we need to match these achievements with the necessary organizational changes.

What has the ATLANTE project meant to the modernization of the judiciary in last ten years? Did you see a definite turning point? For us it has meant a major technological undertaking. ATLANTE is the tool that integrates all the other applications that are making the justice system more effective and operative. The project is constantly evolving. After ten years in operation, we have recently introduced an updated version, because we are committed to evolutionary development.

In effect, the introduction of computer systems for procedural applications marked a turning point for the different judicial bodies. It was the ATLANTE program, created in the Canary Islands, that drove the change; it forced us to take that leap forward into the modern age.
Which agents and bodies are involved with the information system? How do you manage to ensure that each one can operate with independence?

As an IT tool serving the justice department, ATLANTE is necessarily complex; at the same time it has to be open to a large number of stakeholders. It is used by personnel from the justice department who handle the general administration of relations with judicial matters—administrative agents and intermediaries, for example. Each of them performs a different job, and the system needs to adapt to their specific areas of jurisdiction.

There are also groups who form part of the central Spanish Justice Ministry, rather than the regional justice department, such as court clerks and the attorney general's office. At the same time, the tool must be tailored to the jurisdictional work of the judges and magistrates.

In addition, the courts need to be able to communicate with bodies and departments from different tiers of government, such as property registers, notaries, the Social Security Office, etc. For example, using ATLANTE, our government pioneered direct communication with the Wage Guarantee Fund. We will also be the first autonomous community to integrate the system with the local police.

We need to ensure that the program facilitates direct communication with these bodies. This means developing it to allow other applications to be integrated, such as the electronic communications systems Lexnet, to which we were granted access by the central Ministry of Justice, which allows two-way communication between judicial offices. We are also making good headway in integrating the Punto Neutro Judicial (inter-agency communication network) in our procedural application. These changes will help make it simpler for users to operate, ensuring a faster response for citizens.

Before you joined the government, you were a magistrate and worked with the ATLANTE system. What was your perception of it as a user? Has that perception changed?

That's right, I've seen the program develop from the outset. Like any change or advance, it requires a certain amount of adaptation, and that takes time and commitment, but its impact has been highly positive. We've come a long way from the early days, when we really saw it as being just a word processor and file storage system. Today, it involves the integration of different applications that can make our work far easier. We're going to continue along that path.

It's certainly been a complex development and it's required direct input from all of the different groups working in the different processes involved in the judiciary...

It took considerable commitment to adapt to ATLANTE I and the same is true for ATLANTE II. By now, however, practically all users of the system have adapted fully to the change. Difficulties arise with changes in legislation, which necessitate altering the templates.

Another of the areas we're working on is to provide users with remote access; much of the jurisdictional work of the Justice Department is also carried out from home. We're looking at security-related issues and trying to make users more aware of how they use the application.

Managing all this is a hugely important task, so we're setting up a monitoring committee to check the range of documents in the system and ensure that all points of view are included. Another key feature for us is the regular meetings with the whole ATLANTE team, including representatives from government, the General Directorate for Telecommunications and New Technologies and others offering external help. These regular meetings are proving very fruitful. They're enabling us to make rapid progress in
solving any issues that come up. Our relationship with Accenture has helped us gain a better understanding and foster commitment to the projects. If you want to get good results, it's essential to get everyone together around the table.

**ATLANTE** has marked an important change in the way officials from the justice department operate. How has this change been achieved and how do you think personnel from the justice department have adapted?

Our strategy includes three major areas and the IT application is extremely important within those. As I said, we want to make justice an effective and citizen-oriented public service, based on efficient management of the available resources. We also want to increase the value of our human capital; in other words, we want to have qualified and motivated staff. To do this, one of our main goals is to encourage training and interest among justice department staff. Training in the IT application is also essential, since the operability of the system will, to a large extent, depend on the use made of it.

**What is the main thrust of the organizational change you’re undertaking?**

Above all, it involves developing a new organizational model that prioritizes teamwork, promoting it through what we consider to be common services. Having a common procedural service and a common enforcement service enables more effective results. It also gives us a better overview and optimizes information control.

I believe it’s essential that we all work on a horizontal plane, but each person has to know what their own responsibilities are. That way, we can achieve greater coordination and integration. There’s nothing new

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**ATLANTE, a system constantly improving**

The benefits **ATLANTE** has brought to the Canary Islands' justice department include information communication and exchange, teamwork, coordination of tasks, collaboration between different agents, adaptability and homogenization of processes and the documentation. The system was designed and implemented at the beginning of 2000 for the justice department of the Government of the Canary Islands. It is based on an open flexible platform that enables evolution of the tool and integration with others available on the market.

By combining a strategy focusing on processes, people and technology, the system gives users the resources they need to undertake their work and decision making within the judicial framework.

The application consists of several modules: judicial bodies, common communication acts service, registration and distribution offices, schedule, free legal aid, magistrate's courts, public prosecutor's office, minors, institute of legal medicine and database of judicial interest. These are all integrated into an intuitive, user-friendly environment, in which information is provided in a grouped and fully secure form, with contextual help.

This is a complete system, which fosters standardization. It encompasses all the functions of the different jurisdictions and bodies involved in judicial proceedings, including both internal agents (General Council for the Judiciary, General State Public Prosecutor's Office and the Free Legal Aid Commissions) and external ones (Wage Guarantee Fund, emergency services, security forces, professional associations and the General Directorate of Protection of Minors of the Government of the Canary Islands). It offers maximum flexibility in choosing and operating procedures.
about this approach; it’s already happening in other domains. What we want to do now is transfer it to the justice area.

Another important aspect to improvements in the service is the perception of citizens in the Canary Islands. How are you addressing this challenge?

It is true that there is a fairly widely-held—and reasonable—belief that the justice system is very slow. We need to take the necessary steps to be operational and effective, without running the risk of rushing the process of justice. We need to strike a balance between the two extremes; our justice needs to be functional and offer people a response within a reasonable period of time. In all of this, it is essential for the technology to advance with us. If we can facilitate the procedures and formalities and minimize the red tape, people will perceive the process favorably.

The challenge is to ensure that when someone wants to find out something about a specific case, they can get an immediate response and have access to the information they need. We want to facilitate communication between the public and the justice department, and that means developing the whole area of telematic communication. This will help improve public perceptions and prevent unnecessary spending on items such as transport. This communication needs to be easy and accessible; people shouldn’t have to wait for an answer.

Clearly, all these advances are helping make the Canaries justice department a benchmark and one of the most advanced regional administrations in Spain. What new strategic challenges has the department set itself?

Our aim is to help ensure that the law operates with uniform criteria, not just in the Canaries, but throughout Spain. Without overlooking the special characteristics of each region, this homogeneity should be reflected in both the personal and the technological field. We are, therefore, working with the Ministry of Justice and, of course, the General Council for the Judiciary, to make sure that our systems are fully compatible and well coordinated.

At the same time, we believe that one of our goals should be to reform and improve the Judicial Demarcation and Institutions Act [Ley de Demarcación y Planta Judicial]; at this moment in time, we need to redefine the judicial districts. From an organizational point of view, too, it will be very helpful to have trial courts and to “districtize” certain courts. The idea is to prioritize teamwork with the new organizational models of the Judicial Branch [Oficina Judicial].

Evidently, these are changes that will need to be implemented cautiously. In terms of infrastructure, the Canary Islands will have two new judicial buildings, one in La Laguna and another in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. From the outset, we want them to work with the common general procedural service and the common implementation service, and that will undoubtedly be a major step forward.

From there on, the road ahead is set out in the strategic plan...

We’ve published a strategic plan for 2012 to 2015 which sets out our major objectives and identifies more than sixty projects we want to develop. Clearly, we’ve made a lot of progress and the changes are there for all to see, but we need to keep advancing. It’s essential to reconcile three key aspects: the technical aspect, management and the day-to-day work of the courts.