



AD&C

A simplified digital gateway for European Funds

Portugal has a new and an innovative digital platform, available on mobile and web, which aims to counter the common idea that to apply for European funding is a bureaucratic headache for potential beneficiaries. We are talking about the Balcão dos Fundos (a Funds Web Platform), a new single point where one can apply and consult information about European funds – bringing together, an ecosystem of different funds, financial frameworks and managing authorities.

The initiative comes from AD&C - Agency for Development and Cohesion, in co-creation with the different management authorities, with the development of the digital platform led by Axians.

Facing the vast amount of information and systems gathered in the Balcão dos Fundos, the key element is that beneficiaries do not run the risk of getting “stuck” during the process of applying for European funding, nor in the management of their projects. A strong focus on the front-end (UX/UI), advanced technologies, a clear language (understandable and intuitive), intelligent search and contextual help allowing a much simpler use of the platform from the user’s perspective. Applying for European funding has never been so simple.

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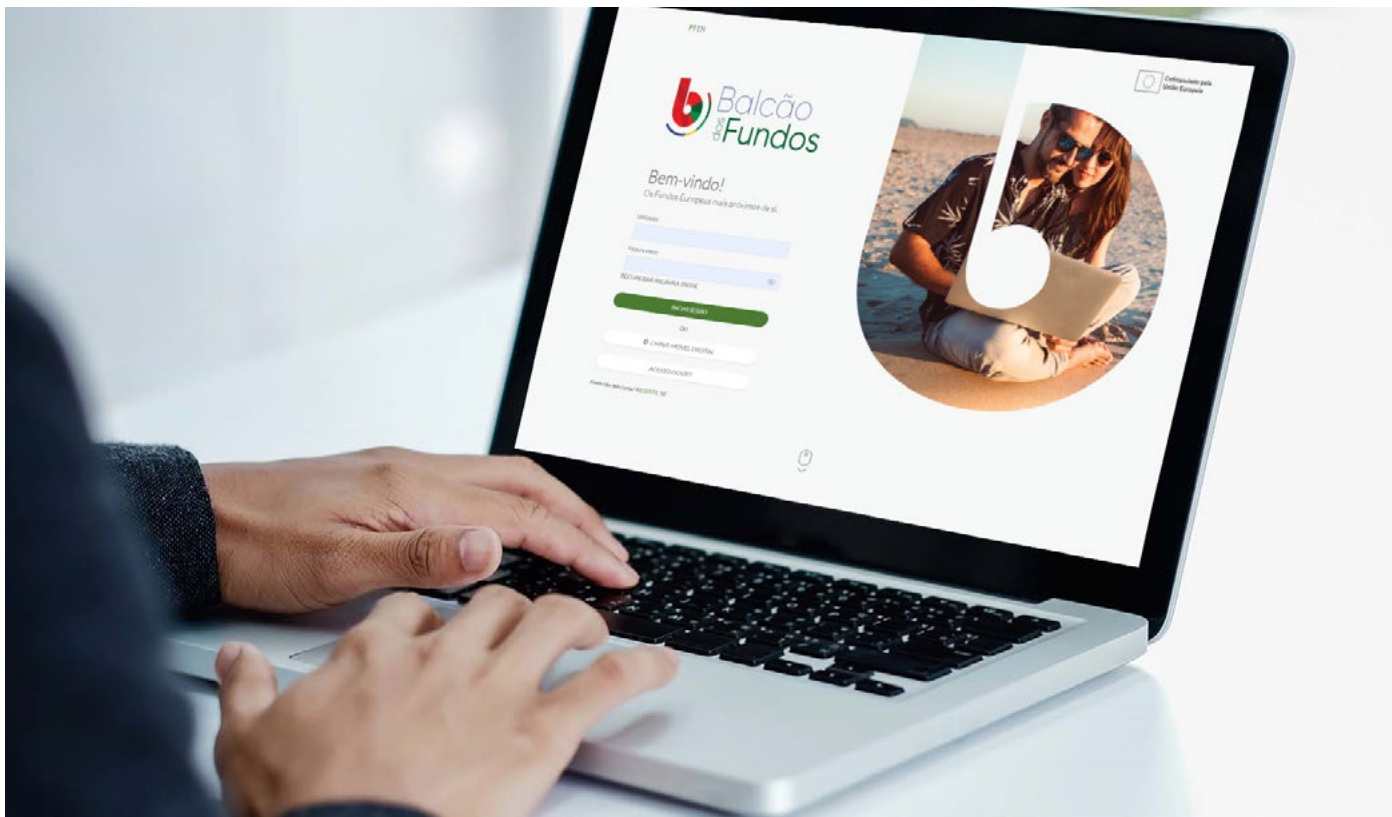
BALCÃO DOS FUNDOS, AND ITS TECHNOLOGICAL EVOLUTION (FROM BALCÃO 2020)

The new platform, Balcão dos Fundos was officially launched on July 13th, 2022, ensuring the work developed on Balcão 2020. In the year of 2014, the idea of creating a single digital point for access for European funding was born, especially for the 2014-2020 financial framework (Portugal 2020).

It was an essential step in the digitalization of this business area - but as the years went by, needs also evolved. The Balcão 2020 platform was becoming obsolete in the face of cutting-edge technological possibilities, improved services provided by the Public Administration and AD&C’s own ambition to evolve the beneficiary’s digital journey.

“The Balcão 2020 (old platform) was no longer responding positively to the needs, had a very outdated user experience and

interface that was not user friendly. We decided not to restyle the old one, based on obsolete technology, but to develop a new platform. It was a decision based not only of user interface and user experience, but to enable a set of new features. Also, because it is different to evolve on a modern platform and with recent frameworks than to be working on something that is



becoming obsolete”, explains Carlos Santos, manager at Axians and responsible for this project at the time.

From AD&C’s point of view, the vision is to optimize the user experience and the ecosystem of European funds shared by the various entities. “We want to simplify the citizen’s life from a single access gateway. We want a space where everything happens, a sort of ‘public square’. The evolution towards the Balcão dos fundos is a natural evolution in terms of functionalities, interoperability and innovation”, summarizes Patrícia Borges, member of the AD&C Board of Directors.

TRIANGLE OF INNOVATION: SCALABILITY, INTEROPERABILITY, USABILITY

The approach of a new programming period of European funds 2021-2027 (Portugal 2030), was the window of opportunity to implement this innovative digital structure, already with a differentiated development rationale: instead of a platform allocated exclusively to a single programming period, the Balcão dos Fundos is designed from scratch to gain scale and be multi-fund. That is, over time, the structure will allow the integration of any EU fund from any programming period, beyond the timeframe of Portugal 2030 programming period. A flexibility that serves AD&C’s vision for the project and ensures the evolution of the platform in response to future needs.

Initially developed in .NET Core, and with a transition to a version in Outsystems, the Balcão dos Fundos brings new features in applications for European funding. Among the new features, the platform now has an intelligent search engine, which simplifies navigation among the vast information available, and an effective digital communication channel between public administration

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and beneficiaries, with a notification system. In parallel, there is also a new app for the Balcão dos Fundos platform, designed to provide more mobility in information consultation and communication between the managing entity and the beneficiary.

Still, deepening interoperability turned out to be the main challenge in this project. “The Balcão continues to be an interoperability platform for the entire organizations in the ecosystem, now in a more powerful way because it contains more functionalities than in the past - and it will continue to grow. These functionalities are not only limited to AD&C, but

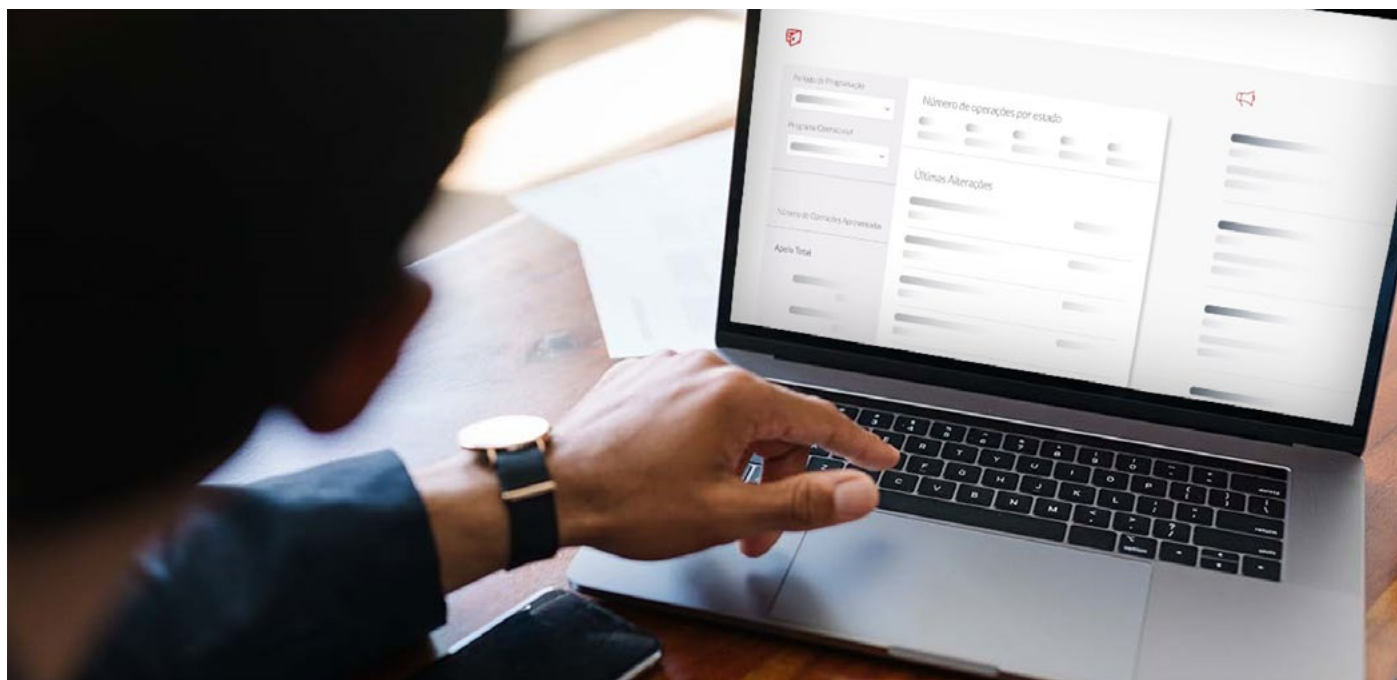
are shared with the operational programs,” comments Carlos Santos.

“The digital marketplace” where various types of funds and entities meet and the interoperability of the “Balcão” also meant that the transition from the Balcão 2020 to the new platform would have to happen in a seamless way - and without increased adaptation efforts - for the public entities and for the beneficiaries themselves. The solution developed by Axians responded to

this need: the ecosystem of organizations continued to function fully in the Balcão dos Fundos, from day 1 that the platform was launched, just as it worked in the Balcão 2020. This technological migration was fully assured by Axians.

On the beneficiary’s side, the transition was also immediate, with added advantages: the application meets the “only once” principal that exempts users from entering data in the platform that they have already provided in other public platforms, relieving the bureaucratic burden among different applications.

In the Balcão dos Fundos platform, beneficiaries can follow an approved funds application in the Balcão 2020, consult new calls or start a Portugal 2030 funds application, easily and



without the need to create new entries. The system currently has more than 230 thousand entities, 278 thousand users and 275 thousand operations.

The project also invested heavily in usability, to streamline the user experience in an application for European funds that is as simple as possible. "We invested a lot in the front-end, which was something that, previously, was not the focus, especially for public sector clients. It's an investment in UX/UI that makes the platform appealing, easy to understand and use", reinforces Fernando Cruz, Associate Manager at Axians. On AD&C's side, usability is key to the platform's goals. "The application process becomes more visual, more predictable, with contextual help, so the beneficiary feels supported in his funds application filling process, which was previously complicated and long," highlights Wilson Lucas, responsible for the digital transition at AD&C, reinforcing that "the branch is based on a fast paced development platform, which allows us to respond adequately, in a timely manner, to rapidly changing business requirements."

FROM LAUNCH TO THE FUTURE, WITH NEW FEATURES IN THE PIPELINE

The development ambition for the Balcão dos Fundos platform started in January 2020. During the following two years, and with some evolutions in terms of the definition of the project itself, the platform had many complex work streams counting with a team of more than 10 specialists.

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During the official launch of the platform, two aspects were a priority: the solution's rapid response and stabilization. Both challenges were overcome with success and within two weeks, the application was stabilised.

The partnership between AD&C and Axians however does not end with the launch of the Balcão dos Fundos platform. "We continue to work with AD&C to evolve the platform, which will add new features over time," explains Carlos Santos, emphasizing this perspective of continuous improvement. Besides the recent migration to Outsystems platform, some of the future functionalities include the possibility of exchanging messages and the introduction of machine learning tools that can suggest the best funds call notice (according to the beneficiary's profile). In addition to improvements in the platform itself, the development of a virtual assistant to support the Linha dos Fundos (Funds call center) is also planned, a service to beneficiaries that was reinforced at the same time as the launch of the Balcão dos Fundos platform.

"We and Axians are not short of ideas to be able to evolve. This is a long partnership, where we challenge each other. The idea is that AD&C can challenge the partner and the partner can challenge AD&C," says Patrícia Borges.

It is sure that the new Balcão dos Fundos will keep on developing and making the user's journey easier. For now, the project is a national highlight in the public funds area, but also a major reference in Europe, signalled by the European Commission itself.