
Development of a web-based counseling assistant for clients in child and youth welfare services. ”

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JURIX Conference – Brno 2024

Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

My name is Florian Gerlach. I am a professor of family and social law at a German university of applied sciences and managing director of the Institute for the Law of Social Work, IReSA for short. Our projects are funded by the German Ministry of Family Affairs.

Today I am pleased to present our project to you: **“Development of a web-based counseling assistant for clients in child and youth welfare services. ”**

The starting point: Social rights in Germany

Germany is a welfare state with a well-developed system of social rights. Citizens are entitled to various state benefits, for example:

- Basic security in the event of unemployment or old age,
- financial support in the event of illness or disability,
- or assistance in special circumstances such as an accident at work.

The decisive factor is that these benefits are **legal entitlements**. They can be applied for and - if rejected - can also be claimed in court.

A special feature of German social law is the **principle of official investigation**.

This obliges authorities and courts to investigate the relevant facts of a case independently. This relieves the burden on applicants, especially people who have language or formal hurdles.

However, there is also a problem here: Despite these simplifications, many people do not exercise their rights. They often do not even know that they have entitlements, or they fail to meet the requirements that applications and procedures entail.

The challenges in child and youth welfare

Child and youth welfare services face additional difficulties:

- Professionals in youth welfare offices and facilities are often overworked.
- The shortage of specialists in the social sector means that capacities for individual counseling are limited.

This means that important counseling tasks cannot be carried out in the depth that would be necessary to really support clients.

Our approach: a digital counseling assistant

This is where our project comes in. With our digital counseling assistant, we want to:

1. **Inform those seeking help:** What rights are they entitled to and how can they assert them?
2. **Reduce formal hurdles:** The assistant guides you step by step through the application process
3. **Relieve the burden on specialists:** Standardized advice requests can be handled digitally, leaving more time for direct work with clients.

How does our advice assistant work?

We use the open source software **Docassemble**, which is particularly suitable for creating interactive, web-based interviews.

A concrete example: kindergarten places

A simple legal entitlement in German social law is the right to a childcare place in a daycare center. A child is entitled to support in a daycare facility from the age of three until they start school.

To check this entitlement, you only need two pieces of information:

1. **The child's date of birth,**
2. **and whether it is already at school.**

The counseling assistant asks these questions in clear, simple language and forwards the answers directly to the decision-making process. If the requirements are met, the legal consequences - the entitlement to a daycare place - are pointed out and explained to those seeking help.

Mapping the complexity of social law

Of course, many claims are much more complicated. To cope with this complexity, we have structured our system as follows:

1. **Categorization of legal entitlements** We have divided the entitlements into practical categories, e.g:
 - Rights in the event of separation and divorce,
 - Rights vis-à-vis the youth welfare office,
 - financial assistance,
 - support in the event of illness or disability.
2. **Analysis of the basis of claims** Each basis of entitlement has been analyzed in legal detail. In German law, a claim consists of two parts:
 - the conditions or preconditions: the **factual characteristics**,
 - and the **legal consequence**, i.e. what the claimant can demand.
3. **Programming the logic** Each claim basis was mapped in Python. The conditions (factual characteristics) are checked by means of clear, structured questions in the interviews. The users' answers then drive the decision tree.

How is the data processed?

The interviews are defined in **YML files**. These files contain

- **The questions** to the users,
- the **logic for decision making**,
- and **references to further information**.

At the end of the interview, the system generates an **individual PDF file** which:

- contains the results of the consultation,
- provides further links to explanations in simple language,
- and refers to a legal dictionary with in-depth information that is also useful for professionals.

The support for those seeking help

A central aim of our work is to encourage those seeking help. We want to show them that social law in Germany is on their side. It is particularly important to take away their fear of institutions and courts.

Our digital assistant helps with this:

- **Correctly fill out and create forms and letters**,
- **meet deadlines**,
- and **take the next steps**.

The functionalities also include:

- Automatic generation of pleadings,
- identification of the competent authorities,

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- and instructions for urgent applications in urgent cases.

Challenges and technological solutions

The biggest challenge was the large number of legal claims and the associated complexity. To ensure that the system works reliably, we developed our own test program. This checks all decision paths within the interviews to avoid errors.

Availability and future prospects

From January 1, 2025, the advisory assistant will be publicly available free of charge. At <https://kiju.iresa.de>, people seeking help can check their rights and receive support.

Our long-term goal is to further expand this technology to give even more people access to their rights - in Germany and beyond.

Conclusion

With our digital advice assistant, we are creating a win-win situation:

- People seeking help receive simple, direct support.
- Professionals are relieved and can concentrate on their personal work.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to your questions!