

Electronic invoicing in the federal administration

Information about invoicing in public procurement

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Background

Electronic invoicing (e-invoicing) is a decisive step forward for Germany's public administration in its efforts to expand e-government. In addition to enabling the digitisation of business documents, electronic invoicing makes it possible to standardise and (partially) automate processes.

This brochure contains information on invoicing in public procurement and the adoption of electronic invoices in the federal administration and is intended for suppliers of goods and services to the federal administration.

Legal basis

The European Union's Directive 2014/55/EU on electronic invoicing in public procurement entered into force on 26 May 2014. It requires all contracting authorities engaged in cross-border procurement to be able to receive and process electronic invoices. To meet this obligation, Germany's E-Invoicing Act (*E-Rechnungsgesetz*), published on 10 April 2017, transposed the directive into national law for federal authorities. At the state level, the responsibility for electronic invoicing is in the hands of the federal states: each state legislation defines when public-sector agencies are required to accept electronic invoices and whether suppliers of goods and services are required to submit them. The Coordination Office for IT Standards (KoSIT) offers an overview of the status of implementation at state level at <https://xeinkauf.de/xrechnung/> (in German only).

The E-Invoicing Act gave supreme federal authorities and constitutional bodies until 27 November 2018 to comply with the e-invoicing requirements. Other authorities of the direct and indirect federal administration, the "sub-central contracting authorities" referred to in the Directive, had until 27 November 2019 to comply.

First and foremost, the law addressed the receipt and processing of e-invoices. The Directive further calls for streamlining administration with the help of seamless electronic processing.

The E-Invoicing Ordinance (E-Rechnungsverordnung, ERechV) adopted by the Federal Cabinet on 6 September 2017 specifies the requirements of the Directive. In addition, it has required invoice issuers to do so in electronic form since 27 November 2020. Section 3 (3) of the Ordinance makes exceptions to this requirement for direct contracts with a value of up to €1,000, for sensitive invoice data and for certain matters of the Foreign Service and other procurement abroad.

The Ordinance also specifies requirements for the invoice data model, which must conform to the XRechnung data exchange standard or another standard which complies with European standard EN 16931. Invoices must also contain information in addition to that required by the Value Added Tax Act (Umsatzsteuergesetz, UStG, section 14). This additional information is described in the section “Implementation in the federal administration”.

According to the Ordinance, invoices must be transmitted using a federal administrative portal. This applies to those submitting invoices and to those receiving them. The transmission methods are described later in this document.

Advantages of electronic invoicing

Electronic invoicing has many advantages compared to paper-based invoicing and processing for both invoice issuers and recipients. These advantages are described below.

The Federal Central Invoice Submission Portal (ZRE) and the Invoice Submission Portal which complies with the Online Access Act (OZG-RE) have greatly simplified the process of submitting invoices to various federal authorities. After a one-time registration, contractors can use these portals to submit their invoices to every office of the direct and indirect federal administration. No bilateral agreements, such as those needed for electronic data interchange (EDI), are necessary.

Enterprises which generate large numbers of invoices can significantly reduce their costs, as they no longer need to print or send invoices by a postal service. For invoice issuers, switching to e-invoicing also presents an opportunity to optimise and digitise other accounting processes as well.

With e-invoicing, it has been possible to demonstrate that government authorities need less time and fewer steps to process invoices, speeding up the processing time and enabling faster payment of contractors, thereby improving their liquidity.

The requirement for e-invoicing has made it possible to process invoices electronically from beginning to end, which results in significant potential savings for the federal administration. Additionally, e-invoicing and digital technology can improve the quality of invoice processing as well. Digitising the entire process from beginning to end increases transparency and improves the ability to track invoices within the organisation.

Infobox: Advantages of e-invoicing

E-invoicing offers a wide range of benefits for enterprises and the public administration, speeding up the processing time and enabling faster payment of contractors. Here are the benefits in detail:

Advantages for invoice issuers:



- Simpler invoicing
- Reduced processing time
- Increase of timely payment
- Potential to reduce paper and postage costs

Advantages for invoice recipients:



- Optimisation of invoice processing through automated import of invoice data
- Increase in data quality through reduced likelihood of errors
- Potential to reduce invoice processing costs
- Enabling decentralized invoice processing

Implementation in the federal administration

As defined in Directive 2014/55/EU, an electronic invoice is an invoice that has been issued, transmitted and received in a structured electronic format which allows an automated and electronic processing. An electronic invoice must therefore provide all relevant data in a structured format. An image file, a PDF document without an integrated data record or a scanned paper invoice do not meet these requirements and are, by definition, not an electronic invoice.

XRechnung standard

The XRechnung standard was developed in a joint federal–state steering project and is the national version of the European standard EN 16931. It is supported by the federal and state governments. Designed as a pure data format, the XRechnung standard enables invoice data to be imported directly and seamlessly into the processing systems. The structured XML data record is thus primarily used for machine readability. Using display programs, the XML data can be made readable for human users.

The XRechnung standard is intended to standardise the handling of electronic invoices in public administration. It is an open-source standard maintained by KoSIT which is available free of charge and adaptable to future needs. Different standards for electronic invoicing may be used if they meet the requirements of the European standard, the terms of use for the invoice submission portals and the requirements of the federal E-Invoicing Ordinance. All information about the XRechnung standard can be found on the KoSIT website <https://xeinkauf.de/xrechnung/>.

Infobox: Content of an electronic invoice

In accordance with section 5 of the E-Invoicing Ordinance (and in addition to what is required by section 14 of the Value Added Tax Act), an e-invoice must include at least the following information:

- the buyer reference (*Leitweg-ID*) of the invoice recipient
- the applicable terms of payment (or the date by which payment is due)
- the bank account details of the invoice issuer
- the De-Mail or email address of the invoice issuer

An electronic invoice must also include the following information if it was provided by the contracting authorities when awarding the contract:

- a purchase order reference
- a seller identifier

A specific data field is provided for each item of additional information. The contracting authority and contractor can include any additional information to be provided in the invoice.

Infobox: Buyer reference

The buyer reference (*Leitweg-ID*) is a unique identifier of the contracting authority. It ensures that the e-invoice is sent to the correct authority and automatically forwarded within the portals.

The contracting authority informs the invoice issuer about the buyer reference when placing the order. In addition, the reference can be accessed centrally in the portal at any time. Invoice issuers do not need a buyer reference of their own.

Federal invoice submission portals

To implement e-invoicing in the federal administration, two electronic portals for submitting e-invoices have been set up:

- [the Federal Central Invoice Submission Portal \(ZRE\)](#)
- [the Online Access Act-compliant Invoice Submission Portal \(OZG-RE\)](#)

When awarding a contract, the contracting authority will inform the supplier/invoice issuer which portal or transmission method should be used for submitting e-invoices. The respective terms of use apply.

The ZRE and the OZG-RE represent the link between invoice issuers and the federal administration. One-time registration is necessary to use the portals. Following the registration, the invoice issuers can select the preferred transmission channel and store it in the system.

Invoice issuers can choose from five methods for transmitting e-invoices:

- Web submission
- Upload
- Email
- Peppol web service
- De-Mail (only available in the ZRE)

The following sections describe the requirements for and advantages of using the different transmission methods.

Web submission



This method is particularly suitable for companies which a low volume of invoices that either do not use any software for outgoing invoices or whose software does not create electronic invoices compliant with the EU standard.

The invoice data is manually transferred by the invoicing party to an input mask on the platforms and then transmitted to the recipient. For archiving purposes, the biller is provided with the valid e-bill in XML format for download.

Note: The portals do not provide an audit-proof archive for invoice issuers. However, it is mandatory that the e-invoice is archived in XML format by the invoice issuer.

Upload



This method is relevant for those who produce e-invoices compliant with the EU standard but cannot or do not wish to send them via the other transmission methods offered. The option of manually uploading an invoice requires users to activate this transmission method.

Transmission via De-Mail or email

Transmission via De-Mail and email requires that invoice issuers can generate a valid electronic invoice using their own software.



Once the De-Mail or email transmission method has been activated in the invoice submission portal, the invoice issuer is informed of address to be used for sending invoices. Invoice issuers must also register their own address, as only messages from previously known senders can be processed. Note: De-Mail is currently only available in the ZRE portal.

Web service/Peppol



Both the ZRE and OZG-RE portals offer the option to send invoices using the federal web service and transmission via the Peppol network. There are three different ways to submit e-invoices using Peppol:

1. with an existing Peppol service provider (subject to a fee)
2. with the federal Peppol web service (free of charge)
3. by joining OpenPeppol (subject to a fee) and setting up your own Peppol access point

To be able to track the status of invoices submitted using Peppol, the Peppol transmission method must be activated in the ZRE user account and the Peppol participant ID used to transmit the invoice must be saved and verified in the system.

Infobox: Peppol

Pan-European Public Procurement OnLine, or Peppol, defines a standard for the secure exchange of documents between different systems. Standardised processes, a standardised “business language” and technical specifications ensure the necessary interoperability between enterprises and authorities for the electronic processing of purchasing, delivery and tendering.

In technical terms, Peppol is based on a 4-corner model. By connecting to any Peppol access point, an invoice issuer can join the network and communicate with all other participants. The sender forms the first corner of the model. The same principle applies to all parties in the network. Thus, the potential recipient of a message becomes the next corner. The recipient must also be connected to an access point. The two access points represent the remaining corners and are responsible for the secure transmission of the information.

A list of all access points can be found on the official Peppol website at <https://peppol.org/>.

Annex

Choosing a transmission method

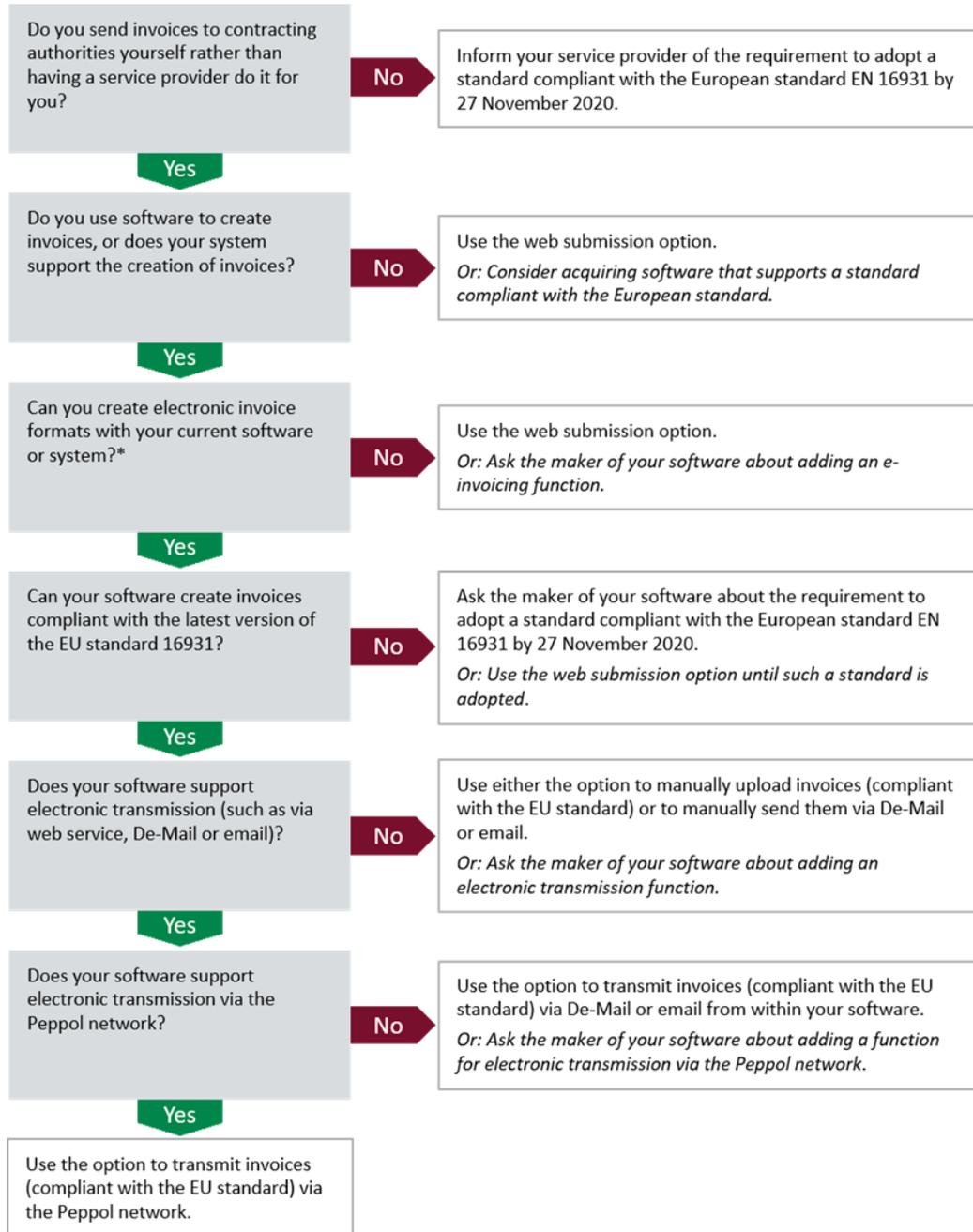


Figure 1: Choosing a transmission method

* This refers to data formats containing structured invoice data.