



## nCipher Time Stamping Technology Helps Notaries in Belgium Go Digital

*With the deployment of the nCipher Time Stamp Server the Royal Federation of Belgian Notaries has been able to dramatically cut the time required to complete company registration from 56 days to three through the secure signing and time stamping of notarised documents.*

The Royal Federation of Belgian Notaries (RFBN) is a not for profit association that was established to look after the interests of Notaries in their dealings with the Belgian Government and public authorities. As the world's oldest legal profession still in existence, Notaries are highly-trusted, public officers that provide advice and authenticate legally-binding documents in fields as diverse as real estate, family and business law. A Notary is totally independent and impartial and in Belgium they are appointed by the King.

The RFBN's overall aim is to standardise and streamline professional practises for all of the 1200 regional Notaries in Belgium and provide them with the technology they need to comply with these practices. Central to the reputation of the Notaries is the level of trust that both the Government and the public place in legally binding notarised documents, and clearly any changes that are made to the processes that the Notaries use, for example the introduction of digital signatures, must be conducted in a way that ensures this reputation is not compromised in any way.

The RFBN's 'e-Notaries project' was launched in 2000 to find ways to digitise proceedings and communications between Notaries and public authorities, including the secure electronic transmission of evidentiary legal documents. One area identified that would greatly benefit from this was the registration of companies – a highly cumbersome process, taking some 56 days to complete. It was identified that digitising the procedure would drastically cut the time taken for this process by eliminating the need to send paper documents back and forth for review and collecting handwritten signatures. Clearly any digital solution had to ensure that the resulting documents would be legally recognised and trusted as evidence of company registration.

Verifying and witnessing new company registrations is just one of the vital, legally binding functions provided by the RFBN. To speed up their work and increase efficiency, the Belgium Ministry of Justice launched an initiative to create a secure infrastructure to replace hand-signed notarised paper documents and forms with digitally signed electronic documents that carry the same legal standing. Central to this initiative was the need to generate securely signed and time-stamped digital documents that could not be changed or tampered with and whose authenticity could be proven.

The Ministry of Justice initially laid out the concepts and requirements for the project, an essential part of which was to find a way to ensure the integrity of the digital documents. With hand-signed paper documents it is easy to see if anything has been altered, but if digital documents are left unsecured the entire contents, not just the date and time, could be changed without it ever being spotted. The Ministry of Justice specified that as part of the solution the digital documents had to be securely time stamped and made tamper-evident so that the contents, the time of signing and the signature itself could be totally trusted and would have the same legal standing and enforceability as the traditional notarised paper documents.

The RFBN looked at four different solution providers and after a lengthy evaluation process selected the nCipher Time Stamp Server (TSS) to perform the digital signing and time stamping function.

"Digital signatures provide a proven way to establish the authenticity of an electronic document, but for these documents to be of any legal value we need to be 100% sure of the point in time at which the document was digitally signed by one of our Notaries," says Jan Biets, program manager at the RFBN. "The deployment of nCipher's Time Stamp Server means we can digitally sign and time stamp documents using a high-strength, tamper-resistant security appliance. Not only does this overcome the risks associated with software-based digital signing processes, but also provides an auditable and trusted record of date and time for all documents without relying on system clocks within host operating systems that can easily be abused. The nCipher appliance is also feature-rich and offers the performance necessary to scale to meet our future requirements."

The RFBN has built a national infrastructure that provides more than 1200 regional Notaries with the technology to digitally sign and time stamp electronic documents. The time stamps provided by the nCipher TSS bind the documents and the information they contain to a secure official Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) source verified by the Belgium National Measurement Institute (NMI) and that is impossible to falsify. The nCipher TSS also creates what is in effect a cryptographic digital fingerprint that freezes the content of the document at the exact moment it is signed so that if any changes do happen to be made the 'fingerprint' will also change, and it is immediately evident that the document has been tampered with.

In Belgium, taxation and other charges begin the moment a Company is created so it is of critical importance that any possible doubt is removed from the exact time a document was signed and whether it has been altered. The nCipher TSS ensures the integrity and trust of digital records so they can be used as binding evidence when required. Once the documents have been time stamped a certifiable and auditable trail is established. Any changes to the document, the identity of the signatory and the time, are identified as soon as the time stamp signature is verified.

The nCipher TSS is fully compliant with the ETSI 102023 ETSI TS 101 861 policy requirements for time stamping authorities. The RFBN's entire certificate issuing and time stamping procedures conform to these ETSI requirements and this was the standard the RFBN measured against when evaluating and deciding upon their time stamping solution.

Through the deployment of the nCipher secure TSS, Belgian Notaries have successfully moved away from the time-consuming paper-based process of creating a company registration and replaced it with a highly secure and efficient electronic one. All documents created have a traceable, timed signature and the integrity of everything contained within the document can be also be proved so there is irrefutable evidence of the moment of a company's creation. The RFBN now provides all regional Notaries with a software tool that automates company registration. As a result of being able to complete and submit all of the necessary paperwork digitally the highly bureaucratic process as been reduced from 56 days to just three.