eRA Project Team Meeting Minutes

Date: Tuesday, August 10, 2004
Time: 9:00–11 a.m.
Location: Rockledge 1, 5th floor conference room
Chair: Jim Cain

Next Meeting: Tuesday, August 24, 9:00 a.m., Rockledge 1, 5th floor conference room

Action Items

1. (Jim Cain) Look at sending inordinately delayed tickets from the Help Desk up the chain of command as a way of exerting authority to have them resolved quicker.

2. (Tim Twomey) Look into compiling a list of names and telephone numbers of people whom PIs can contact to update their Commons account.

3. (Jim Tucker) Have someone look into why there were problems with a program module that despite a long testing cycle came out with serious errors that were not in the original.

4. (Scarlett Gibb) Explore the idea of starting a newsletter geared towards principal investigators. For starters, cover conferences of interest to PIs.

5. (Scarlett Gibb) Have Rick Ikeda's letter, urging PIs to sign up for Commons to get their summary statements quicker, posted on the IMPAC II website.

6. Hold a Project Team meeting devoted only to workflow

eRA Operational Team Structure

Jim Cain

Jim Cain presented an overview of eRA's operational structure, followed by individual presentations by branch chiefs. Jim noted that when he joined eRA about eight to ten years ago, it was an agency organized by project areas. He stated that he found that the structure constricted communications across the agency and was too stovepiped; therefore five years ago he had it reorganized completely into branches organized by function—the eRA you see today. eRA is divided into seven branches, each with its own branch chief. They are:

❑ Requirements Branch headed by David Wright

❑ Office of Project Management headed by Donna Frahm

❑ Systems Management and Support Branch headed by Tim Twomey

❑ Architecture Branch headed by Steve Hughes

❑ Planning, Communications and Outreach Branch headed by Scarlett Gibb

❑ System Quality and Interfaces Branch headed by Jim Tucker

❑ Analysis Design and Development Branch headed by Sherry Zucker

Jim noted other finer points of the eRA structure:

- ❑ Jim Seach, who serves as integration manager, is on loan from the National Cancer Institute. He shuttles between his two jobs, much as JJ McGowan did as eRA project manager for three years on loan from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

- ❑ David Wright is the only government employee heading a branch full of contractors.

- ❑ The Operations Branch was combined with user support a year ago to form the current Systems Management and Support Branch. This made sense because of the close relationship between trouble tickets and the operation of the system.

- ❑ The branches dovetail with a software development cycle—from planning to requirements to architecture to project management to analysis, design and development to quality testing to systems management to communications and outreach.

- ❑ eRA has always had a direct contract with Oracle consulting since the eRA system is heavily based on Oracle technology. The help from Oracle's Brad Sachar and his staff has proven invaluable to eRA in helping guide the system through new releases and in fixing things that go awry.

- ❑ IBM plays a big role in various aspects of eRA, from architecture to integration analysis to requirements analysis. Dave Teager, the IBM lead project manager, reports to Jim and provides him with a weekly status report. Teager's senior staff has been assigned to branch chiefs—one to David Wright, another to Steve Hughes, etc.

Individual branch chiefs outlined their roles and responsibilities.

Planning, Communications and Outreach Branch

Scarlett Gibb

- ❑ Provide meeting support (Felicia Shingler, lead)

  - – Preparing agendas

  - – Attending meetings

  - – Preparing and distributing minutes

  - – Tracking action items

  - – Posting minutes to the Web for communication to the entire project team.

- ❑ Publish two on-line newsletters (Felicia Shingler, lead):

  - – *Inside eRA* for NIH staff

  - – *Inside eRA for Partners* for people in our partner institutions

- ❑ Write, publish and maintain user documentation (Felicia Shingler, lead)

  - – User Guides

  - – Release Notes

  - – On-line Help

- Develop and maintain eRA Project Websites (Jim Soden, lead)
    - eRA Website
    - IMPAC II Website
    - eRA Intranet (*in progress)*
- Provide direct support to the eRA Project Manager
    - Plan symposia, workshops, and retreats
    - Write eRA status reports in compliance with federal requests (report to Congress for HHS underway)
    - Prepare presentations about eRA for key meetings, including:
        - Budget
        - EPMC
        - ITWG Steering Committee
- Coordinate eRA System training (Patty Austin, lead)
    - MEO training
    - All eRA applications
    - NIH eRA Virtual School
    - Hands on training sessions for NIH users
- Plan outreach activities to extramural community
    - NIH Regional Seminars
    - National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA) and Society of Research Administrators (SRA) national and regional meetings
    - Commons Working Group (CWG) and Federal Demonstration Project (FDP) meetings
    - Scientific conferences
    - Commons 101 presentations
- Develop strategic planning
- Provide annual planning and work breakdown structure *(currently working intensively with Amy Burns and Alastair Thomson on annual plan)*
- Created, published and distributed the *eRA System Made Easy* brochure

Architecture Branch

Tracy Soto (in place of an absent Steve Hughes)

Key Branch Duties

- Support and maintain eRA Data Model

- ❑ Support and maintain eRA Framework

- ❑ Support eRA project-wide design

- ❑ Support eRA use of enterprise services

- ❑ Support eRA strategic planning for new technology

- ❑ Evaluate emerging technologies and provide guidance on implementation strategies

Key Branch Efforts
- ❑ Coordinate Kumaran migration of client-server to J2EE

- ❑ Evaluate data mart technology for eRA data access strategy

- ❑ Support eRA eCGAP development tasks

- ❑ Evaluate potential eRA workflow solutions

- ❑ Support eRA Knowledge Management pilot

- ❑ Provide ongoing support for eRA development and maintenance tasks

Integration

Jim Seach

- ❑ Rational tool migration

- ❑ Configuration and change management

- ❑ Process definition and improvement

- ❑ Facilitation of inter-team issues and initiatives

- ❑ External application integration and coordination

Office of Project Management

Donna Frahm

- ❑ Provide oversight to the Project Management Support contract

- ❑ Maintain time-tracking system

- ❑ Reconcile contractor invoices against invoicing system

- ❑ Administer the Change Control Board

- ❑ Provide security policy functions—ISSO *(Information System Security Officer)*

- ❑ Calculate earned value *(for project at some time in future)*

System Quality Assurance and Interfaces Branch

Jim Tucker

- ❑ Serves as the focal point for eRA quality assurance

- ❑ Manages projects to maintain, improve and extend the quality of the HHS extramural data and systems software

Software Quality Assurance Section

- ❑ Conducts system integration, functional, and user acceptance testing of all components of eRA software.

- ❑ Maintains data integrity.

- ❑ Recommends solutions to software and data problems.

- ❑ Supports TAGGS (Tracking Accountability in Government Grants System).

- ❑ Assures that policy changes related to extramural programs are reflected in the system.

Data Quality Assurance Section

- ❑ Responsible for the external institutional information, formerly called IPF.

- ❑ Coordinates the professional data entered and maintained through the Commons, or by receipt of official documents requesting changes.

- ❑ Maintains authority tables.

Requirements Branch

David Wright

- ❑ Works with business analysts and users to develop system requirements.

- ❑ Works with business analysts and advocates to develop vision documents.

- ❑ Creates requirements documents (e.g., use cases, supplementary specifications).

- ❑ Leads requirements reviews with users, advocates, business analysts and developers.

- ❑ Manages changes to existing requirements.

- ❑ Are available to developers during the development cycle to answer questions.

- ❑ Act as a resource to the business analyst to troubleshoot system issues.

Analysis Design and Development Management Branch

Sherry Zucker

ADDM staff has two primary roles: Business Analyst and Task Order Manager.

Business Analyst (BA)

- ❑ Key player in planning

  - – Strategic planning

  - – Annual planning

  - – Release planning

- ❑ Conducts business analysis and business process modeling

  - – Inputs: Stakeholder vision, Users' assessment of problems, pending organizational changes, opportunities for process improvements, constraints, priorities, risks

- – Outputs: View of area in relationship to external and internal business workers and flow of information between them, business processes performed, inputs and outputs, events that trigger a process, messaging within and between internal and external areas, concept of how to transition, risk mitigation, business models, process improvements

❑ Responsible for Vision document for new initiatives

❑ Approve requests for maintenance items and bundles items in releases (working with advocates to prioritize)

❑ Serve as point of contact for User Support

Task Order Manager (TOM)

❑ Develop task order plan for approved initiatives for Planning Group

❑ Coordinate development of task orders and assemble Statement Of Work (SOW) for Request For Quote

❑ Track pending task orders through procurement process

❑ Lead technical evaluation panel for evaluating proposals and report results to CO

❑ After award, manage task order and provide technical project oversight and administration, project planning, risk management, status updates, regular communication with contractor management and technical leads, first step in problem resolution.

❑ After award, serve as liaison between the user(s) and contractor technical team. Demonstrate pilots, prototypes, and other work products to users and community. Request clarifications as needed.

❑ Verify when design is complete and ready for design review, and verify when software is ready for testing.

❑ Work with deployment, training, and user community to transition to new software.

Sherry Zucker also introduced her task order managers and business analysts and outlined their specific responsibilities. The list can be found at
http://era.nih.gov/docs/Bus_Analyst_Task_Order_Mgr_coverage_08-13-04.pdf

Systems Management and Support Branch

Tim Twomey

The eRA Systems Management and Support Branch manages approximately 80 servers and more than 150 database schemas with more than 8 Terabytes of data supporting more than 4,000 IMPAC II and 23,000 Commons users. They have three primary areas of responsibility: user support and Helpdesk, system administration, and database administration.

User Support and Helpdesk

- Provide front-line support for all eRA System (IMPAC II and Commons) applications to users as received through phone or email.

- Advise users on using the system and modules, solving problems or answering general questions.
- Verify and respond to user problems, forwarding to next level support when necessary.
- Log and track all questions, problems, or enhancement request in Remedy system.
- Install and maintain Remedy software for all Project staff to properly track service and track user issues.
- Assist in eRA outreach and training efforts by traveling to off-site locations with presentations, discussions, and displays.
- Assist with eRA System training classes as instructors and assistants.
- Manage all Commons organizational registrations.
- Manage all OD eRA user accounts.
- Assist ICs and OPDIVs with account management transfers, cluster management, password problems etc.

System Administration

- Plan and administer system
  - User account management
  - Space allocation
  - Script programming and automation
- Manage and support hardware configuration and technical architecture
- Manage and support eRA Storage Area Network (SAN)
- Troubleshoot hardware and operating system issues
- Plan, manages system backup and recovery
- Plan, implement and test eRA Disaster Recovery (DR) procedures and systems.
- Implement and oversee performance and capacity planning
- Plan, implement and perform network and security management
- Responsible for system documentation

Database Administration

- Maintain database configuration and installation
- Manage "backend" user accounts
- Troubleshoot and resolve database issues
- Manage space allocation at database level
- Program database job automation procedures
- Performs database backup and recovery
- Responsible for performance tuning
- Monitor database for problems or issues
- Baseline and manage schema changes

❑   Manage replication

❑   Responsible for database administration documentation

Discussion

Help Desk

Contractors from RS Information Systems (RSIS) staff the Helpdesk, with eight full-time staffers rotating 13 hours a day and over weekends. Tim Twomey stated that usually there are four staffers onsite at any given time and they are looking to expand that number in the fall. In response to a question, Tim stated that they are upgrading the phone system; a move that he hoped would take care of the mechanical problems people are encountering with the Helpdesk. Tim urged users to report problems only to the Helpdesk instead of relaying them through someone they meet in the hallway. That way, requests for help would not come in from three different sources, creating a confusing situation where three people would be working separately on the same problem.

Tom Tatham noted that simply contacting the Helpdesk would not help in situations where the response from the desk was extremely slow. He recalled that a critical problem he encountered in early June—that of Principal Investigators (PIs) being able to see their scores before the Scientific Review Administrators relayed the scores to them—took a month to resolve. Tim Twomey stated that he recalled jumping on the problem very quickly. Scarlett stated that if the problem was taking longer than usual, people should call either Tim Twomey or Dave Chicchirichi. Both have been very prompt in their response, she noted. Dave noted that 84.4 percent of Helpdesk calls (more than 2,000 calls in June, for instance) were, on average, resolved within 24 hours.

Some group members said the Helpdesk is developing a reputation of not being very helpful.

Pete Morton stated that at CIT, tickets that do not get resolved within a reasonable time are sent to the next tier. Pete stated that he is tier 3 and if he can't resolve the problem, the ticket goes up to his director. That process of exerting authority helps to keep the pressure on to deliver on time, he said. Jim Cain said he would look into implementing a similar escalation process with Helpdesk tickets.

Action   **(Jim Cain) Look at sending inordinately delayed tickets from the Help Desk up the chain of command as a way of exerting authority to have them resolved quicker.**

Testing Delays

Pete Morton questioned why testing cycles for software seemed to be fairly long and whether anyone at eRA was looking into that problem. Jim Tucker stated that the testing cycle involved not only testing but, if critical bugs are found, the software has to go back into development and emerge again for retesting. The process takes a few iterations.

eRA is working on automated testing and looking to expand that over the next six to nine months. Jim Tucker said that one of his testers recently sat down with an automated testing script for a Commons demo; the end result was that something that would take a human two hours took only 15 minutes. Jim Cain said that with IBM doing the integration testing since they took over from

Northrop Grumman last winter, he had seen fewer bumpy starts after deployment. Jim Cain stated that while testing was taking longer, they are doing a better job and putting out more stable code.

One group member brought up the issue of the Program module, which came in for relatively minor problems and underwent a long testing cycle only to emerge with serious errors that were not in the original. Jim Cain requested Jim Tucker look into this incident.

A group member said that she would strongly encourage speeding up of testing, noting that several initiatives had gotten stuck in testing and missed critical deadlines as a result. Jim Cain responded that the team would continue to aggressively look at making the testing process more efficient and in leveraging automatic tools to reduce testing time cycles. However, Jim Cain said he cannot see the advantage of hiring more people until he could see the results of simply improving the process and using automatic testing.

Action   (Jim Tucker) Look into why there were problems with a Program module that, despite a long testing cycle, came out with serious errors that were not in the original.

J2EE Conversion

A group member asked about the schedule for conversion of client-server applications to the Web-based J2EE platform. Jim Cain stated that eRA was poised at the "go/no-go" point, but it would be months before anything was implemented. It is a very critical issue and eRA does not want to rush into anything but rather wants to do it thoroughly and thoughtfully.

Survey of Service Providers

Scarlett Gibb

Scarlett stated that many Commons Working Group users had urged eRA officials to advise them as to which Service Provider to choose. She said that while eRA cannot show any partiality, they could provide information about the Service Providers to help users make an informed decision. Towards this end, eRA recently administered a detailed questionnaire to Service Providers. Their answers to that survey plus links to Service Providers' websites can be found in an article in the latest newsletter for the external community (*Inside eRA for Partners*) on eRA's website at http://era.nih.gov/eranews/latestpartners.cfm

The article is titled, *Choosing the Right Service Provider for Your Institution's e-Submissions.*

People interested in learning more about the way things work in eRA can turn to the Project Procedures Guide that is now available on the IMPAC II website under technical documentation. The guide is a living document and changes will be incorporated along the way. Read the guide at http://impacii.nih.gov/doc/pdf/eRA_Project_Procedure_Guide_1.1a.pdf

Carlos Caban suggested that eRA develop a newsletter geared towards PIs. Scarlett responded that that was on her radar screen. For starters, she requested group members to inform her about conferences that PIs would like eRA to cover.

Action: (Scarlett Gibb) Explore the idea of starting a newsletter geared towards principal investigators and attending conferences specific to PIs..

Updating Commons account

Tom Tatham suggested a tool that would provide a list of whom PIs should contact to update their Commons account. Tim Twomey said the problem with compiling such a list was that it could include a range of people from administrative support personnel to the director, and would differ at each institution. Scarlett suggested giving the name of the signing official. Tim Twomey said he would look into the matter.

Rick Ikeda said he had a letter sent to PIs in his institute urging them to sign up on Commons to get a wealth of information on their grants and applications. He suggested that the letter be posted on the eRA website. Scarlett said she would consider it.

Action: **(Tim Twomey) Look into compiling a list of names and telephone numbers of people whom PIs can contact to update their Commons account.**

Action: **(Scarlett Gibb) Consider having Rick Ikeda's letter, urging PIs to sign up for Commons to get their summary statements quicker, posted on the eRA website.**

Open Discussion

A group member requested more detail on the proposed eRA workflow solution. Jim Cain suggested that a separate session be held devoted just to workflow.

Action: Hold a Project Team meeting devoted only to workflow.

Attendees

Ashley, Rich (RNS)	Hausman, Steve (OD)	Simms, Sophonia (OD)
Bukowski, Maria (OD)	Ikeda, Richard (NIGMS)	Snouffer, Anna (OD/OFACP)
Burns, Amy (LTS)	Jordan, Craig (NIH/NIDCD)	Soto, Tracy (OD/DEIS)
Caban, Carlos (OER)	Katzper, Linda (OD/DEIS)	Subramanya, Manju (LTS)
Cain, Jim (OER)	Lagas, Robert (Lagas Assoc.)	Tatham, Thomas (CSR)
Chicchirichi, David (OER)	Martin, Carol (NHGRI)	Taylor, Jean (SAIC)
Clark, Howard (Mitretek)	Milner, Tina (OD)	Thompson, Alastair (Blueprint Technologies)
Dixon, Diana (OD)	Morton, Pete (CIT)	Tucker, Jim (OER)
Dutcher, Sylvia (Mitretek)	Reeb, Michael (Perot)	Twomey, Tim (OD)
Faenson, Inna (OD)	Sachar, Brad (Oracle)	Wehrle, Janna (NIGMS)
Flach, Jennifer (OD)	Salata, Kalman (CSR)	Wright, David (OER)
Frahm, Donna (OER)	Sanderson, Gina (LTS)	Zucker, Sherry (DEIS)
Gibb, Scarlett (OD)	Seach, Jim (NCI/eRA)	
Goodman, Mike (OD)	Seppala, Sandy (LTS)	
Hahn, Marcia (OER/OPERA)	Shingler, Felicia (OER)	