eRA Technical Coordinators

Date: December 16, 2004
Time: 1:30–3:00 p.m.
Location: 6700 B Rockledge Dr., Room 1205
Chair: Chip Groh

Next Meeting: February 17, 2005, 1:30 p.m. to 3 p.m. TBA

Action Items

1. (Amir Venegas) Look into issue of why release screen takes a while to populate.

2. (Amir Venegas) Email to group the TSNNAMES entry for the IRDB Test environment.

3. (Tim Twomey, Amir Venegas) Inform group at least five days in advance of migrating IRDB to 10G.

10G Migration Update

Amir Venegas

Amir stated that the migration of eRA database servers to Oracle 10G took place over the weekend (Dec. 11, 12). The IRDB (reporting) database has not yet been migrated to 10G. eRA has also not yet RAC-enabled (Real Application Clusters-enabled) its database servers and is not going to push that into production until they are confident that RAC is configured correctly and can handle the load. Most functionality has been good with 10G. However, some issues have cropped up:

o On Monday, Dec. 13, eRA had to increase the shared pool—the memory realm of the Oracle database.

o On Tuesday, Dec. 14, there were intermittent issues with the listener process that kept people from logging in. Connections were refused four times that day. The listener process accepts communications coming in, directs it to the right port, and directs users to the right database. For some reason, a duplicate process kept popping up. eRA has been communicating with Oracle folks on site. Meanwhile, an operations side workaround has been put in place to ensure that outside connections are not refused.

o Some users complained about problems while pasting attachments through the Grants Management module. eRA is still working on determining the cause.

o Richard Ashley noted that users of CRISP Plus had also encountered problems while saving modified abstracts. (*CRISP Plus is an internal relational database available through the eRA System that allows NIH staff to perform keyword searches of grant titles, abstracts, and application summary statements. It houses sensitive information (e.g., dollar amounts and information on unfunded grants) not available in the external version of CRISP*). Developers are looking into that problem.

One group member stated that it would have been helpful to get an email from eRA early on about the problems they were encountering as a result of the 10G migration; it would have helped deflect the many telephone calls she received about the problems. Group chair Chip Groh agreed, saying that a heads-up in a situation like this would go a long way in erasing hard feelings. Another group member noted that generating a report out of the Grants Management module was much slower than in the past. Amir stated that regression testing had reflected no problems. He suggested that the query may have to be manually tuned. He urged the member to report any persistent problems to the eRA Helpdesk. Another group member stated that the Release screen in GM takes a while to populate. Amir stated that he will look into the issue.

Amir noted that the IRDB database is still at 9i. IRDB does a lot of data replication and performance testing is ongoing to make sure that the data is working fine in the test environment. IRDB is likely to be migrated to 10G anytime between now and New Year's Eve. Group members stated that they would like to be notified in advance of the IRDB migration so they can ensure that staff is alerted to the change, especially since some have automatic queries running against the IRDB base. Amir stated that the date will definitely be communicated to the group at least five days in advance. The group will also be notified two weeks in advance of plans to RAC-enable its stage environment and another two weeks in advance before that goes to production.

One group member asked if they could have access to the staging database for IRDB. Amir stated that users can gain access to IRDB test environment. To those who need it, he will email out the TSNNAMES entry for the IRDB test environment.

A group member asked why the client-server tools folder is still at 8i, even though the database servers are being upgraded to 10G. Chip Groh stated that Oracle did not upgrade the tools because it is trying to move away from client-server applications to the web-based platform of J2EE. Amir stated that the challenge eRA faced was whether to upgrade client-servers to 10G when they were developing the J2EE platform. They felt resources were best spent on J2EE, plus they could not move in opposite directions at once. The move to 10G is being driven by security issues as well as the proven long-term benefits of RAC-enabling the servers—such as more flexibility and more scalability, all leading to a more stable database environment. Chip noted that larger policy issues formulated at the NIH-wide and HHS-wide level is driving these changes. In addition, NIH architecture came up with standards for servers that called for doing away with UNIX servers running the Tru64 machines, which is the current set-up at eRA. It was decided that J2EE was the wave of the future. While the changes leave a disconnect at this time, users will be in a better position a year down the road when there will be no more client-servers, no more Tru64s and business will be conducted on the Web.

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Contracts Data Update

Michael Goodman

Years ago, eRA used to have contracts data in IMPAC I and it was bridged to IMPAC II. However, in 2000, a policy change called for all contracts data to be directly placed in DCIS (the Department Contract Information System—the federal repository of all NIH contracting information). It was decided earlier this year that it was time to start bridging the data from DCIS back into IMPAC II. The impetus for this was the desire to have some robust reporting from the eRA database, a goal that Norka Ruiz Bravo, director of extramural research, also championed. After some analysis and mapping techniques, eRA got a good bridge in place. Then it ran into a glitch. eRA uses an IC serial number as an identifier for grants and contracts. But DCIS does not store this IC serial number as a discrete element; sometimes it is mixed up with the contracts number which is the DCIS number. Despite using many parsing techniques, the data bridging yielded only a 70 percent success rate. Thirty percent of the data fell by the wayside. Michael noted that eRA is now shifting focus to use the 25 character DCIS number as the only way to identify NIH contracts. That means that eRA has to retool applications that use contracts data such as Pop Tracking, CRISP, IRDB, CRISP on the web and Web QT. The goal is to reshape these tools by June/July of 2005 and have data for reporting requirements in place by the end of 2005.

Tech talk

No meeting in January—The next scheduled meeting falls on January 20, which happens to be a holiday because it is Inauguration Day. Therefore, the next meeting will be held on Feb. 17.

Looking for a conference room—Chip noted that the current booking of the NIAID conference room had run out for the year. Hopefully, they will be able to schedule these meetings at the same location. If not, Chip urged the group to suggest other conference rooms available on the third Thursday of the month. His preference was for rooms that were not run by Conference Services, since they would then have to pay for the room. The conference room should also be in a building with ample parking.