

Case Study:
PUBLIC SERVICES

PROTECTING THE PUBLIC HEALTH THROUGH KNOWLEDGE

NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH

As one of eight health agencies of the Public Health Service—which, in turn, is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services—the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has a very specific goal: to acquire new knowledge to help prevent, detect, diagnose, and treat disease and disability. Acquiring that knowledge requires quick and easy access to information from a variety of sources. That's where the agency's Division of Computer Research & Technology (DCRT) comes in. DCRT was tasked with integrating the agency's various legacy data systems to simplify business processes for NIH staff—not exactly a routine assignment when you consider that the NIH comprises 26 separate institutes, centers, and divisions housed in 75 buildings on more than 300 acres. In 1992, DCRT began compiling a data repository and—



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— JOHN PRICE
Information Systems Branch Chief

RESULTS

- Integrated data warehousing consolidates information from numerous sources, enabling a “snapshot” view of business performance across all administrative business areas
- Time savings increases productivity
- Ease of use improves employee satisfaction
- On-site training and support help ensure high adoption rates

as information technology progressed and the popularity and need for information increased at the NIH—proceeded to build a data warehouse and decision support system.



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AN INFORMATION IMPASSE

According to Information Systems Branch Chief John Price, “There was a lack of ability to quickly and easily access data that people needed to do their jobs. We were tasked with building a data warehouse to eliminate the need for staff to go to separate systems and manually pull data together and hope that it was consistent. A lot of time was spent with minimal results and inconsistent responses, and we needed to bring a decision support application to the desktop to meet the need for easy access to information.”

The need to build a data warehouse/decision support system led the NIH to seek outside support to augment DCRT’s data warehousing staff. Having teamed with BearingPoint’s Public Services practice in previous technical efforts—such as building a graphical user interface on the original data repository and a graphical front end on the agency’s Administrative Database (ADB)—the NIH once again turned to BearingPoint.

“[BearingPoint] did a study of several transformation tools, recommended one for implementation, and then brought people in to use that tool in developing various layers of the warehouse.”

— JUDY MAHAFFEY
Head of the Database Information Section

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Together, the NIH Data Warehousing Committee, DCRT, and BearingPoint worked to design and build a data warehouse/decision support system that provides integrated business information and offers NIH staff the ability to perform queries and reporting. The data warehouse integrates information from a variety of NIH enterprise systems, such as the Central Accounting System, Human Resources Database, NIH Payroll (including Civilian Service, Commissioned Corps Officers, and non-full-time-equivalent employees), and the NIH ADB.

This information provides a picture of the agency’s business performance across all administrative business

areas—a capability that was not available before the data warehouse was implemented. The data warehouse furnishes the users with information that helps them understand how their business is performing and enhances their decision-making process.

Price points out the value that NIH users are finding in the data warehouse/decision support system. “People are saving time and they’re very happy about that,” he remarks. “Instead of going through a lot of paper, they get quick answers online.” Price states that the agency’s strategy of providing two different querying capabilities—predefined and ad hoc—has been a success. “By providing as many predefined queries as possible, we’ve made it so users don’t need to know the data—they just need to know which question to ask and which button is related to it. This simplicity has made the data warehouse very successful.” While the predefined queries address the most common requests for information and knowledge, the ad hoc capability addresses the unanticipated querying and reporting needs of NIH business users. Advanced or “power” users at the NIH find the ad hoc capability particularly effective.

Contributing to the successful strategy of providing both predefined and ad hoc capabilities were the combined efforts of DCRT and BearingPoint. DCRT and the NIH Data Warehousing Committee kicked off the process by deciding which subject areas were to be brought into the warehouse and meeting with the various business units at the NIH to determine their user requirements. In addition to participating in the user requirements sessions, BearingPoint developed the predefined queries and reports. As the project progressed, BearingPoint's role expanded to providing data warehousing technicians, who performed data extraction and transformation, and evaluating various products on behalf of the NIH.

Judy Mahaffey, head of the Database Information Section, comments on BearingPoint's experience in data warehousing. "[BearingPoint] did a study of several transformation tools, recommended one for implementation, and then brought people in to use that tool in developing various layers of the warehouse."

She continues, "In addition to the transformation tool, [BearingPoint] did several other product evaluations, including OLAP [online analytical

processing] tools and Web-based training software." DCRT and BearingPoint are now teaming up to investigate another tier of support by integrating OLAP into the product suite.

ONE-STOP SHOPPING FOR THE NIH COMMUNITY

BearingPoint also helped DCRT train the NIH community on the data warehouse/decision support system. The training proved to be very effective, with an increasing number of NIH staff registering to use the data warehouse. According to Mahaffey, "Our registration rate has increased tremendously over the last six months," with over 1,100 staff members registered to date.

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It's no surprise that the data warehouse is so well received—it's a valuable source of information that allows staff to access data and get quick answers to questions on a wide range of subjects, including budget and finance, human resources, travel, procurements and market requisitions, property management, vendor information, and contracts. BearingPoint also provided training to DCRT staff to facilitate ongoing maintenance efforts and customer support.

Says Price, "The benefits of having BearingPoint help us on this project—in addition to providing supplemental staff when we didn't have enough in-house positions—include their knowledge of new technology."

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