

Information Technology Advisory Committee (ITAC)

Meeting Highlights
Montgomery, Alabama
September 10-12, 2002

Home Support Policy

This issue dealt with district/local computer support for telecommuters. The role of system administrators in this regard isn't well defined.

There's concern about the safety of computer support personnel going into people's homes. Rules for support of computers owned by employees, but used for official business aren't clear.

The Central Region has a policy that any home-use computer that has problems must be brought into the office for problem resolution.

The California District recently had an incident related to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. The requestor threatened to have personal computers impounded to retrieve information from them. In the absence of specific subpoenas, the office had their users certify that there wasn't any information related to the request on their home computers. Apparently, if a home computer is used for official business, then the USGS has the right to scan that computer, and the general public has the right to request information from that computer as part of the FOIA. USGS employees need to be aware of this policy.

The Regional Computer Specialists will draft a set of guidelines for off-site computer support by October 15, 2002.

Active Directory

The Department is pushing a DOI-wide deployment of Microsoft Active Directory Services (ADS). They probably won't provide any funding for this effort. There's no system architecture plan in place for this initiative. Microsoft, rather than DOI, seems to be the driving force behind a DOI ADS implementation. Microsoft is offering ADS as part of a licensing agreement for other Microsoft products.

There are two approaches to implementing AD – 1) Centralized; and 2) Distributed. Both approaches will be discussed in training at the ITEM 2002 conference. WRD has recommended a distributed implementation.

This will be discussed at an upcoming GIO Leadership Team (GIOLT) meeting. The DOI firewall current blocks NetBIOS. NetBIOS is a required service for ADS. Hence, under the current firewall policy, a centralized AD deployment would be difficult, at best.

HASS

Based on a recommendation by the Headquarters Review Team, the Hydrologic Software Support (HASS) program was dissolved. Please see the October 16, 2001 e-mail message from Bob Hirsch, Subject: "Dissolution of HASS in Water Resources Discipline" for details.

Software formerly supported by HASS is to be supported by appropriate discipline offices. The Office of Information is to maintain the HASS web pages. There is concern that WRD software isn't being adequately supported.

ITAC members are compiling comments from Districts and cooperators regarding software support issues.

Security

A team from IBM conducted a court-ordered scan of the USGS network. This action stemmed from the Cobell vs. DOI (BIA) case. The IBM "hackers" were able to gain access to systems at HQ in Reston. They did screen captures, took remote control of several servers, took control of printers, and were even able to control the voice-mail and phone system. Most troubling, they found evidence of Trojan-horse software installed by real hackers.

In their report, IBM put the responsibility for security problems squarely on USGS and DOI management. Despite IBM's apparent thorough work, the Court's Special Master fired them because the judge wasn't happy with their performance.

According to Kevin Gallagher, the USGS Chief Technical Officer, the weakest link in USGS security is the Powell Building. The local area network (LAN) in Reston is "flat" – meaning that it has no subnets. This LAN organization leaves little room for flexibility in implementing firewalls. USGS management has not allowed reorganization of the Reston LAN to date, because it would mean several periods of downtime for offices within the Powell Building, and occasionally for some field offices that connect to the Internet via Reston.

Bureau- and Department-level firewalls have been implemented in response to IBM's findings. The restricted access will probably be permanent. The Department may act to limit the number of Internet portals for DOI and its bureaus. It's possible that DOI and its bureaus will have to share as few as four Internet portals when the wide-area network redesign is complete. This is an about-face in recent wide-area network design discussions within USGS.

NWIS Future Plans

Susan Trapanese has been named as the new Chief of the NWIS Program.

At the time of the meeting, NWIS 4.2 was about to be released for general installation. A patch for this upgrade will be released in December 2002 or in January 2003.

Some concerns were expressed regarding availability and performance of NWISWeb. Susan stated that implementation of NatWeb and NWIS-RT will ensure availability of data, even during software upgrades. This will be phased in as early as late Spring 2003.

ITAC has recommended that NWIS move to a schedule for release of upgrades, rather than releasing when certain functionality has been developed. This would be similar to the strategy used by the AIS programmers. Susan said this approach would be discussed with major stakeholders.

Jessica Alvarez suggested that NWIS assist in developing an approach to include non-GOES telemetry data in NWIS-RT. Susan indicated that the NWIS-RT and

NWISWeb teams need to stay focused on first release of NWIS-RT, which was scoped for satellite/GOES-telemetered sites only.

BASIS+/FFS

The Branch of Financial Management – specifically, John Walbert – stated that the Bureau plans to stop automatic distribution of FFS reports via ftp by the end of this calendar year. He called ftp an old technology, and said that it took too much effort to keep up with changing field office ID's, passwords, and systems and to retransmit the FFS reports manually when something changes at the local level.

When asked, John stated that FFS reports wouldn't be available in electronic form in the near term. Field offices will have to set up a remote printer for FFS. Local administrative personnel log onto the NBC Mainframe and use Control-D (a software package) to specify which reports they want sent to their local FFS-configured printer. The systems staff is investigating adding an option to Control-D that will allow reports to be pulled into an Excel database in the future.

Either Crystal Reports or Oracle Discover can be used to generate ad hoc reports from FFS. These tools will allow retrieved data to be stored locally in electronic form. Such data would be suitable for use in spreadsheets. Guidance on the procurement and usage of these tools is forthcoming.

Eventually, expenditures reports will be available via BASIS+.

Proposed Bureau Web Redesign

1. Background
 - Ken Lanfear asked Nelson to take on the redesign of the Bureau's web pages
 - Ken stated that the Gateway to the Earth effort was in real danger of losing funding, and a redesigned Bureau web suite was needed to facilitate the incorporation of their products to date, and to show concrete progress by their effort
 - Interviews with users whose comments reflected issues regarding the current web design and rough draft designs were used as a base
 - Nelson asked the Enterprise Web Team to state their goals for a redesigned suite of web pages. They said their primary goals were to define ownership of the web suite, to determine a process for updates, and to identify the final review authority for new content. Not one member of the Enterprise Web Team identified helping people find content as a goal
 - The Enterprise Web Team was asked to help with programming and graphics. Every person on the team said they were unable to help at this time
2. The current Bureau Web Page prototype, which was finished in late July, is currently out for user testing:
 - Contractor Technical Review
 - Contractor Organization and aesthetics Review
 - Kiosk Review in a mall near an LL Bean Store/comments are being collected here by a questionnaire
 - The Design is being well received - Karen Siderelis indicated that the design is "elegant." Approval is imminent, pending receipt of review comments
3. An overview of Bureau Web Page Redesign was presented:

- The proposed redesign is on-line at – <http://nc.water.usgs.gov/b/>
- Heading: rotates thru five art products
- Five Most Recent News Releases dynamically displayed.
- Features may be put in by the Director's Office. An update mechanism for this has not yet been determined
- Footnote contains Disclamers, Legal Stuff, etc.
- Science: list comes from 5-year program planning review topics
- Products: lifted directly from current Bureau "products" web page
- Maps: Comes from Discipline Web Pages
- Data: Comes from Discipline Web Pages
- Ask USGS: No changes were made
- A-Z Index: Product of Enterprise Web Page. This is a Thesaurus.

USGS Information Architecture Report

ITAC comments from the Troy, NY meeting have lead to the restructuring of the USGS Information Architecture Executive Steering Committee. There will now be two members from each Regional staff and one member from each discipline and APS.

The information architecture team evaluates IT needs for each program. The types of data being used by each program – whether science or administrative -- are analyzed. Then the applications needed to manipulate these data are evaluated. Finally, an appropriate technology is recommended.

Any large IT investments (not yet defined, but at least in the hundreds of thousands of dollars for the full life-cycle cost) have to be evaluated by the Architecture Team. There's also a legal requirement to evaluate many programs at the Bureau level. The number of programs to be reviewed is at least 15.

Early estimates led the Information Architecture Team to request from Interior roughly \$1.7 million per year to conduct the evaluations. The industry recommended investment for this activity is 1-2% of the total IT budget.