Summary of 11ᵗʰ EuSpRIG conference, Greenwich, 15-16 July 2010

Morten Siersted's keynote address described the danger of "trust me" models, that people do not review because they cannot. F1F9 spreadsheets are built by an industrialised process by a team of 25 developers in India, to the FAST modelling standard that creates highly navigable and therefore understandable models.

Dean Buckner of the FSA described the effects of spreadsheet jockeys creating islands of automation in a sea of data. If he sees any spreadsheet operations that match up related data (similar to a database Join), he knows that is where to look for problems.

Tom Grossmann of USF presented the first side-by-side comparison of FAST, Operis and BPM's SSRB modelling standard. He had 45 minutes but could have done with three times as much! He stresses the basic quality principle "Find the best way to do something and do it always". Rather than a naïve expectation that there is one best way, he reminded us of the US Army saying that "there's not a right way or a wrong way, there's the Army way."

Thomas Lemon of Protiviti highlighted some key success factors from a recent project at a large client that set out to implement an EUC control framework. The project included remediation, training and governance and sustainability work streams. The client selected the ClusterSeven technology for compliance monitoring. Users register their spreadsheets into the compliance system. He stressed the importance of a clear executive mandate. He recommended that auditors should not only add controls but add value; and provide instructions on how to check.

Sebastien Dewhurst described EASA's authoring tool for creating a web based interface for multi-user access to a spreadsheet running on a server. To prepare the spreadsheet, interactive elements such as VBA pop-ups need to be removed.

Patrick O'Beirne described ways to "refactor" spreadsheets – ie to improve their understandability and maintainability without changing their functionality. He covered formulas, reference structure, data normalisation, and VBA refactoring.

Simon Murphy, developer, finds that the more rigid the IT approval process, the more people will work around it with spreadsheets. He sees a growing market for migration of VBA applications to C#. A rule of thumb for filtering out the trivial spreadsheets is to look for those which are still in use after a year. He recommends deskside expert support rather than classroom training.

David Colver of Operis spoke on "Names are natural". Symbolic names were adopted since the earliest days of computing to make code easier to write and read. He argues that the same principle applies to the use of range names in Excel. Operis models can have thousands of names. To check names you have to verify that the range referred to is the correct one for the meaning of the model. Then, as for any other formula, you check that the formula itself is correct. The Operis OAK tool can de-apply range names, a facility missing in Excel. They do that to remove the names from their models for clients who specifically request it.

Darren Miller of Sumwise showed how a web client can be used to specify a model using symbolic names for row and column items which can then be used for calculations without the need to copy master formulas into ranges. The syntax used is similar to the Table syntax in Excel 2007/2010. He is looking for beta testers to give them initial feedback.

Ralph Baxter of ClusterSeven spoke of the role of continuous monitoring to provide a quick health check on every spreadsheet that is saved to a server.

Angus Dunn asserted that a spreadsheet generator such as RingTailXL would be a safer way to specify and build spreadsheets than at present by hand. Along with Angela Collins, he proposed a set of standards categorised as Require, Desire, Avoid, and Ban.

Ray Panko posed a test for recommendations: "is the prescription safe and effective?" Suggest we should have same ratio of 40% of ALC is in Test, like MS. SW testing covers 2 weeks training in MS. Humans find 56% of defects, software tools 0.5%. We're teaching new dogs old tricks.

Grenville Croll presented a retrospective analysis of a 2001 spreadsheet that modelled Real Options. He concluded that the models underestimated the stochastic nature of the market and the buyers overpaid for the options.

Mary Pat Campbell, an actuary, requires users to leave a spreadsheet in a fit state for others; or for yourself one year later. Consider the plight of new management taking over, having to justify the previous teams' models to the auditors. She recommended training in Excel, systems thinking, problem recognition and solving.

Dermot Balson's paper also required that spreadsheets should be created with others in mind, nit just the original creator. "Make it easy to check and maintain, and safe to use."

Ruth McKeever of StoRC won the ISACA student prize with a paper that provided evidence that the use of range names hindered the debugging performance of novices. This is because any feature that reduces error visibility hinders the perception of those who are not aware of the design tradeoffs in such techniques.

Ben Rittweger of Athlone Institute of Technology presented a survey of spreadsheet risk management practices in organisations in Ireland. 59% claimed to have controls on access and validation.

Françoise Tort of ENS Cachan provided a set of principles to design a curriculum for teaching spreadsheets. A study had shown that students did not master basic spreadsheet concepts but rather acquired habits and routines. She recommended exploring unusual situations, implementation options, and quality.

Andrea Kohlhase of DFKI Bremen discussed the use of semantic technology for assessing spreadsheets. Their institute DFKI created SACHS, a help system for their financial control system in Excel. It provides explanatory text, colour coding, and dependency graphs.

Simon Thorne of UWIC presented a proposed MSc module in EUC risk management at UWIC with ten topics including spreadsheet errors and risk management.

Patrick O'Beirne, July 2010