EuSpRIG 2004 conference report

Risk Reduction in End User Computing

This amazing event showed our annual conference maturing in strength and content. We were fortunate to have it in a beautiful lakeside location, and to have the benefit of professional organisation that was much appreciated. The number and quality of papers presented was higher than ever before. As a result, our previous two-half-day format was expanded to almost two days!

We began with a well-attended tutorial briefing by Ray Butler and Louise Pryor on Wednesday evening on "**Spreadsheets, their Use, their Problems and Risks**".

Dean Buckner of the *UK FSA* delivered the keynote address on "**Appropriate Control of User Development Solutions in the Banking Sector**". As a regulator, he sees many banks who do not know how dependent they are on end-user developed spreadsheet and database applications, and he described how some have suffered severe disruption when the IT administrators migrated systems without taking these thousands of "islands of automation" into account. His talk echoed David Colver's in that risk and impact assessment is needed for a wise choice of appropriate controls.

David Colver of *Operis UK* stimulated much interest with his talk on "**Spreadsheet Good Practice: Is There Any Such Thing?**" In this, he took the *Operis* two-day course in spreadsheet methodology, condensed it to a half hour, and then presented a counter-argument for each point. It made it clear that circumstances alter cases, and that "best practice" depends on the specific context in which a spreadsheet model is used.

Thomas A. Grossman and Özgür Özlük from universities in San Francisco presented "*A Paradigm for Spreadsheet Engineering Methodologies*". Tom's lively presentation style got the audience involved in a thought-provoking session. So let me now pose Tom's question to you, the reader: "What do see as the value proposition of spreadsheet risk management?" If that sounds like American management jargon, try "**What's the benefit of imposing more controls on spreadsheet development and use?**" To start you thinking, how about "Stay out of jail by being able to demonstrate for SOX purposes that material risks are managed."

Ralph Baxter of *Cluster Seven* presented "**Auditability and other Benefits Derived from a Temporal Dimension**". The idea of change monitoring, as described in the XiGence system, was new to some delegates. Recognising the difficulty of imposing controls, many were interested in at least keeping a close track on what changes are made to spreadsheets on a server.

Louise Pryor's talk on "**When, why and how to test spreadsheets**" explained the difference between structural review which audit tools do and dynamic testing, which her product Xlsior assists. She described the key concepts of unit test, system test, and regression test.

Hilary Emmett of *Decisioneering* spoke on "**Identification of logical errors through Monte Carlo simulation**". This is also a form of dynamic testing, where the range of values used in simulations can stress spreadsheets and show their weak points.

Markus Clermont of the *University of Limerick* presented "**A Toolkit for Scalable Spreadsheet Visualisation**". This is a Gnumeric plug-in that looks for structural similarities in spreadsheet formulas, to get a clearer idea of its overall organisation, devise auditing strategies, and assist in fault tracing.

Sabine Hipfl of the *University of Klagenfurt* presented "**Using Layout Information for Spreadsheet Visualization**". This took a different approach to Markus Clermont in that it looked for data patterns that might show more clearly blocks of related information. A comment from one of the delegates indicated that she might also use blank rows and columns to help delineate areas.

Andrej Bregar of the *University of Maribor* presented "**Spreadsheet Models Complexity Metrics**". This applied and adapted conventional software engineering complexity measures to the spreadsheet application. He used concepts of distance, dependencies, and logic branches to show how one might measure how complex and difficult a given spreadsheet is.

Simon Thorne of the *University of Wales in Cardiff* won the student paper prize with "**A novel approach to formulae production and overconfidence measurement to reduce risk in spreadsheet modelling**". This study produced data to show that when given an English description of a calculation, people made fewer errors when producing data to illustrate a correct result, than to create the formula itself.

Garry Cleere of the *ECDL Foundation* presented a draft version of a new syllabus for "**Spreadsheets Good Practice**" and invited comments and contributions from the delegates. This should stimulate some debate!

Karin Hodnigg of the *University of Klagenfurt* presented "**Computational Models of Spreadsheet-Development: Basis for Educational Approaches**". This probed into the different meanings that spreadsheet operations have, and how they can confuse new users. For example, a cut-and-paste operation has different effects from a copy-and-paste.

John Nash of the *University of Ottawa* described the recent developments in his research project "**TellTable Spreadsheet Audit: from technical possibility to operating prototype**". Like the ClusterSeven product, this tracks spreadsheet changes; by contrast, it works in Linux and is strictly server-based.

Gary K. Arakaki could not attend to present "**XlStruct: A Tool for Building Structured Error-Resistant Spreadsheets**" but Simon Thorne stood in for him.

In the panel session at the end, we agreed that we needed to do more to promote EuSpRIG. Several speakers from prominent consulting and technology companies offered to mention the next conference in emails to their user base of many thousands of modelling users.