Teaming Up Resources With the INFORUM® Virtual Center To Manage Air Force Research Projects

Tinker Air Force Base is the home of the Air Logistics Center (ALC), the worldwide manager of aircraft, engines, missiles, software, and avionics. Located in Oklahoma City, the ALC manages and supports a vast inventory of aircraft and jet engines. A new ALC-related initiative at Tinker is the Center for Aircraft & Systems/Support Infrastructure (CASI). The CASI program leverages the knowledge and expertise of faculty members from Oklahoma's colleges and universities on several multidisciplinary project-oriented teams to help the Air Force solve critical technology problems.

"In the past, we focused on harnessing the expertise of professors in engineering disciplines," said Wayne Jones, division chief, Science and Engineering Division, Technology and Industrial Support Directorate. "But now our focus is expanding into business areas – enabling us to include business-based analysis, return on investment, and other metrics that quantify the bottom-line benefits and value of each project.

Dispersed Project Management

The CASI program grew significantly during the summer of 2002, with 19 projects distributed among professors and students across five state campuses. These widely dispersed project teams created the need for a *virtual center* – a single, online work environment in which team members could share their findings, report their progress, and carry out discussions while the CASI program manager could track the status of each separate, time-sensitive project.

CASI built its virtual Center solution using the INFORUM Virtual Center*, a Web-based system that allows geographically dispersed project teams to access all the functionality and information needed to meet their goals. The virtual center solution proved to be quick to implement and easy to use. Today it enables the Air Force to collect requirements, grant projects, and manage task orders issued to the universities through a set of prime contractors. Meanwhile, project teams communicate and collaborate together in a single online work environment – enabling them to more effectively coordinate their activities and manage their projects.

Quantifiable Benefits

Approximately 50 users enter the CASI virtual center on a daily basis to upload their newest files, access up-to-date information, schedule meetings, share their calendar, and participate in discussion groups. To ensure security, the virtual center controls access based on a user's role and need for information. It is simple to make the center immediately available to any user while restricting what that user may see.

Before implementing the virtual center solution, all the project managers, professors, and team members involved in the CASI program relied on email as their primary communication vehicle. With no mechanism in place to capture and share the content of important conversations among the widely dispersed project teams, program management was compromised. It was confusing to keep track of a project and difficult to know what was the most current information.

The CASI virtual center changed all that. Now, all the activities and information associated with a particular project are organized in that project "room" within the virtual center. This greatly simplifies the management of each project for the prime contractor. "Now it takes much less time to quickly get a status on all 19 projects, and to identify what requires my immediate attention," says the prime contractor responsible for coordinating the CASI program.

The project teams designed their centers and structured their rooms without any help from information technology experts. End users praise the advantages of the centralized, secure, Web-accessible, *electronic library* for storing and managing documents. They especially appreciate the "*what's new*" feature that enables them to quickly identify the most recent information as soon as they log into the Center.

Project team members are often based at great distances apart. The online *conferencing, discussion groups, and messaging* capabilities allow easy and immediate communication among even the most geographically scattered team members – saving time and travel expenses.

Collaboration Yields Results

By partnering with the state's universities and colleges to solve critical technology problems, the CASI program is yielding impressive and tangible results for the ALC. These include reduced operational and maintenance expenses, longer aircraft service life, increased safety, improved system readiness, environmental compliance, reduced hazardous waste, and easier technology transfer to private industry.

Based on these results, the Air Force and its academic partners agree on the power of teaming up their resources. The CASI virtual center solution created the collaborative online work environment needed for that teamwork to succeed.

* *The INFORUM® Virtual Center is a Web-based work environment which brings unrivalled scalability, functionality, and flexibility to the virtual Center concept.*