Customer Story

> ❝ *With Seapine tools our team implemented a complete change management solution in days. More elaborate products took months of effort and still did not work.* ❞

Speeding Cancer Research with Seapine Tools

by Allan McNaughton

The search for a cure to pediatric cancer requires the dedicated efforts of researchers and multi-disciplinary cancer specialists around the globe. The CureSearch Children's Oncology Group (COG), a National Cancer Institute- supported clinical trials cooperative group, was established from the merger of the major pediatric clinical trials groups based in North America to maximize the benefits from this work. As a united team, COG develops and coordinates clinical trials for cancer treatments at more than 235 member institutions, which include cancer centers at major universities and teaching hospitals throughout the United States and Canada, as well as at sites in Europe and Australia.

These clinical trials target all major types of childhood cancer, including leukemia, Hodgkin's disease, lymphoma, neuroblastoma, sarcomas, and various types of tumors (central nervous system, kidney, germ cell, and liver). COG typically has 100 ongoing trials that enroll approximately 5,000 new patients each year. Tracking the progress of these patients, along with 35,000 childhood cancer survivors in active follow-up, requires collecting massive amounts of information from its geographically-dispersed member institutions.

Taking Control

Historically, the collection of this information was facilitated by the group's Remote Data Entry system (RDEs), COG's clinical-trials data-collection system. This workhorse allowed researchers to submit updates on the progress of study participants from remote locations. RDEs was a collection of individual custom programs written for each new study. Supporting new studies entailed the expansion of its databases, Web interfaces for data collection, and validation scripts to ensure data quality. Consequently, the period of time to bring each new study from development to release was more than 18 weeks.

To streamline this cumbersome process, COG's technical team—led by Ken Ingram, CIO—began development on the Enhanced Remote Data Entry System (eRDES), an entirely new set of tools that promised to reduce study implementation time to less than two weeks. Part way into this effort, the team needed to upgrade its tools to match the demands of an increasingly complex project. The first task was to put a formal issue tracking system in place.

"We started with a combination of email and a spreadsheet to track bugs," said Ingram, "but that approach did not scale well—it was too time-consuming. To improve the situation, we tried MetaQuest's Census issue-management system. However, after four months of effort, the team abandoned this project because we were unable to make it meet our needs. We were fortunate, shortly thereafter, to learn of Seapine's TestTrack Pro. Just two days after installing TestTrack Pro, we had a fully functional issue management system customized for our needs.

"Not only do we rely on TestTrack Pro for bug tracking, but we also use it to log customer support issues," noted Ingram. "This is achieved by configuring TestTrack Pro to automatically create new issues when emails are sent to our support address. The flexibility built into TestTrack Pro saves us both time and money because it eliminates the need to purchase and implement a separate help desk tool. These savings are especially important to a nonprofit organization."

CureSearch

Children's Oncology Group

> *"Surround SCM is faster than Visual SourceSafe. Getting the latest files now takes less time than before. We now can manage multiple builds per week."*

One Code Base, Two Products

"During our discussions with Seapine, we learned the company also offers a change management solution, Surround SCM. Version control was another thorny issue for our organization: we were using Microsoft's Visual SourceSafe, and the eRDES code base was increasingly difficult to manage. Most problematic was Visual SourceSafe's poor support for sharing classes between projects. The eRDES comprises a Windows desktop client that allows Research Coordinators to create study-specific forms and a Web interface that delivers those forms to trial participants. To maximize code reuse, the software is designed to let the client and Web application share common classes.

"Since updates to these applications are released on separate schedules, we needed a version control tool that supported multiple development streams. In our case, releasing software through Visual SourceSafe became an overwhelming task because it was difficult to have separate builds within a single project." Ingram's team found that Surround SCM was designed explicitly to overcome these issues. "The product offers a flexible branching model that lets us efficiently manage the eRDES code base. Surround makes it easy to specify which files are shared between projects and which are not.

We also use private workspaces to separate works in progress from the mainline; designated changes are promoted to the integration workspace, which is then branched to create release candidates."

In addition to solving the code-sharing problem, Surround SCM delivered other unexpected benefits. "Before Surround SCM, the deployment of eRDES from development to quality assurance and then to production was tedious. Preparing a build package (all the bits that need deployment) took at least two days. We now use Surround SCM to manage deployments because it ensures that no file is left behind—files from a tested branch are simply retrieved from the Web server's root directory. Our developers also found that Surround SCM is faster than Visual SourceSafe. Getting the latest files now takes less time than before. All of this means increased productivity and shorter cycle times—we now can manage multiple builds per week."

Flexibility and Value

"Another pleasant surprise is the ability to run TestTrack Pro and Surround SCM in an accessible environment using Windows clustering services. We have two servers that run the Seapine tools: one is configured as the active server and the other as the passive—both nodes access application data on a shared SAN device. When a failover event occurs, the Microsoft cluster manager switches to the passive server, which brings our tools back online. Although Seapine does not formally support this environment, we got it working in a matter of hours. With the Census product, which is supposed to support failover configurations, we never were able to get it to work.

Lessons Learned

- Choose substance over flash. Says Ingram, "Seapine tools have the features you really need, not the ones you don't. The tools are so simple to use that we had them customized for our environment in days without special training or professional services."

- Make flexibility a priority. "We use TestTrack Pro to track both bugs and customer support issues. This saves us time and money because it eliminates the need to purchase and implement a separate help desk tool. In addition to versioning files, Surround SCM does double duty as a Website deployment tool."

- Value customer service. "Seapine is very responsive. It is refreshing to find a vendor that backs up its products with excellent support. We received two hot-fixes to a technical issue in a very timely manner."

"Seapine tools are an exceptional value and are delivered by a company that stands behind what it sells," Ingram concluded. "The responsive support we receive illustrates how much the company cares that its products address our needs. TestTrack Pro and Surround SCM are not the flashiest tools around, but they work exceptionally well, which is what we care about. With Seapine tools, our team implemented a complete change management solution in days. More elaborate products took months of effort and still did not work."

About the Author
Allan McNaughton is a patent holding technologist and veteran writer with more than fifteen years of industry experience. He is the president of Technical Insight, LLC, a firm specializing in the composition of high-technology white papers. Mr. McNaughton is a frequent contributor to leading technology publications and can be reached at allan@technical-insight.com.