

DEAMS leaders define a 'stabilized environment'

Number and severity of defects, system performance top list of standards

*By Cathy Segal
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Australian social researcher Hugh Mackay once asked, "No one welcomes chaos, but why crave stability and predictability?"

It's probably a good thing he was nowhere near the Defense Enterprise Accounting and Management System when he posed that question because he likely would have received a chorus of answers from every direction.

As DEAMS users know, system stability has been a problem. And if there's one thing that users, functional and program managers, and senior leaders alike crave it is stability.

Stabilization is an oft-stated goal for DEAMS but what that actually means was never defined ... until now.

It wasn't as if DEAMS officials didn't have any idea of the kind of system they envisioned. No, it has taken a lot of discussion between leaders and partners to apply their definition to the system as we know it.

The system as we know it requires numerous patches and workarounds. But although it may not be apparent to all end users, those problems have never been among acceptable standards from which to work.

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“DEAMS is capable of much more than we have seen so far,” said Russ Mielke, DEAMS Functional Manager. “I think users would appreciate it more if they didn’t have to put up with things like manual workarounds, incomplete reports, interface problems and system downtime. We’re going to fix those things before we deploy DEAMS to any more bases,” he said.

Users might define a stabilized system as one on which they can rely to do their jobs without the litany of problems they have faced over the past nine months. That is exactly the goal that DEAMS officials are working toward.

Among the items on the top of the stabilization list is the acceptable level of defects, which are rated as Severity Levels 1 (urgent), 2 (high), 3 (medium) or 4 (low). Many of the fixes for these defects involve system patches that require DEAMS to be shut down temporarily. Although maintenance patches are regularly scheduled for the middle of the night, some emergency patches take place during duty hours, forcing users off the system for unexpected downtime.

Severity 1 defects are described as those that prevent users from accomplishing essential capabilities, jeopardize safety or prevent other critical requirements. Users cannot continue their work until the problem is resolved. Severity 2s adversely affect essential capabilities with no known work-around

solutions; work-arounds are available with Severity 3 defects, so functionality may continue while these problems are resolved. Severity 4s inconvenience or annoy the user but do not affect required operational or mission-essential capabilities.

In a stable environment, Mielke and the DEAMS leadership call for zero Severity 1 defects, no more

than 12 Severity 2 defects open at any given time with none over 10 days old, and 60 or less Severity 3 defects open at any given time with none over 30 days old.

A stabilized environment also encompasses functional and system performance issues, Mielke said.

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DEAMS Functional Manager***

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“It is imperative that our end users are able to process major functions such as billings, end-of-month closeouts, and time and attendance using standard checklists without major deviation,” he said. They also should be able to generate and distribute complete financial reports, obtain balances on time and without manual intervention, reconcile and balance daily business, and process transactions without significant manual intervention, he added. In addition, the plan calls for receiving and transmitting inbound and outbound interfaces as scheduled, accomplishing error correction within 24 hours, and ensuring systemic financial controls are in place; i.e., balanced general and subsidiary ledgers.

Stabilizing system performance also means ensuring that DEAMS is available to users during business hours (6 a.m. to 6 p.m. EST) 99 percent of the time and that scheduled system processes are completed as outlined in service-level agreements.

“As you can see, our definition of a stabilized system fits very well within the scope of what users might expect but we have a way to go before we get there,” Mielke said. “In the meantime, we appreciate their efforts to help us identify problems and their patience while we solve them.”

DEAMS will deploy to the rest of the Air Force when DEAMS leaders can live by the words of author Tom Robbins: “True stability results when presumed



File photo

Russ Mielke updates the DEAMS Functional Office staff during an all-hands meeting.

order and presumed disorder are balanced. A truly stable system expects the unexpected, is prepared to be disrupted, waits to be transformed.”

FMO clarifies DEAMS Help Desk role

The survey conducted by the Defense Enterprise Accounting and Management System following Spiral 2 deployment revealed some misunderstandings about the role played by the DEAMS Help Desk.

While initial survey data indicated generally favorable opinions of the help desk, later analysis of written comments showed that some users expect more than the Help Desk can reasonably deliver.

The government lead for DEAMS Sustainment, Terri Drees, emphasizes that the primary responsibility of the help desk staff is to receive and log trouble tickets, and then assign them to subject matter experts.

“Members of the help desk staff would love to be so proficient in DEAMS that they could resolve issues on the spot,” said Drees, “but that’s not realistic nor is it their primary role.”

While some issues can be addressed with a reminder of a procedure or reference to a training guide, most are complex and require more time and expertise than the help desk staff can provide.

Tickets that involve accounting functions such as procure to pay; general accounting; project accounting; property, plant and equipment; orders to cash; or Oracle Time and Labor are routed to SMEs in the DEAMS Functional Management Office in Fairview Heights, Ill. Issues involving technical system problems may be routed to the Global Combat Support System-Air Force or another technical team partner. Any issues requiring system patches are routed to the system integrator.

Dee Mix, the help desk lead contractor, points out that user experience with the help desk was probably somewhat different during Spiral 1, which involved only commitment accounting.

“In Spiral 1 there was only one legacy system and five or six forms to process, and our customers were all from Scott Air Force Base and its tenants,” Mix said. “Any problems that arose then were much easier to resolve.”

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“Now we have 36 systems that interface with DEAMS and we handle 600 to 700 contacts per week from not only base callers but also from those interface partners and the Defense Accounting and Finance Service center that supports DEAMS,” she continued.

In between calls from DEAMS customers, the help desk staff helps the FMO functional teams research problems and solutions. Their daily association with new and existing issues helps connect the dots for the experts working to stabilize and improve the system.

Drees pointed out that the help desk is only one of the resources available to DEAMS users. Unit experts designated as DEAMS Organization Liaisons at Scott Air Force Base and members of the User Assistance Task Force within DFAS can provide over-the-shoulder assistance and serve as a ready resource. They are financial subject matter experts who have been appointed to serve as conduits between the help desk and DEAMS end users, and serve as their unit’s first level of assistance. In addition to helping their peers, they use their unique perspectives to provide feedback and suggestions to program managers at the DEAMS FMO. A list of DOLs and DFAS task force members is posted under the help desk tab at www.deams.org.

On the survey, conducted Oct. 18-Nov. 5, almost all respondents (91 percent) indicated they know how to contact the help desk; 68 percent have asked

for assistance. Almost half (49 percent) agreed the help desk provides assistance in a timely manner; 9 percent disagreed. Overall, 42 percent agreed they were satisfied with the DEAMS Help Desk; 8 percent disagreed.

More survey results will be released as they are analyzed.



File photo

Dee Mix helps a walk-in customer at the DEAMS Help Desk.



Auditor visits FMO

Russ Mielke (right), updates Theodore J. Williams (center), Auditor General of the Air Force and head of the Air Force Audit Agency, on DEAMS during a visit to the DEAMS Functional Management Office Feb. 8. Williams also watched Scott Steber and Noel Denlinger demonstrate DEAMS. Looking on is Patsy Frisch (left), the Defense Finance and Accounting Service's Deputy Functional Manager for DEAMS.



Integrated planning

Michael Sorrento, Chief Information Officer for the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Financial Management and Comptroller, poses some follow-up questions during a Feb. 9 meeting at the DEAMS Functional Management Office. Sorrento met with functional managers and team leads to discuss DEAMS stability criteria; members of the DEAMS Program Management Office team phoned in. He emphasized the need for integrated planning between the FMO and PMO and a very disciplined approach to DEAMS development. “We need to focus on a ‘measured and careful’ methodology rather than speed,” he said. “We have to get it right up front rather than fixing it later in production.” Pictured left to right at the table are Sorrento; Russ Mielke, DEAMS Functional Manager; Kara Kessel, DEAMS program support; Randy Newcome, DEAMS Deputy Functional Manager for the Air Force; Nancy-Jeanne Rosenberg, Defense Finance and Accounting Service; and Maureen Childress, DEAMS Deputy Functional Manager for U.S. Transportation Command.

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