Client

National Institutes of Health (NIH), Office of the Director, Office of Strategic Coordination

Overview

The Office of Strategic Coordination (OSC) is one of 10 offices of the Division of Program Coordination, Planning, and Strategic Initiatives (DPCPSI) within the Office of the Director (OD). OSC is responsible for management of the NIH Common Fund, making funds available to the Institutes and Centers that implement the programs, and providing the NIH Director with information necessary to make funding decisions. To fulfill their goals and objectives, OSC required a mechanism to perform information dissemination and reporting related to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). Specifically, they were seeking:

- The ability to provide representation of budget data related to ARRA funded initiatives; and

- The ability to provide information and workflows to NIH constituents to request ARRA funding or co-funding research.

The automation component of the workflows was provided to LCG to address. This case study reflects this requirement.

Business Value

LCG assisted OSC in making the ARRA funding request and approval processes more efficient, while reducing the risk of missing requests due to human error and manual processes. The automation of approvals also provides visibility on status requests throughout the lifecycle.

Challenge

OSC required a solution to facilitate the process used by 27 Working Groups for pay plan requests and approvals. When Working Groups needed to submit a pay plan, they would download an Excel spreadsheet from the Query, View and Report (QVR), which is the reporting system for IMPAC II, and manually submit an email attaching the excel spreadsheet for approval. The multi-level approval process was error prone, consisted of long email trails, had no tracking mechanism in place for reporting of stages and approvals for each pay plan, and involved a long list of approvers, only a few of which needed to be involved for each pay plan. The risk of a pay plan getting lost in numerous emails was very high. Additionally, if one approver in the workflow didn't complete a step, there was no system in place to show status or alert of delays.

In addition, the OSC staff were manually updating the Strategic Initiative Databases (SID), the Grants Management system for Common Fund, with pay plan updates. If the status wasn't entered manually, stakeholders would have to wait until the updates appeared in IMPACII and other enterprise databases before a status could be received. OSC needed a way for system administrators to override any approver's rejection to pay plan, and to provide an explanation so that OSC admins would have more control over pay plan approvals within their office.

Solution

LCG addressed this challenge by automating the pay plan workflow approval process. We developed a SharePoint based workflow solution which automated the approval process using custom web-based screens, out-of-the-box SharePoint lists, and SharePoint workflow. This solution included a way for OSC admins to dynamically select the list of approvers before starting the workflow.

The custom forms and screens automatically acquire default data from existing repositories such as QVR, SID, and other SharePoint lists. Users can select from a drop-down list of Requests for Applications (RFAs) on the form. This allows Working Group members the ability to submit a new pay plan request with minimal effort. LCG used a Service Oriented Architecture approach to update OSC's grants management system, SID, for continuous updates to pay plan information. LCG also gave the ability to OSC admins to override an approver's rejections so that pay plan can still go through the rest of the workflow.

Once a Pay Plan request is submitted, the SharePoint workflow starts, and the request moves through the multi-level approval process. At each stage of the approval process, an approver's comments are added to the form. As the form progresses through the process, the Pay Plan stakeholders are notified via email notification of the status of the form. Once the request is approved, it becomes a pay list, the CAN# is updated automatically, and notification is sent to both the requestor and the appropriate Grants Management personnel at the IC level of the approved pay list. In addition, the SharePoint solution keeps track of the central location of the pay list file once it has been created. Justification documents can be attached to the pay list, and all related documents are stored together in the document storage.

Result

LCG delivered a streamlined, automated pay plan approval process with no paper trail or unattended emails. The solution provided OSC several benefits including:

- Flexibility to review the approval status along with comments from approvers at any given time during the approval process
- Automated notification to OSC Admins when any approver rejects the pay plan request
- Ability for OSC Admins to override the rejection of a pay plan
- Visibility via a central document repository of all pay plan approval comments associated with pay plans, enhancing search results and making reference easier
- Pay plan approval in as little as 24 hours