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Setting up collaborative tools for a 1000-member community

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The CTA (Cherenkov Telescope Array) consortium is developing a next generation ground-based instrument for very high energy gamma-ray astronomy, made up of approximately 100 telescopes of at least three different sizes. It counts presently more than 1000 members, out of which almost 800 have a computer account to use the “CTA web services”.

CTA decided in 2011 to use a SharePoint 2010 “site collection” operated by a subcontractor, as standard framework for collaborative tools. This system completed pre-existing installations of an InDiCo server, a MailMan mailing list management system, a MediaWiki instance and a Drupal content management system used by a community of 400 official users at that time. First actions were the unification of user logins in view of the expected increase of activity, by means of an LDAP directory, followed by the creation of an administrative user database for the consortium reflecting the up to date memberships of the groups from 178 institutes. Migration of existing data had to be carried out, as well as careful and persuasive user training.

Working groups and ad-hoc communities (countries, institutes) have parametrised the SharePoint “sub-sites” system for their needs, while the CTA-IT-support team, spread over several sites in Europe, has developed two major applications that were not available from SharePoint out of the box:

- a document management system for the consortium (RecordsCentre) and
- a conference and publication management system named after the committee in charge - SAPO (Speakers and Publications Office).

CTA uses a mixed “LAMP+WS” (Linux, Apache, MySQL, PHP, Perl, Windows and SharePoint) system at present to respond to user needs in an optimal way. Extensions by SVN and Redmine are foreseen and partly operational in a transparent way for CTA users. Further specific implementations like approval workflows for the engineering process are planned in SharePoint.

After two years of operation and interaction with an outsourced provider for the SharePoint services, we are trying to strike a balance of our choices and the resources needed to implement new requests and keep the existing system up, running and safe.

Primary authors: Mr RIVIÈRE, Adrien (Centre de Physique des Particules de Marseille, CNRS/IN2P3); Dr HOFFMANN, Dirk (Centre de Physique des Particules de Marseille, CNRS/IN2P3)

Co-author: CTA, Consortium (Heidelberg)

Presenter: Dr HOFFMANN, Dirk (Centre de Physique des Particules de Marseille, CNRS/IN2P3)

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