The SAS® User Group Community Activity
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ABSTRACT
Internal SAS User Groups are an effective and inexpensive way to disseminate practical information and technical content by meeting with peers who share the goal of getting more out of the SAS platforms, products, technologies, and resources available. Typically a SAS User Group is run by volunteers and is independent of enterprise management, who meet on a regular basis to discuss and share information on a variety of technical and user topics. This presentation discusses a summary of the experience and lessons learned creating and managing a SAS Users Group with the goal of providing an insight through experience.

INTRODUCTION
Whether a seasoned SAS software user with years of experiences to share or a newcomer looking to interact with other users, a Users Group is an excellent way to help get the most value from the SAS System. These groups can be found around the globe on the international, regional, local, in-house, and special-interest levels. Users groups offer participants a variety of benefits depending on the group's unique structures and activities. Participating in a group offers personal and professional benefits that can help increase efficiency and productivity through increased exposure to

1. New coding techniques
2. Analysis techniques
3. Other methods for using in-house SAS applications
4. Enhanced understanding of SAS's software and service
5. Networking and idea sharing with other SAS software professionals.

The more a SAS User Group works to offer something for each of its members, the richer potential benefits become for all its users. Before getting too much into the particulars of a Users Group, it would be beneficial to take a step back and review what it takes to create a Users Group.
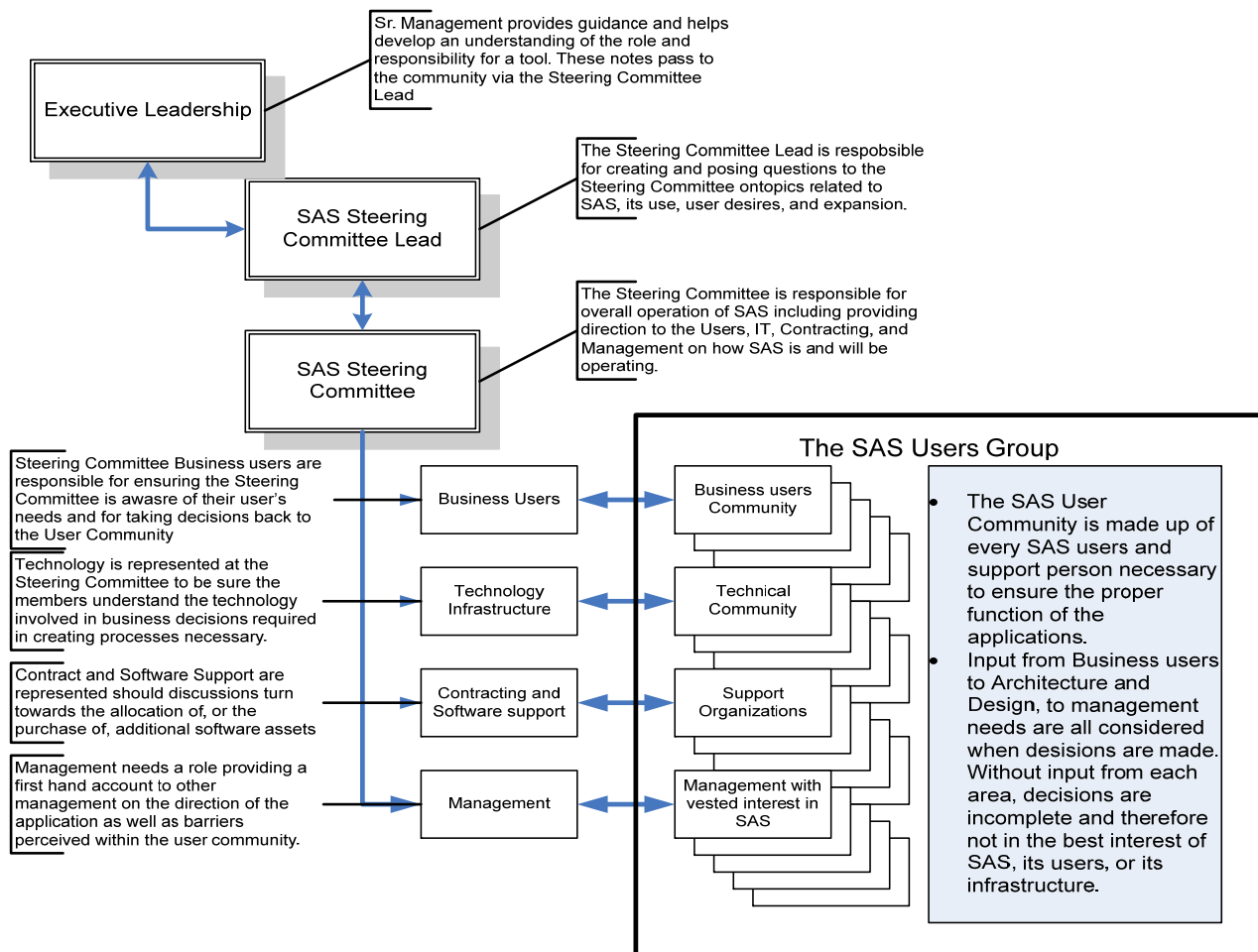
Steps to create a users Group

Step 1: Get SAS Involved right away

- SAS Institute Inc. provides a wealth of experience in helping organize a User Group. When considering the creation of a SAS Users Group, a call to your SAS account representative should be among your first actions.

Step 2: Creating a User Group

- Start with the end in mind – What are the primary objectives the User Group is being formed to meet? Is it to educate and consult? Is it to take advantage of peer-to-peer learning opportunities, or to better organize current informal get-togethers with other SAS and non-SAS Uses? What are the types of ideas, skills, habits that users want to get out of group meetings?
- Articulate the goal – Documenting and communicating what is expected to accomplish with a User Group is likely to draw support and help make the plan a reality. When appealing for volunteers and material resources, a simple charter or mission and goal statements can build confidence among others to support the goal.
- Develop a hierarchy to direct SAS developments within the organization. Establish a Steering Committee at the center, and designated responsible parties who support the daily experience of all SAS users.

The following diagram illustrates a SAS User Group beginning at the executive management level and flowing down to a steering committee and then to the members of the user group.

Sr. Management provides guidance and helps develop an understanding of the role and responsibility for a tool. These notes pass to the community via the Steering Committee Lead

Executive Leadership

The Steering Committee Lead is respobsible for creating and posing questions to the Steering Committee ontopics related to SAS, its use, user desires, and expansion.

SAS Steering Committee Lead

The Steering Committee is responsible for overall operation of SAS including providing direction to the Users, IT, Contracting, and Management on how SAS is and will be operating.

SAS Steering Committee

Steering Committee Business users are responsible for ensuring the Steering Committee is awasre of their user's needs and for taking decisions back to the User Community

Technology is represented at the Steering Committee to be sure the members understand the technology involved in business decisions required in creating processes necessary.

Contract and Software Support are represented should discussions turn towards the allocation of, or the purchase of, additional software assets

Management needs a role providing a first hand account to other management on the direction of the application as well as barriers perceived within the user community.

Business Users

Technology Infrastructure

Contracting and Software support

Management

The SAS Users Group

Business users Community

Technical Community

Support Organizations

Management with vested interest in SAS

- The SAS User Community is made up of every SAS users and support person necessary to ensure the proper function of the applications.
- Input from Business users to Architecture and Design, to management needs are all considered when desisions are made. Without input from each area, decisions are incomplete and therefore not in the best interest of SAS, its users, or its infrastructure.

To maximize the productivity and role of SAS in the organization, decisions made about the tool and the processes surrounding it will benefit from a cross-functional forum, which facilitates and encourages communications in all directions.

Don't re-invent the wheel

Find out if a SAS User Group already exists in your geographic area or company. If one does and after petitioning for your interests, that group still does not meet your goals, be clear to document what would differentiate your group from other similar groups. This will help potential members and speakers.

Make your purpose clear

Put together a simple mission statement. Be sure to record synopses of past meetings. This helps new users see how your SAS User Group could be useful and relevant to them. Consider keeping 'SAS' in the SAS User Group name – this creates immediate recognition as to the purpose.

Attract Members;

Users of SAS products are the most obvious target audience. Managers of SAS users, customers of SAS-tool outputs, and general management are also key constituents who can benefit from exposure to the issues facing both SAS users, the colleagues responsible for supporting processes, and technical infrastructure. Getting management interested in improving the User Groups' understanding of SAS tools potential contributions and limitations is a big win, since that constituency, as a customer of SAS outputs, influences if not ultimately holds budget purse strings. Attempting to cultivate diversity within the audience, while maintaining clarity of purpose can be tricky, however it can also enhance support for and enrich contributions to the goal of the Users Group.

Monitor Finances

Detail and plan for the costs associated with running the group. Typical expenses may include room rentals, equipment, refreshments, advertising, postage, speaker expenses, and Website administration. Failing to monitor the budget and plan future costs can cause immediate and long-term challenges. Consult with your SAS Representative as they have great tips for SAS User Group budget planning and management.

Communicate!

User Groups are unique in the community space because they focus on and promote face-to-face meetings as their primary mode of interaction. Set up remote-conferencing for off-site participants if necessary and if at all possible. Online community activities (such as newsgroups, chats etc.) can augment meeting interaction (and visa-versa). When considering using the Internet, research if it is possible to integrate your site into an existing site if that makes the most sense and will get more traffic. A SAS User Group Website should be a structured portal, which contains content (e.g. meeting notes, presentations, FAQ's, schedule, etc.), references to existing resources and

useful tools for members, partners, and vendors. It is also a good idea to provide a place on the Website for members to provide feedback on speakers, topics, content etc. Consider setting up an e-mail address for your User Group.   The email address may be for general info or other types of requests and communications. A SAS HELP DESK e-mail provides a one-stop address for anything SAS related and removes the need for SAS users to search for the correct venue to ask questions or find resources related to SAS. From code reviews to topics for Users Groups and anything in between, users only need a single contact point to get their information across.

Organizational structure and roles

Some User Groups have a President or Lead, while others have a Board of Directors. To some degree, it will be necessary to formalize and document each role, their responsibilities, how the roles are filled, and the duration of the appointment/election. A common path consists of a Lead Person and a Steering Committee. The Leader is responsible for forming the context around the monthly Steering Committee meetings and keeping the Steering Committee on task. While it is the responsibility of the actual Steering Committee to shoulder responsible for making all business relates decisions about SAS.

Other roles to consider identifying and filling are
- A meeting facilitator (usually the President/Lead): Keeps the meeting moving and on track.
- Recorder: Responsible for documenting the meeting minutes. It is not unheard of for the person in this role to change frequently (meeting to meeting). It is important to publish meeting notes on the SAS User Group Website (according to whatever guidelines the SAS User Group has adopted) for the benefit of those who could not attend and for enabling online searching.
- Roles like Web master, speaker organizer, topic list organizer and partner liaison may emerge as needs arise. Depending on what the group agrees upon, the people in these roles may change frequently or infrequently but either way, it is a good idea to periodically rotate through the SAS User Group membership.

Adopt guidelines;

It may sound bureaucratic, but having a documented and published set of guidelines helps proactively deal with disputes and misunderstandings as your group evolves and its members, officers and leaders change. Without consistency of core purpose, fluctuating fancies dictated by changes in Steering Committee leadership can dissolution segments of the user community.

Step 3: Getting the Word Out

We're Here!

Widely and repeatedly publicize your meeting schedule and topic list. Post this information on the Website. Refer to it in e-mails sent to members and to potential users that have been identified within the company. Other methods of getting the word out about the group might include a link in online postings and/or post it on local bulletin boards in libraries, break rooms, or other areas users gather for other reasons. Consider advertising in any company-supported media such as bulletins if you have the budget to do so. Make sure the locations for User Group meetings are easy-to-find. Make every effort to sync up with other User Groups as this may result in collectively larger group can offer a much broader range of topics, meeting locations etc. Also when it comes to securing speakers, larger groups find it easier to secure top speakers by enabling them to book a tour of User Groups at one time.

To help non-members find your User Group, it is important to register your User Group with SAS. Please contact your SAS Support Representative to learn more about how to accomplish this. It may take a bit of time, but having SAS involved up-front greatly improved your chances of success in establishing a successful users group.

Speakers speak and also listen

Keep in touch with speakers who have presented at the SAS User Group meetings. After hosting a speaker, send a thank you note in a follow-up email and include a link to the Website. While on speaking tours, they may mention your group to other audiences. Make it easy for them do so. Periodically send notifications when your group hosts a speaker or topic of particular interest. A speaker may want to become a member.

Step 4: Preparing for the First Meeting

Prior to your first face-to-face group meeting, consider sharing the above steps with the group. This will help to iron out any initial issues and to take the temperature of the fledgling User Group. The results can then be published and used as the agenda for the first meeting. In addition to preparing the agenda for the first meeting, remember to not only focus on the content and flow of the meeting, but also intangibles that will make the meeting flow. These include but are not limited to:
1. Breaks: Always remember to schedule these.
2. Training/Product/Company presentation: Cover a tool/technology that is pertinent to the group. It may be an update on existing info or on something brand new. It may also be a visiting speaker.
3. Key point regarding capturing the discussion.
4. Consider capturing your notes so they can be shared on your Website and in your newsletter.
5. Always facilitate and encourage an open discussion to find out what attendees are looking to get out of and contribute to the User Group.

The First Meeting

Ten items to consider when organizing the first meeting to help it go more smoothly:
1. Introductions and informal conversation: It is always a good idea to give people a chance to do this and it's a great icebreaker before the formal meeting starts.
2. Housekeeping announcements:
3. Welcome new members
4. Financial updates (if necessary)
5. Event/meeting updates
6. Location updates
7. Topic list updates
8. Recruitment of speakers
9. Website/newsletter updates
10. Any other group-wide issues which need resolution

Member presentation

This is a good way for members to learn about each other and to support the aspect of information sharing. Attempt to have an internal speaker present a project, idea, publication, or any topic they feel comfortable discussing to the larger group that they find interesting. Sharing ideas in formal presentations allows all users to see the problem faced, methods of researching causality and solutions implemented using SAS.

Step 5 and Beyond:

This is a Users Group after all; the purpose is to bring users together in a social setting and offer academic, research, company issues, and general knowledge as a backbone for future meetings. Don't get so involved in the details that the three keys to success are forgotten:
- Have fun and keep it thriving
- Getting the word out and promoting the event
- Successful meetings make successful User Groups

Make sure the topics to be discussed have a broad appeal to the members and try to avoid focusing an entire meeting on just one topic. Effective presentations are integral to a thriving SAS User Group so make sure to gather member input regularly on how things are going.

Consider also including any of the following in your format:
- Ask the expert panel
- Live in-person presentations
- Utilize video and/or audio conferencing

Finding speakers

A top request by SAS User Group members is for quality presenters. Remember, quality presenters could be anywhere. Not that everyone is a quality presenter, but keep in mind that great presenters are all around. Maybe a co-worker would make a great speaker or possibly even a client or customer a user is working with. Users may also be

involved in a chat or on a newsgroup where there are knowledgeable posters whom should be consider. The key is to be sure speakers can relate to all levels of users.

Retaining members

Sometimes member retention is the most challenging task for a User Group; especially since most if not all members are volunteers and may have many other events vying for their time. Here are a few recommendations to address this:

- Create a level of consistency with respect to date/time/location. Though these may change at times, the ability to remain consistent goes a long way toward keeping members engaged. Also keep in mind that if a SAS User Group only plans to meet a couple of times a year, it will most likely not be considered worth investing time in.
- Well-planned meetings are very much appreciated by the attendees and convey solid commitment for any newcomers who may be attending.
- Some User Groups have polling questions on their Website and ask members to vote on monthly topics, meeting times, and facilities to involve the majority of member in-group decisions.
- Give a user a reason to come back and visit your website. An online discussion forum or blog may be an excellent way to keep people returning to your site, where they can also see the agenda for the next meeting.

Success starts at home

Fundamental to the long-term success of a SAS User Group is the ability for it to be self-sufficient. It is important to encourage and support an infrastructure and a set of processes that enable the SAS User Group to accomplish this. It is a worthwhile investment in the health and longevity of the SAS User Group to continuously be on the look-out for opportunities to improve a User Group's approach to funding, securing speakers, interacting with other User Groups, updated content etc. Also keep in mind that every group goes through a period of clarification and maturity, which should also be encouraged and supported as a vital part of the process.

With that said, as a strong SAS User Group, there will be partnering opportunities with other SAS User Groups resulting in win-win scenarios for all the groups involved. Such things as sharing best and worst practices, and directing users to the correct SAS User Group will start to become important tactics for keeping the entire SAS User Group ecosystem thriving. These meta-community investments only further benefit your SAS User Group on multiple fronts.

Patience and fun

It will most likely take a few meetings to smooth out logistical details and the channels of communication, but this is expected. These first few meetings are where members are deciding if the SAS User Group is worth their commitment and it is also where trust and relationships are being developed. Remain up-beat, committed and open-minded and it will be a fun and valuable experience for all.

Registering a User Group

The benefits to registering your User Group:

- First and foremost, your SAS User Group gains visibility. Many people use these registration sites to find a User Group. Many other sponsors, partner and vendor sites also link to these sites.
- User Groups that are registered may also have access to resources, trial software, speaker bureaus, newsletters, and product discounts provided by the registration sites.

Conclusion

An Internal SAS User Group provides a place where "like-minded" people within an organization can come together on a regular basis to share knowledge and experiences. Veteran SAS users share tips with newer users. Opportunity for vendors and users alike demonstrate products and pass copies of code to each other. In addition, an internal SAS Users Group is an ideal environment to make sure all SAS users understand upcoming changes, education opportunities, and have a venue to ask questions of the Group Leaders and Steering Committee. Most of all, the user group is a fun, non-threatening place to learn and share information about our favorite tools in SAS.

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