

SESUG Paper 154-2019

Developing and running an in-house SAS Users Group

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ABSTRACT

Starting an in-house SAS ® Users Group can pose a daunting challenge in a large worldwide organization. However, once formed, the SAS Users Group can also provide great value to the enterprise. SAS users (and those interested in becoming SAS users) are often scattered and unaware of the reservoirs of talent and innovation within their own organization. Sometimes they are Subject Matter Experts (SMEs); other times they are new to SAS but provide the only available expertise for a specific project in a specific location. In addition, there is a steady stream of new products and upgrades coming from SAS Institute and the users may be unaware of them or not have the time to explore and implement them, even when the products and upgrades have been thoroughly vetted and are already in use in other parts of the organization. There are often local artifacts like macros and dashboards that have been developed in corners of the enterprise that could be very useful to others so that they don't have to "reinvent the wheel".

INTRODUCTION

An in-house SAS users group can be of great value to an organization, especially a large, geographically dispersed, worldwide organization. The SAS users group has the following benefits:

- It can help identify valuable resources across the organization.
- It can help individuals with knowledge of SAS find kindred spirits.
- Since SAS has many products and features, it is unlikely that any one individual would have knowledge or mastery of all of them. A SAS users group will enable experienced SAS programmers to enhance their skills and their networks by identifying other SAS resources with complementary skills.
- It can help people who want to become SAS programmers learn about resources within and outside the company that can help train them.
- It can increase the organization's visibility within the SAS community, leading to more information about external resources available from SAS Institute and from other users groups.

There are many resources that can help with the formation and operation of in-house SAS Users Groups. SAS Institute can provide guidance and support and can help obtain speakers for the group. In addition, many of the regional SAS Users Groups provide help to local groups. For example, SESUG (SouthEast SAS Users Group) has a meeting of local groups at its annual conference and offers to arrange speakers for in-house groups.

Finally, if people setting up in-house groups reach out into their organizations, they will often find other SAS users who are eager to help. There will be people who are already active in outside groups who

would enjoy presenting a webinar, people who can design surveys, people who will help socialize the group via in-house social media and external media like Linked In, and people who will provide moral support and organizational backing.

IDENTIFY GOALS AND THE STRATEGIES TO REACH THE GOALS

Goals need to be identified in order to have a successful SAS users group. While the overriding goal is to provide value to the organization, the specifics of implementing that goal need to be identified. This identification is an iterative process, as ideas about how to achieve the goal will be proposed and tried, and then kept, modified, or abandoned based on results and feedback.

The following goals and strategies can be useful as a starting point. When implementing the strategies, some will prove to be more useful or easier to implement than others, but all are worthy of consideration.

- Goals
 - Establish a network of contacts for current and would-be SAS users in the organization to communicate with each other, learn more about SAS and its different products, and find out about available training opportunities.
 - Expand knowledge of any arrangements that the organization has with SAS Institute, so that people can take advantage of services that are already paid for.
 - Provide insight into the breadth and utility of SAS products.
 - Provide insight into the SAS products used in different technical environments within the organization.
- Strategies
 - Arrange webinars exploring different SAS topics that might be of interest to the organization.
 - Encourage people to publish tips, techniques, and SAS applications on internal databases and dashboards. This could also involve publicizing the databases and dashboards and their links.
 - Set up specific databases and dashboards dedicated to technical papers and demonstrations relating to SAS.
 - Help provide information about internal projects using SAS and about fellow employees with SAS skills.
 - Provide insight into the SAS products used in different technical environments within the organization.
 - Communicate SAS product licensing and availability within the organization and coordinate the connection of internal resources to the appropriate technical environments and support organizations.
 - Create SAS profiles that relate to SAS skills, for example SAS Enterprise Miner, SAS Enterprise Guide, and SAS Forecast Studio for a SAS Data Scientist.

IDENTIFY POSSIBLE MEMBERS

There are a number of ways that interest in a SAS users group can be both gauged and encouraged.

- If you are thinking of setting up a SAS users group, you might know others who could contribute to the effort, share the leadership, and make suggestions. They, in turn, might know other power users and you could begin to establish a core network to build upon.
- Many large companies have internal databases in which employees' skills are listed. These databases can be searched for the occurrence of people with skills identified as "SAS" or as any SAS products.
- If SAS products are installed on dedicated servers, the server administrators would be able to provide lists of users.
- If a central group is responsible for tracking installed software, a list of who has SAS on their personal computers could be obtained.
- A mass mailing can be sent to people in the organization asking who is interested in using SAS or is already using SAS, and who would be interested in joining a SAS users group.
- SAS Institute might be able to share records showing who in the organization has signed up for training or participated in conferences or other events.

IDENTIFY LEADERS

As mentioned above, those setting up a SAS users group probably know others who would be interested in helping out, building, and maintaining the group. Many of these people might have ideas that could be translated into events and activities for which they would be willing to assume ongoing leadership. Doing this can help increase their exposure in the organization, which is a career benefit that could further motivate them to be active leaders.

If the originators and leaders of the SAS users group make it clear that people who have energy and enthusiasm are welcome to participate in planning and make suggestions, they will usually find that people who can make a valuable contribution will step forward. They may be experienced SAS users who would like to expand their organizational footprint, they could be people who feel siloed and want to hook up with others with SAS expertise, and they could be people who would enjoy taking part in building an organizational group that will be both fun and valuable.

FIND RESOURCES

SAS Institute can provide advice and assistance when setting up an in-house SAS users group. The people at SAS have experience working with a large number of regional and in-house SAS users groups and can provide insights into best practices and guidance about what works and what hasn't worked.

Many regional SAS users groups provide a forum for in-house groups at the regional conferences and can help find speakers and, if necessary, meeting places. Meeting places have become less necessary for users groups in large, geographically dispersed organizations, as the meetings tend to be conference calls, webinars, papers in databases, and video conferences.

Conferences like the SAS Global Forum and regional users group forums provide an opportunity to meet individuals from other organizations that have SAS users groups. These people are usually happy to share tips and techniques.

Internal resources who have presented at conferences or written papers about SAS can be tapped to present at webinars, and the papers can be put into databases and dashboards and made available to the organization.

The following links can help people setting up SAS users groups learn more about available resources and guides:

SAS Support:

https://www.sas.com/en_us/connect/user-groups.html

https://www.sas.com/en_us/connect/user-groups/resources/register-users-groups-form.html

https://www.sas.com/en_us/connect/user-groups/resources/request-user-group-assistance.html

https://www.sas.com/en_us/connect/user-groups/resources.html

And for each regional group - SESUG as an example:

<http://www.sesug.org/main/>

http://www.sesug.org/main/MainDocuments/User_Groups_Best_Practices.pdf

http://www.sesug.org/main/MainDocuments/SESUG_User_Group_Support.pdf

ARRANGE AND PUBLICIZE EVENTS

Once an initial list of interested members/attendees has been created, the next step is to create an Email mailing list. It is also important to have a strategy for keeping this list up-to-date. Initial extracts of people with SAS skills or activities need to be updated and the results put into the mailing list, and resources who have left the organization need to be pruned. If people are forwarding the invitations or reports, the people receiving the forwarded Emails can be added to the list. In addition, if people mention that they've heard about the users group, make sure to add them to the mailing list.

As mentioned earlier, webinars are a good way to bring people together and inform them about different SAS features and activities. If the people in the organization have the ability to identify people that they want to track or follow, encourage them to follow the users group leadership and the user group databases. Also, check out the social media capabilities within the organization. There are often internal streams and Microsoft Teams that can be used to spread the word.

EVALUATE PROGRESS

After the user group has been in operation for a while, it is a good idea to see how well it is doing. Some indicators might be the number of people who attend webinars, the number of followers that the group has (in many organizations, the dashboards allow people to be identified as followers and the collections of artifacts count the number of downloads), and the number of people who reach out for help solving SAS problems or seeking SAS support or finding specialized resources.

In addition, a periodic survey of both the user group and the interested parties in the organization can help guide future activities. A survey can help find what people like about the group, what people want from the group, and what activities could be added to help the users group more completely aid the organization and its employees. A survey, combined with the methods mentioned in the previous paragraph, can also help the user group redirect its efforts away from those activities that don't seem to inspire much support.

CONCLUSION

An in-house SAS user group can help an organization in a number of ways. It can help identify interest in SAS products, it can help locate SAS resources in the organization, it can help reduce the isolation of SAS users that can cause valuable skills to be overlooked when required, and it can help organizational resources who have interest in SAS and/or SAS skill to find each other. There are many resources available from SAS and other organizations that can help the user group begin and continue, and there are often in-house resources who would be happy for the opportunity to help.

THANK YOU

I would like to thank Elizabeth Hamner and Cynthia Rowe of SAS Institute. Their help in setting up the group, giving advice, and finding speakers has been invaluable.

REFERENCES

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