

Comparison of SAS® Training Alternatives

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Introduction

Every SAS user at one time or another has a need for training. If you are the person responsible for arranging training for your site, or if you are just in need of training for yourself there is certainly a wide variety training options available.

Much has been written regarding needs assessments, and while this is certainly important, I would like to concentrate on the different formats and media choices available instead. Obviously the needs and volumes will have an impact on the choices that you make.

Inhouse SAS Support

My personal feeling is that regardless of whatever means you use to initially train people, the best sites are those that provide follow-up support. This doesn't need to be rigid and formal, but maybe just a name to call to answer questions. Almost every new SAS user needs some help to not only understand SAS, but also to wade through local conventions, data locations, JCL, tape handling, security issues and so on.

This of course is the whole idea behind Information Center consultants and obviously we want to staff these positions with people that are receptive to users and will be helpful to them.

Again this doesn't need to be formal, but I think new users need a name to call, and experienced users may need someone to bounce ideas off etc.

Another area to consider is to make sure adequate documentation is available. Training people can be expensive, where manuals are usually a bargain.

Inhouse Training

Internal training may consist of a very informal arrangement or it might be much more formal involving regular schedules, different media types etc.

Hand them the Books

Though not always the most effective training, simply letting the users read manuals might suffice in some cases. There are virtually no administrative or direct costs, but the employee is taking time and may be

bored soon. While reading technical manuals does sound attractive to most people, it might be adequate for casual users, or programmers experienced in other languages may do ok with this method.

Informal Local Stuff

Some of the best training I have attended have been very informal. One site regularly tapes their system programmers to give 1 hour explanations of topics such as what is the linkage editor etc. These can be good and in some cases require very little prep time.

Many sites have informal users manuals documents, local standards etc. Often these are little treasures in written form.

Formal Training

Sites that desire more formal training have several options. There are choices among the different media formats, but also you may need to choose between doing the development and training internally versus having an outside vendor do it.

Media Choices

The basic media choices are CBT, video training, or self-study, and instructor-led training.

CBT

Computer Based training is available from a variety of vendors. Some of the advantages of CBT are as follows:

CBT is interactive.

Students interact with the machine, and with system vendors the students are actually running SAS. This gives actual SAS experience while learning.

CBT can be accessed anywhere on the network at any time.

Students are free to start and stop at any time from their own workstations. Travel costs are eliminated. Sessions can be worked into other schedules. If you have a relatively small number to train over a large territory, CBT may make sense.

Some of the disadvantages of CBT:

CBT may not be cheap.

CBT vendors price CBT to recover their development

costs, and some are quite expensive to contract. Note carefully the limitations for number of concurrent students, number of workstations, workbook costs etc.

CBT may require additional resources.

Some CBT packages require a separate CBT authoring system to be installed. These can be expensive by themselves, as well as requiring support personnel to install and maintain. In any case there will need to be training coordinators to administer the CBT courses, User Ids etc. This can be a significant burden so evaluate carefully.

CBT is usually not site specific.

All the vendor packages will be generic and as such won't address local conventions. You can develop your own CBT modules to supplement, which is fine, but be aware that developing good CBT courses is a time consuming task.

CBT doesn't always hold student's interest.

Personally I like the idea of CBT and tutorials, but rarely have proceeded more than an hour or so into any one course. If I really needed to learn the material quickly I might stick with it, but I haven't in the past.

The is no human to talk to.

Since CBT is intended to be self-study, normally there is no one to ask questions of during the training. This can be minimized by access to coordinators and support personnel, but I see this as the biggest drawback to CBT, in that sometimes you just need to ask a real person a question.

Video Training

Video training offers some advantages and disadvantages as well. The courseware is available from multiple vendors and comparatively priced to CBT. Advantages to Video as I see it are:

Low equipment cost.

Most sites have video equipment that is relatively easy to find.

Vendor provided Video training is high quality.

The major vendors have professional video staffs and the technical material is usually pretty good.

Inhouse video training can be done as well, but to do it right can be expensive and time consuming.

Disadvantages

Video has some of the same problems CBT had, but

in addition there is no interactivity. Again the big problem is that there is no human to talk to. In addition the material usually cannot be site specific and can be boring as well.

Other self-study

Other choices for self-study might include simply making up a workbook and perhaps accompanying it with an audio cassette. This makes most sense for simple topics. I have seen some very nice live sessions developed inhouse.

Instructor-led Instruction

Having a stand up instructor is certainly a possibility. There again are choices of whether the development materials should be done in-house or contracted, and whether the actual training should be performed by company staff or contracted etc.

Advantages:

A live person is available.

The instructor is available to answer questions, change the pace as needed, provide war stories and experiences, and hopefully enhance the class. The instructor can adjust the pace as needed and provide extra attention as required.

Having a lively instructor can make the training much more interesting by using humor and giving suggestions for possible applications.

Good materials are available.

The vendors doing SAS training need to keep up with the software and while there is a wide range of quality available, generally the quality is quite good. Different vendors make their SAS training materials available in trainer's kits if you want to do your own, which is usually the same material used by the vendors for their contract work.

Disadvantages

Humans can be expensive.

It does cost money to send people away for training. Having your own instructor onsite is a commitment and to bring an outside instructor costs as well.

There are some things that can be done to minimize these costs. Obviously if you have only a few people to train it might make sense to send them to public training. If there are lots of people to train, bringing an instructor to the students is better.

A very good compromise to all of the above options is to consider consortium training. A group or site that has training facilities offers to host a training session

exchange for a few free seats. The vendor that provides the training sells the remaining seats at a price usually lower than public training.

Most of the vendors handle the administrative details such as registration etc. This arrangement is a win-win-win situation for everyone. The host gets free training. The other students get local training at reduced rates and of course the vendor gets the work. This is an especially attractive arrangement for organizations that can't justify a full class on their own, but also makes sense for user groups etc.

A Mix of Options

It may well be that a mixture of options may be in order. You may want to do your own introductory training and send people out for advanced topics. Or you might use video or CBT and call in a vendor as needed.

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