

SAS® Institute Quality Partners Who Are They ?

Loretta Jo Schlatzer

The Quality Partner™ Program was established in the Spring of 1995 and announced at SUGI '91 in Orlando, Florida. The goal of the program at that time and through today remains the same: To support and assist independent consultants whose **primary** business is providing SAS® consulting services and SAS expertise to the user community. This program has grown to include over 180 consulting organizations in the United States and over 30 in Canada. A similar program in Europe brings the total number of Quality Partners worldwide to approximately 250.

The Institute began the Quality Partner Program in order to identify independent consultants and consulting organizations with proven SAS expertise and to establish a cooperative relationship with those individuals and/or companies who have made a commitment to SAS software. This includes establishing a more formal relationship with organizations that have proven quality development skills and expertise in various applications areas as well as those with a history of providing quality SAS software support.

In addition to the above, each consulting organization must meet the criteria listed on the Quality Partner Program Features List. This criteria includes:

- Minimum of five years SAS experience
- minimum education requirements
- Institute Sponsor
- Customer References

Although applicants must meet all requirements, special emphasis is placed on the sponsorship criteria. An Institute sponsor must have knowledge of the applicant's SAS expertise, the services they provide and their reputation in the industry. Sponsorship often involves arranging a special meeting so that the sponsor (an Institute employee) may learn more about the applicant's expertise, skills, projects they have worked or are currently working on and for what companies. This meeting helps to determine an applicant's:

- Technical capabilities
- Product knowledge
- Support of the program and its' goals and objectives
- Commitment to SAS software

A Business Plan describing how an organization plans on utilizing the partnership affiliation is also required of applicants.

Once in the program, Quality Partners must continue to meet additional criteria in order to maintain their approved Quality Partner Status.

This criteria includes:

- Attendance at SAS training courses
- Attendance at user group meetings
- Positioning of SAS software
- Providing new references
- Support of two or more Institute initiatives
- Providing a designated contact

Quality Partners play an ever increasing role in the Institute's business model. As a result, the Program was recently modified in order to include larger consulting organizations. Originally, designed to support consulting organizations with annual revenues of under \$5M, as of April 1998, any consulting organization meeting the criteria outlined on the Quality Partner Features List may participate in the program. This business decision was made in order to develop a closer relationship with consulting organizations who provide quality SAS expertise, regardless of their size and to ensure similar benefits are made available to them. The inclusion of larger consulting organizations assists the Institute in meeting the demand for quality SAS support services. This means the Program's goal of encouraging growth and high quality SAS consulting resources is now available to larger consulting firms. In addition, this recent expansion better aligns the various partner programs in place around the world.

Benefits received as a result of the expansion include:

- Increase in visibility
- Increase in delivery capabilities
- Improved quality of services provided
- Incentive for larger consulting organizations to rededicate their commitment to SAS software

Quality Partners may take advantage of several benefits* of the Program. These include:

- Use of the Quality Partner Logo
- Press Releases
- Access to Technology
- Education Discount
- Publication Discount
- Access to information posted to the Quality Partner Listserv
- Special QP Software Package
- Entry on the Institute's Intranet and public web pages

*Benefits are tied to the size of the partner organization. Partner size is calculated in terms of the number of SAS consultants and/or the partner's SAS-based business volume. Likewise, there is a scalability factor in place in regards to maintenance criteria as well. Subcategories have been established for internal use only and are used to ensure proportional commitment/support of each Quality Partner organization.

The Quality Partner logo is an important tool and one of the most important partner benefits. It has become synonymous in the user community with quality SAS expertise, and is viewed as an 'endorsement' of the partners products and services.

Quality Partners have proven quality development skills and expertise in various application areas and each brings an expertise to the partnership that is unique to their business. A Quality Partner Profile Questionnaire was created in order to identify each partner's SAS "profile" and to better understand and identify each partner's business and subject matter strength. The information obtained from the questionnaire is available via the Quality Partner Registry. This registry is available on the World Wide Web at:

<http://www.sas.com/partners/quality/NAqp/sort/intro.html>

SAS software users interested in obtaining expert SAS software support are able to review consultants by region or expertise. This on-line registry is another important promotional tool for Quality Partners and has helped to assist those users in need of quality SAS support.

The benefits provided to Quality Partners help to encourage partners to learn the Institute's newest technology. By working in partnership, Quality Partners receive information and training on new technology which, in turn, is then made available to those sites where they are providing services.

Feedback on the program indicates SAS customers are receiving high quality assistance and are getting excellent added value SAS solutions.

As part of the Institute's worldwide network of business partners, Quality Partners and Alliance Partners have expressed their desire for continued knowledge on new SAS technology and features. As the SAS System continues to add new software capabilities, Institute Partners are growing and obtaining the necessary skills to support the Institute's new and enhanced products. By staying on top of the latest technology, Quality Partners are available to assist the Institute in positioning and supporting new products. This enables Quality Partners to meet the goal of supporting the ever changing needs of the SAS user community. And, ensures the support being provided utilizes the latest available technology.

The Institute assists Quality Partners in this endeavor by hosting an annual conference designed specifically for them and provides an opportunity to network, learn, explore and share ideas and information. This year's conference is scheduled for July 27-31st, at the Institute's Corporate Headquarters, in Cary, North Carolina, and provides Quality Partners an opportunity to receive insight on new products and future directions. Additional conference activities include advanced training provided by the Institute's Professional Services Division staff, Business Solutions and Research and Development staff, along with opportunities to meet with personnel from the Institute's Technical Support and Publications Division. Round table discussions have also been arranged and include industry

specific topics along with discussions on specific software issues.

Additional meetings and seminars are scheduled throughout the year at the Institute's regional offices. These meetings are designed in order to assist Quality Partners in obtaining any needed information or assistance. For example, the Quality Partner Program provides Quality Partner Workshops. These informal half-day sessions provide Partners with information on enhancements made to products, new products and future products. These workshops are provided with the assistance of the Institute's marketing and services staff and are held at the Institute's training centers around the country. These events are another way in which the Institute communicates with Quality Partners and provide an informal avenue for discussion and customer feedback.

Although frequent seminars and presentations are held specifically for Quality Partners, partners are also expected to attend any one or more of the numerous user meetings that are scheduled throughout the year. These include local, regional, special interest or SUGI® user group meetings.

Quality Partners are involved in nearly every SAS user group meeting around the world. Their expertise is proven and recognized via the numerous paper presentations given and user group awards received by them. In addition to supporting user group meetings, Quality Partners have also

supported the global SAS user audience by publishing books in the Institute's Books-By-Users program. These include:

- Strategic Data Warehousing Principles Using SAS® Software - Peter Welbrock
- Carpenter's Complete Guide to the SAS® Macro Language – Art Carpenter
- SAS(R) System for Elementary Statistical Analysis, Second Edition - Sandra D. Schlotzhauer and Ramon C. Littell

Quality Partner expertise is also demonstrated via articles written for *SAS Communications®* and *Solutions @ Word CD*.

Several partners have received additional recognition by obtaining Solution Provider status. This **new** recognition is available to those partners who have met additional requirements outlined in a particular Solution Provider Requirements List. These requirements include:

- Advanced product knowledge
- strong subject matter expertise
- strong industry expertise

Solution Provider Status is currently available for:

- IT Service Vision® software
- CFO Vision® software, and
- PH-Clinical® software

Quality Partners interested in obtaining Solution Provider status must meet with Institute personnel for a technical and personal interview. Advanced training,

mentoring, and joint services are additional conditions required in order to receive Solution Provider status. Solution Providers must clearly demonstrate superior knowledge and experience. The Solution Provider status complements the Quality Partner Program by further identifying those consultants with advanced product and subject matter knowledge. Additional Quality Partner Solution Provider Requirements Lists are in development.

The benefits to the Institute as a result of the Quality Partner Program have been numerous. These include:

- **SAS based solutions.** The program has increased the Institute's ability to meet customer requirements by identifying those Quality Partners who provide customizable SAS applications that address a customer's business pain. The availability of partner built applications has assisted in positioning SAS as the solution and has increased the Institute's competitiveness. Users often benefit by receiving a shortened implementation cycle.
- **Complementary Solutions.** SAS-based applications or solutions that complement or perhaps complete the overall solution to the customer.
- **Services.** Quality Partners are an alternative resource available to the SAS user community and are viewed by the Institute as an extension of its own consulting services. Quality Partners have increased SAS delivery capabilities worldwide.
- **Business consulting resource.** Several Quality Partners possess a deep understanding of a particular business and an understanding of how SAS technology can best address a customer's business problems efficiently.
- **Access to a wider market.** Due to their diverse business knowledge and industry expertise, partners have helped to implement and position SAS software solutions beyond original target markets.
- **Customer feedback.** The program has provided an avenue to share customer information and business needs and has allowed the Institute to better respond to same. Quality Partners have proven to be a valuable link to the SAS community.
- **Customer Care.** Quality Partners provide on-site support, informal training (transfer of knowledge), and application development.

Quality Partners have provided "Customer Care" to the SAS user community for years. Customer care includes assisting with product installation, upgrades, new product releases, support of SAS programs on multiple platforms, etc. This customer care has helped with keeping customer satisfaction of SAS software high.

Future Program objectives include the creation of a Partner XtraNet in order to communicate with partners more effectively. This web-based application will enable the Institute the ability to provide:

- Monthly marketing updates (i.e., conferences, tradeshow, presentations, open-houses)
- Availability of marketing collateral
- Success stories
- Technology updates
- New members
- Comments and user feedback
- Tracking of partner activities

As the Institute's products and services grow, the role of Quality Partners will grow. Customers today are interested in solving business problems – not simply receiving software. They are looking to partner with firms who place an emphasis on technology and knowledge. The partnerships established via the Quality Partner Program help to meet the Institute's goal of providing total business solutions to our mutual customers. Resulting in a win-win-win for the Institute, Quality Partners and our mutual customers.