

TRAINING IN A WORLD OF COST-CUTTING AND DOWNSIZING

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Abstract

Providing training and user support in a world of cost-cutting and downsizing requires clear objectives that will not compromise quality and effectiveness. The challenges facing organizations throughout the remainder of this decade and into the next century will require specific technical knowledge managed and implemented by experienced and competent professionals. Consequently, organizations will need to adhere to practical and proven methods to assure clients of the highest quality technical solutions available.

This paper presents strategies for a user support and training methodology that assures quality and flexibility among the work force. Numerous practical and proven solutions will be presented to illustrate an effective approach for organizations facing reduced budgets.

Introduction

(Overview of the Cost-Cutting Organization)
Countless news articles about organizations planning or completing mergers, downsizing, or implementing cost-cutting measures are becoming common place as a means of reducing operating costs. At the same time, the need for quality and effective SAS training and user support continues to climb. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how both objectives can be met.

Cost reductions are often felt first in the training department. This is unfortunate since the future of one's mind is also the future of the supporting organization. As William Marsteller said, "The only companies that grow are those that expect their people to grow, and spend time and money and understanding to help them do it."

Training

(Series: Intro, Intermediate, Advanced)

The objective(s) of training are to benefit users and organization and include the following:

- ① Teach usable techniques and methods.
- ② Provide real-world application.
- ③ Obtain user involvement.

Options include: on-site training, consortiums, CBT, video-based training, tutorials, and hands-on workshops.

User Support

(Types: Internal, User Group, SAS Institute)

After users are properly trained, it becomes the role of user support personnel to provide assistance when needed. SAS Institute provides phone support and online support, as can individual companies. Organizations can also provide walk-in support and application development. User groups, both in-house and external, provide continuing user support and education. Leadership of an in-house user group brings together those who support the users: installers, help line personnel, application programmers, trainers, and volunteers from user departments.

User Group

(Types: SUGI, Regional, City, Corporate, or Special Interest)

The user group generally strives to provide its members with a vehicle for learning, training, and the sharing of ideas. Sally A. Roberson of SAS Institute Inc., mentions that, "...strong (user) groups have certain elements in common. They have a mechanism for bringing in new leadership and talent. These groups offer strong programs that meet the needs and interests of a variety of users." Their structure,

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although dependent upon a clear set of goals and objectives, is one that will best meet the needs of its members.

They reinforce the techniques learned in classes (which can also be conducted in the user group meetings) or in other contexts. The sharing of experiences is one of real-world education. Thus, the user group can both present training and reinforce training.

Several types of SAS User Groups exist within the user community:

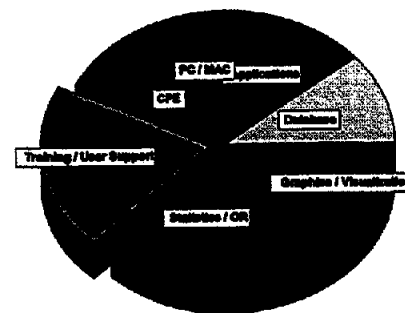
- ① International (SUGI, SEUGI)
- ② Regional (e.g., MWSUG, NESUG, WUSS)
- ③ City (e.g., SANDS, SCSUG)
- ④ Corporate (e.g., City of Dallas, Northrop)
- ⑤ Special-Interest (e.g., Consultants', JMP).

The scope of this paper is training and user support as supplied by their own training resources. Consequently, discussion emphasizes the Corporate, City, and Special-Interest groups. International and Regional conferences are also excellent forums, but due to cost-cutting and downsizing, many, if not most, users are unable to attend as frequently as desired and needed.

⇒ The City SAS User Group

The city SAS users group brings together members residing in the local community. In addition to training and continuing education, tutorials and demos of an instructional nature offer members an interesting insight into the workings of application-oriented techniques. Tom Winn, President of the Austin Area SAS Users Group, notes: "How-to sessions provide members with a broad spectrum of valuable techniques that can be implemented upon return to work." They provide users with valuable and insightful methods for solving common technical problems. In addition, advanced topics and applications are interesting and beneficial for members of the user group.

User Interests



The city user group brings users together from a variety of disciplines for comparison and exchange of ideas. Examples of these similar areas include installers, support people, trainers, application developers, managers and others. Training can be consolidated in specialty areas, for example, using SAS for computer performance evaluation; operations research; quality control; or any number of other areas.

One of the interesting parts of SUGI, regional, and city user groups is the Coders' Corner. This can be conducted in several ways consisting of panel discussions with coding questions from the audience; or one person field questions and obtaining answers and suggestions from the audience (filling in when the audience doesn't volunteer the answer); or by having a presenter provide prepared questions and answers that are interesting.

Product demonstrations provided by SAS Institute are always popular among users. Members receive timely information about new and upcoming product features as well as their application. Additionally, users see first-hand how a feature or application looks and behaves. This is useful for SAS Institute also, since they can reach many decision makers at once. Consequently, it provides valuable feedback for them by seeing the reactions and obtaining comments from the users.

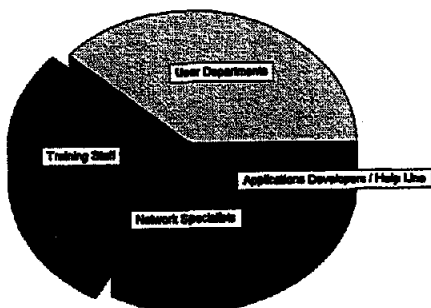
Users on the other hand receive instruction, in many cases, costing hundreds of dollars. Marv Lindsey, Southern California SAS Users Group, has this to say about product demonstrations by SAS Institute, "The presentations are always instructional, entertaining, and valuable!"

An informal network of those involved in user support and training can be a valuable aspect of the user group. Comparisons on how other companies are progressing and succeeding can be an efficient and time-saving benefit.

⇒ Corporate SAS User Groups

The strength of the corporate user group is that it provides a forum and focal point for departments interested in SAS usage within the company. If your company does not have a well-run user group, you should consider having one as a strategic corporate item. In the user group context, each department can bring up how they support the community of SAS users. Beyond proper installation, user support, and application development, training is a common interest.

Corporate Departments



⇒ Special Interest Areas

SUGI, regional, city, and corporate groups can have special interest sub-groups. Their general meetings can have special interest tutorials. In these national, regional, and city groups,

Internet communication can benefit those with common interests. An example of how effective Internet communication can be, is offered by Charles Shipp, Southern California SAS Users Group (SCSUG), "SAS-L and the new JMP-L provides valuable and timely information for programmers and users alike."

For those with programming interests (and other SAS interests) SAS-L and the new JMP-L list server on the Internet are wonderful links to the global SAS user community. Information is shared by other "like-minded" SAS programmers and users.

⇒ Role of Training at the User Group

One of the main roles of the user group is to assist users in using the software tools properly. Training is a big part of this. With proper training, the investment in hardware and software will pay off. The user group provides a forum for tutorials, advanced training, and exchange of SAS experiences.

For example, Kirk Lafler, San Diego SAS User Group (SANDS), offers these comments to user group members, "When you or your organization have a training requirement, but are not able to host an on-site class, then find out if other members are interested in a consortium class on the specific topic needed." Consortium classes are an attractive alternative for users not able to host an on-site class or not able to send employees to a SAS Institute training facility. As long as a "host" site can be arranged, costs can be shared between two or more organizations having a similar training need. Consequently, significant time and costs can be saved by communicating your needs with other members in the user group.

⇒ Types of User Group Training

User group training can be achieved in various ways. Some user groups find success using

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one or more of the following methods (see which method works best for you).

- ① formal demo by SAS Institute
- ② project demo by user/creator
- ③ hands-on workshops
- ④ arrange for a video segment
- ⑤ specialized tutorials
- ⑥ newsletter
- ⑦ online service (BBS)
- ⑧ sharing software libraries
- ⑨ coders' corner
- ⑩ sharing techniques and ideas ("mini" sessions)

Also, don't overlook special guest speakers from both outside and within the company. Let people know that you would like them to practice their SUGI talks within your city or corporate group. Also have those that present at SUGI repeat their papers, since a large percentage don't attend the annual SUGI conference.

⇒ Survey Results (Description of Evaluation Table)

The following table summarizes results of the User Group survey and shows the average response values for program categories. See Figure 1 to see survey results (next page).

The following categories not used often in the User Groups that we surveyed:

- ① Other Vendor Demonstrations
- ② Installation/Support/ Feedback
- ③ BBS or Online Information.

Some groups emphasize certain categories and vote them high (e.g., Agree or Strongly Agree), showing customizing for their users needs and requests.

The most popular item to include in a meeting is SAS Institute Demonstrations. Other popular items are:

- ① Consultant and Speakers
- ② User Presentations
- ③ Coders' Corner
- ④ General Question/Answer Sessions.

See Figure 2 for a sample User Group Survey.

Conclusion

The value of cost-effective training, user support, and user group activities can not be overemphasized. Quality training benefits not only the individual, but the organization as well.

User groups provide continuing training and support to help organizations overcome the problems associated with cost cutting and downsizing. People benefit from short and concise "mini" topics presenting technical approaches and techniques.

Acknowledgments

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References

Roberson, Sally A. (1993), "Secrets of a Successful SAS Users Group," Proceedings of the Eighteenth Annual SAS Users Group International Conference, 18, 1202-1205.

Category Popularity Chart

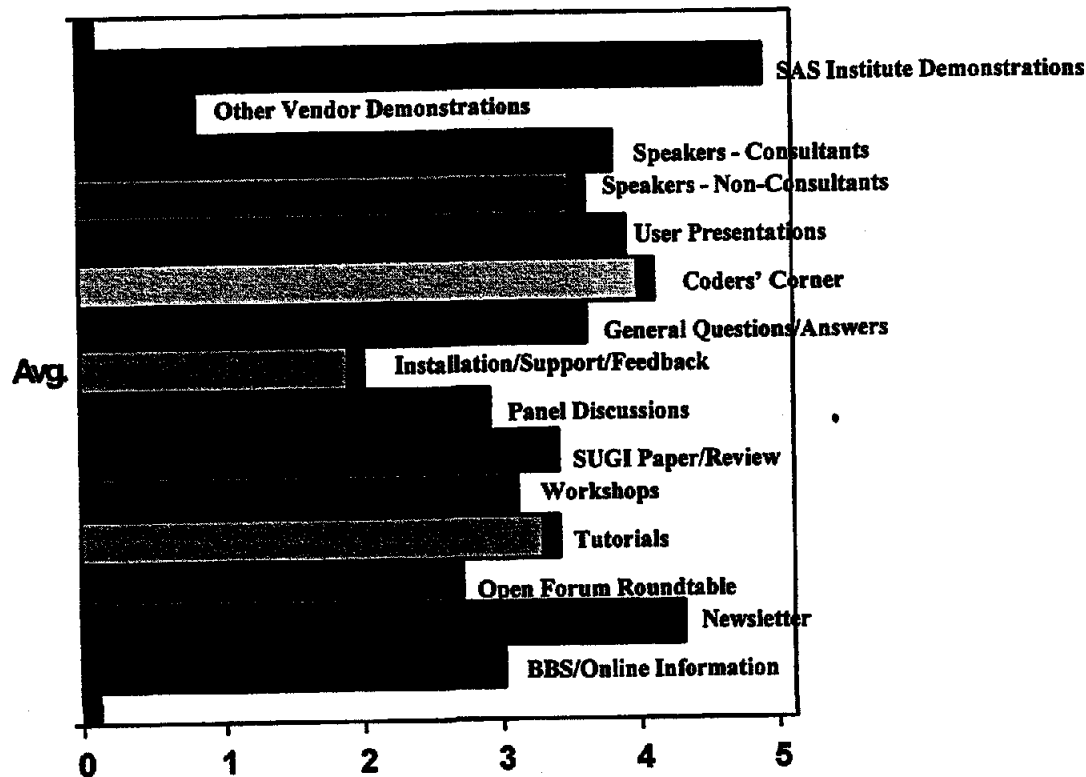


Figure 1. Survey Summary Results

This graph presents a representation of the popularity of items, where 0=Never, 1=Low, and 5=Highest.

USER GROUP SURVEY

User Group: _____
(Company or City)

Contact: _____
Phone.: _____ Date: _____

"We are doing a survey for a SUGI paper on how successful user groups are run and organized."

1. When and how often do you meet? Frequency.: _____
Time of Day: _____
Length.....: _____
2. What type is your group? ____ City ____ Corporate ____ Department ____ Other
3. Who are your main attendees? _____
4. What do they expect and why do they attend? _____

5. What do you do to support expenses? _____

6. How is your group structured? (e.g., President, Vice-Pres., Treasurer, etc.)

7. What defines your best meetings? _____

8. Rate the following categories by how successful they have been for your group:

	Never	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
- SAS Institute demonstrations	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
- Other Vendor demonstrations	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
- Speakers that are Consultant	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
- Speakers that are Non-Consultants	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
- User Presentations	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
- Coders Corner	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
- General Question/Answer Sessions	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
- Installation/Support/Feedback	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
- Panel Discussions	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
- SUGI Paper Preview/Review	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
- Workshops	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
- Tutorials	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
- Open Forum Roundtable Sessions	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
- Newsletter	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
- BBS or Online Information	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
- Other _____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

9. What makes your group unique and/or successful? _____
10. What are your goals, directions, and future plans for support and training? _____

11. Are there any other comments that you have that haven't been asked in this survey? _____

12. Would you like a copy of our paper sent to you? ____ Yes ____ No

Thank you for participating in this survey! It is expected that the results of this and other participant surveys will be compiled and used within the SUGI paper.

Figure 2. User Group Survey