

How to Develop and Maintain a Corporate SAS® Users Group

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ABSTRACT

One of the keys to building a successful SAS development shop is having an internal mechanism that guides all SAS-related activities; this mechanism is a corporate SAS users group. A corporate users group is different from the traditional users group in that: (1) it is the hub of company-wide SAS technical support, (2) it promotes individual and group professional development, (3) it participates in the recruitment and orientation of new SAS developers and (4) it works directly with management in exploring and exploiting new SAS-based revenue streams.

This paper presents the methods and issues associated with developing and maintaining this type of SAS users group.

INTRODUCTION

As SAS usage grows throughout the world, the need for user support grows also. Traditionally, users seek technical assistance internally (i.e., other company users) or externally (i.e., the SAS Institute or local user groups). These resources tend to be limited in scope, primarily emphasizing coding issues. Moreover, these resources tend to be utilized only by developers and technical managers; SAS user support is typically not a corporate mission-critical issue. However, by segmenting SAS support from the overall corporate purview, growth opportunities for managers, developers and the company as a whole are lost.

One method of providing SAS user support in a way that blends technical issues into the greater corporate fabric is by establishing a 'Corporate SAS Users Group' or CorpSUG. A CorpSUG has a four-fold purpose: (1) to serve as the primary vehicle of SAS technical support for the entire company, (2) to serve as the primary advocate of individual and group SAS professional development, (3) to support the recruitment and orientation of new SAS developers and (4) to support management's efforts in the acquisition of SAS-based revenue streams.

DEVELOPMENT METHODS

Developing a CorpSUG involves the following:

Getting the developers to buy-in. Meet with developers individually or in a group to assess the level of interest. The level of interest will vary based upon past efforts to have this type of entity. Interest will also be influenced by the prevailing political climate. However, the key is to sell the idea that a CorpSUG gives the users: (1) an organized method of helping each other with programming approaches, (2) one voice to speak to management for problems, and (3) a platform for managing the competition for training and resource requests.

Getting the managers to sign-off. Meet with those managers whose 'rings must be kissed' and explain the corporate benefits of a CorpSUG: (1) it provides a structured internal mechanism for support and growth, (2) it serves as a pipeline for recruiting new talent, and (3) it provides support for proposal responses, marketing initiatives, consulting and value-added services.

Getting organized. Determine: (1) the management champion – the person in management with final authority for CorpSUG activities, (2) the CorpSUG structure – simple or complex – based upon the need, and (3) the CorpSUG functions – technical support, professional development, recruiting and marketing – and express them in a mission statement. This last task is critical because it helps to keep everyone focused.

MAINTENANCE METHODS

Maintaining a CorpSUG involves the following:

Defining doable objectives. Instead of seeking a sizable revolution, it is better to pursue a manageable evolution. Identify tasks that can be broken into simple, doable steps. This approach: (1) creates a sense of accomplishment, (2) shows progress, and (3) minimizes the impact on competing priorities.

Communicating with members and management. It is crucial to keep the lines of

communication open to all concerned parties. However, because the CorpSUG resides between management and staff, one must be careful about the information shared. Occasionally, management may entrust the CorpSUG with information for limited hearing. Likewise, developers may be involved in activities (like looking for a new job), that management should not know about. The point is that while the CorpSUG should facilitate communication, it should also be responsible and ethical in the management of that information; the CorpSUG will not survive without being trustworthy.

Monitoring and navigating the political environment. To meet the established objectives, the CorpSUG must not be bogged down by company politics. In operating a CorpSUG, factors such as: (1) the financial health of the company, (2) egos/personal insecurities, and (3) territory/turf ownership can hinder progress. The goal is to be in tune with company dynamics and to move around roadblocks in a discreet manner.

Furthermore, it is wise to 'pick your fights'. Conflict expends a lot of time and energy. Use it only as a last resort and remember to respect your opponent today; you may need that person's help tomorrow.

Finally, be sensitive to the different organizational mindsets; managers tend to be 'results oriented' and developers tend to be 'process oriented'. Find a workable method of being fast and accurate in meeting CorpSUG objectives.

CONCLUSION

Investing in a CorpSUG can reap good benefits for managers, developers and the entire corporate entity. Notwithstanding, as with any relationship, it takes wisdom, cooperation, trust and time to make it work.

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