INTRODUCTION

Missouri, as with most states, has many diverse agencies providing services to the public, and, most of these agencies have statistical and data processing capabilities. The SAS System is the common thread which brings these users together. Currently, ten of fourteen state agencies participate in the Missouri Inter-Agency SAS Users Group. The members meet to share their experiences and knowledge, to seek help in solving their problems, and to learn new procedures. Although the group met informally at first, eventually by-laws were written and now the group has a steering committee. Workshops on different parts of the SAS System have been organized and conducted by members of the user group. By sharing information, some agencies have added additional SAS facilities that they otherwise would not have known about or could not have justified. The users group is also supporting the SAS System for personal computers through one state license. Members are from diverse agencies with different applications but all share an interest in the SAS System.

INFORMAL MEETINGS

Interest from several individuals prompted Missouri's Electronic Data Processing Center (EDPC) to organize a meeting of interested SAS users. Nine state employees from six agencies met May 1, 1984, to discuss forming a users group. Some of the problems discussed included notifying other SAS users of meetings, finding topics or presentations for future meetings, and how often to meet. It was decided we would meet monthly and various SAS topics would be discussed. The group leader for the first few meetings sent a notice of the meeting and a notice of the next meeting to those who had attended. After the first and third meetings and with attendance increasing, it was clear more organization was needed. Since most individuals were not acquainted with others in the group, the duties of organizing the meetings fell to one individual, the chairperson, willing to take the responsibility.

FORMAL MEETINGS

As chairperson, I was responsible for organizing the meetings. This included setting the time and place, picking a topic or finding a presenter, sending a review of the last meeting and a notice of the next meeting, updating the mailing list, conducting the meeting, and passing along any information about the SAS System that might be pertinent. A survey to determine the level of SAS knowledge of the members and to suggest discussion topics or presentations was sent with the first meeting announcement under the new organization. The results indicated most of the members were at about the same level using the base SAS procedures, but some had specialties in SAS/GRAPH, SAS/ETS, and the Macro language and some had used various versions of the SAS System from the 1972 edition to the 1982 edition. All the members were not using the same computer system and some did not have access to certain SAS facilities like SAS/GRAPH. Although we got valuable information on the SAS knowledge of members from the survey, these were few suggestions for topics or presentations.

The most difficult task in organizing meetings was finding topics which might appeal to a broad spectrum of SAS users. The members were from different agencies and used the SAS system in their own applications. The survey showed that most members had not used the newer procedures like CALENDAR and TABULATE, but were familiar with the commonly used SAS procedures. After discussing subjects that seemed to be of interest, it was apparent that unless needed or pointed out by someone else, most would not take time to explore the newer procedures, facilities, and options. This provided topics for the meetings, but not volunteers willing to explore or share their experience with a procedure. Most members are in job situations which do not require presentations except to small audiences of individuals they know. This presents a problem in getting volunteers to present a topic to a group of mostly strangers, especially if there are individuals in the audience who are familiar with your subject. There were a few brave individuals who gave presentations on the Macro language, PROC ARIMA, and a facility to aid in submitting extremely large data sets.

One topic which took several meetings to discuss and formulate, and also helped break the ice, was EDPC's request that the users group organize training sessions on various SAS topics. After surveying the data processing managers on the areas of the SAS System they felt should be covered, the users group set out to organize and conduct these sessions. This took several meetings as well as committee meetings to work out the details but in the process more members were willing to take on responsibility within the group. With more members attending and a valuable service being offered, it seemed time to formally organize the users group.

ORGANIZED GROUP

Even though it was decided to organize the group, with over 50 members this was not an easy task. By-laws were drafted and changed twice. They were adopted June 12, 1985.
officially creating the Missouri Inter-Agency SAS User's Group with one contact person in EDPC. Currently, the users group represents ten of fourteen state agencies and is governed by a steering committee.

Membership is divided into departmental slots which represent each state agency participating in the users group. The steering committee consists of members selected from half the departmental slots. The committee members serve a one-year term with members from the other half of the slots serving the next year. By rotating the committee responsibilities, the committee is not too large, each agency has the opportunity to have a member on the committee once every two years, and one agency does not dominate the committee nor bear the burden, both time and money, required to keep the users group going. This inter-agency sharing also brings different points of view in topics and involves more people.

The steering committee is responsible for organizing meetings, preparing the agenda, updating the mailing list, and overseeing the training sessions. These duties can be divided among the committee and/or delegated to other members. According to the by-laws, the steering committee must meet at least quarterly but usually holds its meeting after the users group's monthly meeting. All the work is done voluntarily and there are no dues or money making projects. Any expenses incurred in mailing or copying agendas and announcements are contributed to the group by the agency whose member is responsible for the task.

By organizing, the inter-agency communication is allowing the group to offer support for additional SAS packages at installations which do not provide all the SAS facilities. Also, training sessions have been formalized to cover more topics, to provide sessions designed for different levels of SAS users, to reach users who are interested in training, and to demonstrate to data processing managers what the SAS System can do.

The group also promoted the installation of Version 5 as it became available. The communication brought about in the users group, provided members with information about Version 5 before it was available rather than after it was installed, and became the default version. This saved time and money because programs could be modified for Version 5 (i.e. quotes on titles, etc.) before they are run rather than after they abound because of syntax errors.

With the SAS System for personal computers now available and microcomputers becoming a part of the state agencies computing facilities, the users group is supporting the state licensing of this SAS package. Many of the members have access to microcomputers and have searched for a strong statistics package. Most commercial packages have not met the expectations of those who used the mainframe SAS System. The group is supporting EDPC in licensing the SAS System for personal computers, then providing members of the users group the opportunity to get copies for their microcomputers. The agencies will reimburse EDPC for the cost of the licensing based on the number of copies requested. There will be two contacts with the SAS Institute, one administrative to handle accounting, keep track of the copies, and disseminating information; and one technical to handle software problems. There will also be one or two contacts in each agency to act as a buffer to the Institute contacts; an attempt to minimize calls to one person. The State licensing provides a way for an agency needing only a few copies to have the SAS System for personal computers at a reasonable cost. Agencies can pool not only monetary resources but personnel to learn the SAS System for personal computers and train others.

TRAINING

The most important service the users group offers is training. Though done by volunteers from the users group, beginning users and advanced users have the opportunity to ask questions of other users who have experience with the SAS system.

Requests for SAS workshops or training sessions were made to the Education Section of EDPC. The users group was asked to organize and conduct the training. After surveying data processing managers on which parts of the SAS System would be of most interest, the sessions were organized and preliminary outlines written. During the first workshops, the major responsibilities of formulating outlines and instructing fell to the chairperson and a few interested members. For beginning users, sessions on the Data Step and basic procedures were

SUPPORT

As a whole, the group has used most mainframe SAS procedures and facilities. Those who have used them, advise those who have not used, or do not have access to, the procedures needed. This way, the group can help justify adding SAS packages to computer systems which only have part of the SAS System by describing and demonstrating to the data processing managers the benefits and uses of the packages.
available and some SAS/ETS® procedures, certain statistical procedures, SAS/GRAPH, Macro language, PROC MATRIX, and Report Writing were presented for more advanced users.

The workshop process was a learning experience for the instructors as well as the participants. The steering committee and those who helped during the first training sessions are revising some of the sessions and dropping others for the next training series. A session for data processing managers is being planned to demonstrate what the SAS System can do and its ease of use. Most advanced topics are going to be incorporated as presentations at the groups monthly meetings with an introduction to the SAS System and more complex topics, like the Macro language, left to training sessions. Hopefully, more data processing managers will incorporate SAS software into their shops. The training offers help and instruction to beginning users and more advanced users can learn different procedures without investing time in class covering other topics.

SUMMARY

Our Missouri Inter-Agency SAS Users Group developed much as described in Jim Knoop's paper "Starting a Local SAS Users Group: Some Issues and Guidelines" in the 1984 SUGI Proceedings, even though we were unaware of this publication until recently. It was hard to keep members interested in the group even though the SAS System provides a common link. However, major projects, like the workshops and obtaining SAS for personal computers, seemed to hold the group together. Version 5 also is offering new topics and facilities for discussion. Our group is still growing and evolving to meet the needs of SAS users in Missouri's state agencies.

REFERENCES


Joan Dorfman, "Making the Most of Users Groups", Infosystems, March, pp 62-64.

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