Corporate and Area User Groups
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ABSTRACT
The author has experience in starting and supporting user groups that include the Northrop SAS Users Group, the Southern California SAS Users Group, and the Northrop Macintosh Users Group. He is a member of the board of directors of the Los Angeles Macintosh Group (LAMG) and started the Special Interest Group connecting Corporate (Macintosh) User Groups.

The difference between user groups and clubs is explained, and the different leadership styles are discussed. Techniques that build in risk but have potential for spectacular success are analyzed and contrasted with techniques for moderate success but a greater guarantee of continuing success.

The paper discusses the benefits of user groups to the corporation, the individual user, the user's department, and to SAS Institute.

INTRODUCTION
Corporate SAS user groups and other mainframe and personal computer user groups hold great potential for increasing expertise and making important connections. Of course, the benefits of supporting user group activity depend strongly on the efforts applied.

Area user groups are geographic in nature. Depending on the city or cities involved, they can cover whatever area works best. The third type of user group, the special interest user group, is not covered here.

BACKGROUND
User groups in universities, companies, and local areas are relatively new, when compared to the longer life of the national user groups. This is the twelfth annual SUGI meeting of SAS users, and another long running users group is that of IBM users, called SHARE, with over 20 years.

The difference between a club and a user group is that a user group is a more professional activity and meets on company time. Still, the user group can be fun and fulfilling if the product is easy to use and greatly increases productivity.

The benefits of user groups are felt at four levels: the individual level, the department level, the corporate level, and the vendor or international level. The individual benefits by learning, by presenting material, and by meeting other people. The department benefits in that user group activity extends the base of talent focusing on the department's current projects. The corporation benefits by the increased capability of the individuals who are doing important work. And the vendor benefits because, not only are there more expert users who know what they want from the vendor, but they have a filtering mechanism to refine and focus what they eventually request.

Two hidden benefits are that the systems that are prepared for presentation tend to be improved, and the people participating actively in the user group find fulfillment and job satisfaction. They become better employees.

KEYS TO SUCCESS
Whether starting a city-wide group or a corporate group, it is important to match the services to the amount of collective talent available to sustain those services. It may be better to start small and get big later. There is a certain critical mass of people to having a user group at all. But with initiative, it is easy to start. As more people join in, be sure to let them lend their talent in support of the
organization. There is a brochure by IBM on the steps to starting a user group. You can request one by calling 305/998-PCUG.

MINIMUM SERVICES

The minimum organization is able to provide minimum services. One person can carry the organization at first. The minimum requirements are:

- Meeting Place(s)
- People to Attend
- Membership List
- Possible programs to present

The last item is not a beginning requirement, but to sustain interest there will need to be impressive or intriguing programs. These will come.

You need a place to meet. A conference room for a company group, or a local college for an area user group will get you started. We have found that many people will come to a meeting on their side of the company complex but will not have time to travel. If you have facilities spread out, consider alternating the meeting to the major sites of SAS users. You can have a board with assistants to set up meetings in their areas with their personnel participating on the program. They take turns hosting the meeting. When you are just starting out, just talking about what you are doing with SAS will have great value. Add to this tutorials on new SAS features and new SAS products as they are added to your corporate system.

To sustain communication and services to members, you need someone to keep the membership list. We store ours on TSO and use SAS Proc FORMS to print mailing labels for our flyers. The members can also see who else is in the group, and their phone numbers. Eventually, we may add self-rating information on talent and interest in various categories of SAS application.

MAXIMUM SERVICES

If it works out well that your small beginning is successful, you can consider the next phase, that of maximum services. The minimum services are rather the same between the company user group and the city user group, but as the groups grow, their format and purposes are in some respects different. You can add, for example:

- Tutorials
- Advanced Presentations
- Newsletter
- Talent/Interest Member Survey
- Special Interest Subgroups
- Help/Consulting

In addition to these which could apply to the company group, the city group often adds the following:

- Board of Directors
- Social Events
- Recruiting/Placement Services

Your imagination/inspiration is the limit, but it will take the involvement and support of others to reach the full potential of the concept. You cannot do it all as an individual if you already have a full-time job.

Be aware that the surest way to crash in flames is to be totally dependent on a single individual for too long. Another caution is to not tie the success of the group too strongly to a newsletter. The editor position has a tendency to burn people out, and is often difficult to fill. Keep it modest, especially since the SAS Communications magazine has an excellent section which can be utilized by user groups.

CITY-WIDE USER GROUPS

Some companies are not able to have user groups, for a variety of reasons. Some individuals have found it easier to start a geographic user group than to start a user group in their corporation. This then has the advantage of including the users who would not otherwise be involved in exchange.

More commonly though, the area user group will be started by one or more individuals who have some experience and know the value of user groups. The formation could come from a person who started a strong company
user group, or it could formulate like the model of the colonial states, in that strong corporate SAS user groups support the organization of a local area user group. Following this procedure, they could either have large central meetings or the various corporate SAS user groups could take turns hosting the local area group meeting.

A main advantage of a city or area users group is that a one-company user group sees things in only one environment. Combining different companies in meetings together can expand the vision of all involved. There is a broader base of experience, and even the best companies can learn from the others. This has been personally valuable to the author in the Southern California SAS Users Group.

To sustain the services of an area users group, you will probably want a board of directors. One local area users group (the Los Angeles Macintosh Users Group) is currently voting to fill a board of 19 directors, who in turn will then fill the officers positions they decide they need.

THE FUTURE

The future has never been better for creating and sustaining user groups, both at the company level and the city-wide level. The success of many groups shows that the opportunity is there and the concept works.

There is greater understanding of the demonstrated value to corporations of users meetings. The reason for this is that the true value of the product can be either lost or greatly enhanced depending on the talents of the users. The enhanced use of the SAS products can be made better via user group participation.

In the very near future . . .

We have had the Computer Revolution, that introduced Electronic Data Processing. This was followed by the Information Explosion. And this will hopefully be followed by a Wisdom Evolution, where we will be able to capitalize on Information Systems—perhaps aided by communication systems, Artificial Intelligence, Expert Systems, creativity software, and other high technology. We need to be able to say what all the information and data means, and wisdom exchanged in the user group forum will help that evolution.

SUMMARY

Corporate management serves best when they foster a climate of support for user group activity. Their first step is to encourage an attitude that the user is an essential ingredient of data processing activity. Individuals will then need to provide the talent and organization to carry it forward.

A local area or company user group can be started by an individual, but broad support is better, especially as more services are expected. Be aware that the groups that can sustain success are the exception. Emulate them.

The format of the meetings is important and needs to be what is comfortable to the leaders and will be successful with the members. The user group meetings should encourage user participation to bring out the benefits discussed. Guest speakers, tutorials, advanced topics, and SUGI video films can also be included. The more formal meetings could be set up quarterly. Alternately, or in addition, less formal monthly meetings could be held to give greater personal interaction. We have found that even in formal meetings a 15-minute break in the middle for interaction is extremely beneficial. Add group discussion at the end if the agenda is not too full.

In the beginning of the computer age, one could describe the budget allocations as: "millions for hardware, thousands for software, and hundreds for helping the users." As information processing matures, user groups are gaining a higher priority, and justly so.

A final note: the thanks of members after a good meeting makes your efforts all worthwhile. Add to this the professional development you yourself receive and you will be glad you were supportive of building your user group.
Levels of User Group Activity

Level 4

SUGI

Level 3

Bay Area SAS Users Group (San Francisco)

So. Cal. SAS Users Group

etc.

Regional or City (Local Area)

Level 2

So. Cal. Edison

Northrop

USC

Company or University

Level 1

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Dept or Division

Schedule of Activities

Pre-SUGI Mtg

Practice Forum for those presenting papers

Pre-Summer Mtg on Education and Consulting

DEC JAN FEB MAR APR MAY JUN JUL AUG SEP OCT NOV

Suggested User Group Meetings

(Corporate or Area)

SUGI Conference (international)

Post-SUGI Mtg

News and Discussion, esp. for those who missed SUGI

FEB

Pre-Summer Mtg on High Tech (SAS/GRAPH, etc.)