Evolution and Anatomy of an In-House, PC-Oriented SAS® User Group

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INTRODUCTION:

This paper describes the beginning, development, and characteristics of the in-house user group that evolved within the Clinical Biostatistics Department at Merck Sharp and Dohme Research Laboratories. Concepts that make the group work and pitfalls to avoid are discussed. These concepts are specific for small in-house user groups and may not apply to larger groups.

BEGINNING:

Two years ago the Clinical Biostatistics Department at Merck Sharp and Dohme Research Laboratories began a transition from the mainframe to personal computers for analyzing clinical trials. Initially there were great differences in the level of PC knowledge among our statisticians; most knew very little. In-house training courses for PCs were available, yet it became clear that it was difficult for people to retain such a large volume of new information. It was also clear that such courses couldn’t cover the many useful tips that were more unique to our particular uses. Our computer support group was so overwhelmed with the exploding number of PCs coming into the company that they did not have the resources to educate our department concerning the use of personal computers.

A small group of people with previous PC and PC SAS experience began to function as resource people within our department. They would commonly hear the same question from several people. It was clear that we needed a strategy to address common problems and to increase the level of PC knowledge throughout the department. It was also clear that many questions could be answered by people within our department, a self-help strategy would be appropriate. We therefore decided to begin a monthly PC users group as a forum to educate ourselves about PC usage.

EVOLUTION:

As people mastered the fundamentals of the PC, SAS (our primary statistical tool) began to be emphasized more. Information that was unique to PC SAS was the primary object of focus, since people were changing from the mainframe to the PC. Now that people are acquainted with the PC version of SAS, the topics are more general and could apply to either mainframe or PC. Topics are also oriented toward learning new features or refining the ways we use our systems. Programming tips are always of interest. They help save time and computer resources, and increase the sophistication of our programming skills. We have therefore added a “Programmer’s Corner” which consists of tips that are generated or solicited by two of our better SAS programmers. The primary responsibility for organizing and conducting the monthly meetings no longer belongs to one person. It is now rotated between two facilitators. This ensures that no one person is overwhelmed. The quality, vitality, and frequency of meetings is thus preserved.

WHAT MAKES THE GROUP WORK:

We began organizing the user group by carefully defining the population it was to serve. It is tempting to use the shotgun approach and attempt to attract every user in your organization. This will initially boost the number of people in the group, but it may be a mistake if you do not have a homogeneous group of users. We were warned that an earlier group had failed because there was too much diversity among its members. The interests of the earlier group’s members were so varied that the group fulfilled no one’s needs satisfactorily and it eventually disbanded. We therefore chose to focus our group primarily on the needs of statisticians. This proved to be a wise choice. We are now able to focus on topics relevant to most members of the group; nearly everyone comes away from the meetings with something that is useful to them.

Focusing our group on statisticians has afforded us another benefit; the size of the group is smaller, usually between 15 and 20 people. Intentionally forming a smaller group is counterintuitive to many people. Too often the focus is on gathering large numbers of people rather than on the needs of the users. Our greatest need was to provide a forum where we could most easily learn from each other and a smaller group is more suitable for this purpose.

The benefits of a smaller group are many. The exchange of information is much better in a small group. The smaller size makes discussion less intimidating. More people are therefore willing to participate. When more people are involved, more ideas are brought out. There is also more time for each discussant to speak. Topics can be thoroughly explored. The smaller, less intimidating group also makes it much easier to recruit people to give presentations. This allows you to increase the range of subjects and the frequency of your meetings. In addition, smaller numbers allow you to avoid group-stifling bureaucracy such as steering committees, minutes of meetings, and newsletters. This bureaucracy may be necessary for larger groups but nobody likes to bear the burden of filling the needed roles. A small group provides a welcome relief from such tedious duties.
Meetings are informal and this has proven to be an important ingredient of our group. Part of the informality is a natural consequence of the small group size; however, it is also deliberately cultivated. The group is a more inviting forum to potential speakers because it is informal and is composed of people familiar to them. Recruiting speakers is rarely a problem. We encourage people to give their talks as if they had several people huddled around them in their office. Since meetings are informal, less preparation time is needed for presentations; we discourage excessive handouts and overheads. If there is too much preparation time, people will be less willing to volunteer for presentations. Most presentations are on-line, where the computer monitor display is projected onto a large screen. Probably the greatest benefit of informality is the discussion that is generated as a result of the atmosphere it creates. People feel free to ask questions and to add their own ideas. The ensuing discussion is often as valuable as the actual presentation, sometimes more so. This is the time when personal tips are offered, new possibilities are explored, and ideas for future presentations are generated. Discussion is the cornerstone of learning from each other and learning is the purpose of our group.

The person who is most knowledgeable about a subject is not always the one we ask to give the talk. This notion may also be counterintuitive but there is a good reason for it. The most knowledgeable person may be perceived by the group as an expert. Experts can adversely affect a group by unintentionally squelching discussion. If a perceived authority is speaking, people may be hesitant to take the risk of disagreeing or offering new ideas. There is also the chance that nobody will understand what the expert is saying. Experts are more appropriate when nobody else has a working knowledge of a particular subject or when they are not perceived by the group as experts.

It is better to get someone who knows a topic reasonably well and won't talk above the group's level of understanding. We don't expect people to know everything about a topic when they present. Often questions are asked that another group member is able to answer (possibly the expert). Questions from the group often trigger a cascade of discussion.

There is another important benefit in not always asking the experts to give presentations. There won't be the same few people giving the presentations all of the time. Since more people will be asked to give presentations, more people will feel included in the group. People who give presentations tend to have a greater feeling of importance, ownership, and participation in the group. The more each member is involved in the group, the greater will be their contribution; all to the benefit of the group.

We are careful to solicit presentations from everybody in the group. Every member has something they can contribute. They just may not be aware of it, or may perhaps be too embarrassed to suggest their presentation topic. We have yet to see an insignificant tip. We actively solicit tips that take only one to five minutes to present. No tip is too small. They are quick and easy to present and are always of great value. In fact, the smaller tips are often the most useful. They are easy to remember and are often things that you'd have to hunt through a manual to find, yet they boost productivity. It is also very easy to find volunteers for a five minute presentation.

The group must serve the needs of the users or it won't work. In computer terms, the group should be user driven. To accomplish this, it is absolutely vital to institute some mechanism to keep in touch with the needs of the users. We have done this in several ways. We solicit our computer support people for reoccurring problems and for issues that could become problems. They are motivated to cooperate in this because it helps them decrease their work load by increasing awareness among users. Our support people sometimes present solutions to problems at our meetings, but more often we solicit the person whose problem has been solved to present the solution. We also listen to problems and ideas that come out in discussions during user group meetings. Since our group is relatively small, we have the luxury of direct contact with most of our users outside of the meetings; our group facilitators are also users.

Timing of the meetings is important. Our meetings are conducted over lunch, which has several advantages. The first is that less time is taken out of a person's work day. People are busy and are more hesitant to attend a meeting if it takes a significant amount of time out of their day. Our management is extremely supportive and attendance at user group meetings is encouraged. However, if your management does not permit time to attend user group meetings, then conducting meetings over lunch may help to avoid this issue. Meeting over lunch also creates a more relaxed atmosphere.

We try to make our meetings short and have a definite ending time. If the meeting is short (ours is an hour), more people will likely be able to attend. If a definite ending time is not adhered to, people may be hesitant to come for fear of being trapped beyond their intended time commitment. They may also feel irritated if they have to leave before a meeting ends, wondering if they may have missed some valuable information.

CONCLUSION:

In forming a group, the purpose of the group and the target population should be carefully thought out in advance. The purpose and target population will largely determine the methods used to conduct the group. It is important to employ group techniques that maximize participation and flow of information. Constant awareness of the needs of the group is vital to ensure that meeting topics are appropriate and current. Don't be afraid to challenge established ideas if they may interfere with the goals of the group, i.e. bigger groups are not necessarily more successful groups. Success should be determined by how well the group serves the needs of its members.

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