

What's Hot, What's Not: Skills for SAS® Professionals

Kirk Paul Lafler, Software Intelligence Corporation, Spring Valley, California
Charles Edwin Shipp, Consider Consulting, Inc., San Pedro, California

Abstract

As a new generation of SAS® user emerges, current and prior generations of users have an extensive array of procedures, programming tools, approaches and techniques to choose from. This presentation identifies and explores the areas that are hot and not-so-hot in the world of the professional SAS user. Topics include Enterprise Guide, PROC SQL, PROC REPORT, PROC FORMAT, Macro Language, ODS, DATA step programming techniques such as arrays and hashing, business intelligence, sasCommunity.org®, JMP®, SAS/GRAPH®, SAS/STAT®, and SAS/AF®.

Introduction

As defined in The Free Dictionary by Farlex, 'skill' is defined as "the proficiency, facility, or dexterity that is acquired or developed through training or experience." Essentially, a skill is developed or enhanced over time, with the help of training resources and/or experience. A skill is demonstrated by the ability to perform a task, or set of tasks, well. SAS professionals frequently need a broad range of skills in order to contribute in the workplace and particularly to succeed in the technological society of the 21st century.

Critical success factors include assessing what your current skills and skill levels are, determining what skills are hot (in demand), as well as what skills are not, and identifying where and how to access resources to acquire or learn the necessary skills. As a SAS® professional, the skills you acquire will, perhaps, enable you to embark on a more rewarding journey leading to exciting opportunities, projects and better way of life. To assist in getting started, a self-survey questionnaire appears at the end of this paper to help you assess where you are and the skills needed to achieve those goals.

Taking Inventory of Your Skills

Taking inventory of your skills is an important first step in understanding what you can provide clients and prospective clients is a valuable ingredient for success. First and foremost, the services you intend to offer should be perceived as adding value in an already highly competitive marketplace. Next, keep in mind that there will almost certainly be intense competition from other like-minded individuals. Taking inventory of your skills involves the following steps:

1. List your skills/services (e.g., DATA step programming, macro design and programming, database design, technical support, systems analysis, strategic planning, market analysis, technical writing, etc.)
2. Perform the following rankings for each skill/service:
 - a. Level of competence (e.g., up-to-date (current), competitive, and out-of-date)
 - b. Income level production for the past 12 months (largest to smallest)
 - c. Assess whether each skill/service is "Active" or "Passive" (e.g., Active---critical to clients you are pursuing, Passive--non-critical to prospective clients)
 - d. Specify your skill rating as "Very proficient", "Productive", "Some working knowledge", "None".
3. Once ranked, categorize each skill by functional discipline (e.g., programming, design, analysis, teaching, consulting, marketing, etc.)
4. Capture comments including, strengths, weaknesses, successes, and failures about each skill. These comments, along with rankings, will be used to help you to better understand the direction(s) you should take.

Seeking Your Level

Once you have determined the skills to pursue, consider the appropriate level and resource needed to succeed. Assess your skill level, including what your objective is, and what you like to do most. Your past experience doing similar things is critically important in this equation. You should also obtain the recommendations and advice of other professionals you know. One good way to begin gaining experience is to team with more experienced consultants.

Improving Skills/Expertise

Many professionals believe they have already mastered all the necessary skills to be successful. But as technology evolves, it becomes increasingly important to continue the process of learning, essentially evolving along with the areas you are pursuing. It may even involve splitting a large area of interest or endeavor into smaller pieces, a process known as specializing. Even if you consider yourself an expert at what you do with interests and abilities in several areas in the SAS software, specialization is becoming not only popular, but necessary. To assist with your skill building, consider additional training from the following sources:

- 1) **SAS-led courses (lecture / hands-on workshops)**
- 2) **Non-SAS Institute Instructor-led courses**
- 3) **Self-paced computer-based training (CBT)**
- 4) **Online SAS documentation in PDF and HTML format**
- 5) **User-written books from SAS Press, Books by Users (BBU)**
- 6) **“White” papers on sasCommunity.org, support.sas.com, LexJansen.com, and other websites**
- 7) **User Group presentations and Hands-on workshops**
- 8) **Podcasts and webinars on sasCommunity.org and support.sas.com**

SAS professionals can improve or brush up on skills by attending instructor-led or hands-on workshop training courses. Training by experienced vendors is frequently available on a variety of topics and offered at local training centers and at conference events. For example, the SAS Global Forum (SGF), the annual regional SAS conferences (e.g., MWSUG, NESUG, PNWSUG, SCSUG, SESUG, and WUSS), and industry-specific SAS conferences (e.g., PharmaSUG) offer affordable half-day and full-day instructor-led training. Users can attend these cost-effective training sessions before and/or after the conference event. Also, many of the conferences offer “free” 80 – 120 minute hands-on workshop sessions for users to attend during the conference event. These can be very attractive ways to learn a topic of interest or brush up on the latest techniques from a leading expert in a hands-on environment.

As an alternative to attending a training class in person, self-paced computer-based training (CBT) modules are available for purchase or through subscription. From time to time, “free” limited trial access is available for evaluation purposes. All you need to access this treasure-trove of information and learning is a computer and Web browser (e.g., Internet Explorer, Netscape Navigator, Safari or Mozilla FireFox). SAS Institute, for example, offers topics that can be accessed and studied for a 90-day period on the Web.

sasCommunity.org

sasCommunity.org is an exciting and new collaborative online community for SAS users worldwide. This virtual online community supports technology for SAS users to collaborate with other users anywhere in the world; access SAS-based content including blogs, presentations, and code examples; learn about upcoming events, forums and user group conferences; and discuss anything and everything that is related to SAS software, from SAS users to SAS users. As organizations experience declining travel budgets, improved broadband and Internet technological advances, and a need for greater productivity, sasCommunity.org expands its presence among SAS professionals.

SAS Certified Professional Exams

To give your career a significant boost and to improve your prospects for success, the SAS Institute offers certification testing for users in three key areas: 1) SAS Programming, 2) Predictive Modeling and 3) Data Warehousing. These globally recognized certification tests are administered in more than 140 countries by a global leader in testing services in the IT industry, and are taken in a controlled environment.

Two credentials are offered by SAS Institute for SAS programmers to consider:

- 1) SAS Certified Base Programmer Credential for SAS 9
 - a. SAS Base Programming Exam for SAS 9
- 2) SAS Certified Advanced Programmer Credential for SAS 9
 - a. SAS Base Programming Exam for SAS 9
 - b. SAS Advanced Programming Exam for SAS 9

SAS Institute offers users a credential for predictive modelers to consider:

- 1) Predictive Modeling Using SAS Enterprise Miner 5.2 Credential
 - a. Predictive Modeling Using SAS Enterprise Miner 5.2 Exam

Two credentials are offered by SAS Institute for SAS data warehouse professionals to consider:

- 1) SAS Certified Warehouse Development Specialist Credential
 - a. SAS Advanced Programming Exam for SAS 9
 - b. SAS Warehouse Technology Exam
 - c. SAS Warehouse Development Specialist Concepts Exam
- 2) SAS Certified Warehouse Architect Credential
 - a. SAS Warehouse Technology Exam
 - b. SAS Warehouse Architect Concepts Exam

SAS Alliance Partner Program

SAS professionals may want to consider applying to become a SAS Alliance Partner. Five core programs are available to choose from: 1) Technology Program, 2) Consulting Program, 3) Application Program, 4) Outsourcing Program, and 5) Reseller Program. Each program has three levels: 1) Platinum, 2) Gold and 3) Silver. For more information about Alliance partnership opportunities, prospective candidates should access and review the SAS Alliance Program Guide on the SAS Institute web site at <http://www.sas.com/partners/programs/index.html>.

What's Skills are Hot?

The following table shows many of the skills and/or websites that the authors have found to be popular and in demand by SAS professionals.

- Enterprise Guide – GUI point-and-click front-end application
- Hash Programming Techniques – “Fast” table lookups, sorts, merges, and joins
- Create RTF, PDF, HTML, XML, and Excel Spreadsheets – ODS
- Queries, Tables, Views, Case Expression Logic, inner and outer Joins – PROC SQL
- Detail and Summary Reporting – PROC REPORT
- Construct Reusable Code and Tools – Macro Language
- Access SAS Environment – Dictionary Tables and SASHELP Views
- Business Intelligence
- Resource for Published SAS Papers – <http://www.LexJansen.com>
- Share Structured Data as meta-data – SAS/XML
- Technical Support, Online Documentation – <http://support.sas.com>
- Social Networking, Blogs, Tech Support – <http://www.sasCommunity.org>
- List Serve of archived Technical Support Help – SAS-L – <http://www.listserv.uga.edu/archives/sas-l.html>
- SAS Certification – SAS Certified Professional Exams
- Statistical and Data Visualization – JMP software
- JMP Genomics

What's Skills are Not so Hot?

The following table shows a few skills that the authors have found not to be as popular now, or as they once were, by SAS professionals.

- SAS/ASSIST® software
- SAS/FSP® software
- SAS/AF® software
- Screen Component Language® (SCL)
- DATA _NULL_ -> Monospace “Custom” Reporting

Conclusion

There are many avenues to help determine what skills are hot and what are not in the world of the SAS professional. Follow the main websites www.SAS.com, the forums and blogs within <http://support.SAS.com> and the user interchange on www.sasCommunity.org to keep abreast of advancing technologies. Education and a desire to acquire new skills and experience are very important. Careful planning, preparation, organization, the ability to handle multiple tasks, and diligence are important factors for any SAS professional to possess and/or develop.

It's also important to identify and acquire specific techniques from others, along with their successes and failures, to improve the likelihood for greater success while enhancing your skills. Other professionals may be able to share their own expertise to help you acquire, or brush up on, specific skills, including resources like SAS-L, sasCommunity.org, and various web sites designed for SAS professionals. These resources include instructor-led and hands-on workshop training available at SAS user conferences, self-paced computer based training (CBT) applications, self-study web resources including "white" papers, published programming tips and techniques, and certification. Also, a good SAS programming and/or user-written technical book, or two, can provide a wealth of knowledge for the inquisitive, and self-starting, professional.

References

- Barnes, Gregory S. (2000), "SAS Skills for the Next Millennium: A Geek Peek into the Not so Distant Future", Proceedings of the Twenty Fourth Annual SAS Users Group (SUGI) Conference - 2000.
- Holtz, Herman, How To Succeed as an Independent Consultant, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1983.
- Holtz, Herman, The Consultant's Guide to Proposal Writing, Second Edition, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1990.
- Kishel, Gregory and Patricia Kishel, How to Start and Run a Successful Consulting Business, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996.
- Lafler, Kirk Paul and Charles Edwin Shipp (2011), "What's Hot, What's Not – Skills for SAS Professionals", Proceedings of the SAS Global Forum (SGF) Conference – 2011.
- Lafler, Kirk Paul and Charles Edwin Shipp (2010), "Connect with SAS Professionals Around the World with LinkedIn and sasCommunity.org", Proceedings of the Annual MidWest SAS Users Group (MWSUG) Conference – 2010.
- Lafler, Kirk Paul and Charles Edwin Shipp (2008), "What's Hot, What's Not – Skills for SAS Professionals", Proceedings of the Annual Western Users of SAS Software (WUSS) Conference – 2008.
- Lafler, Kirk Paul and Charles Edwin Shipp (2008), "Collaborate with SAS Users Around the World with sasCommunity.org", Proceedings of the 2nd Annual SAS Global Forum (SGF) Conference – 2008.
- Lafler, Kirk Paul and Charles Edwin Shipp (2007), "Consulting: Critical Success Factors" – Awarded "Best Contributed Paper", Proceedings of the Annual Western Users of SAS Software (WUSS) Conference – 2007.
- Lafler, Kirk Paul and Charles Edwin Shipp (2001), "SAS Consulting: New Beginnings" – Awarded "Best Contributed Paper", Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Western Users of SAS Software (WUSS) Conference – 2001.
- Nelson, Bob and Peter Economy, Consulting for Dummies, IDG Books Worldwide, Inc., 1997.
- Schiffman, Stephan, The Consultant's Handbook, Adams Media Corporation, 1988.
- Shenson, Howard L. Shenson on Consulting, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1994, 1990.
- Shipp, Charles Edwin and Kirk Paul Lafler (1995), "Training in a World of Cost-Cutting and Downsizing", Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Northeast SAS Users Group Conference - 1995.
- Shipp, Charles Edwin and Kirk Paul Lafler (1995), "Training in a World of Cost-Cutting and Downsizing", Proceedings of the Third Annual Western Users of SAS Software Conference - 1995.
- Shipp, Charles Edwin and Kirk Paul Lafler (1995), "Training in a World of Cost-Cutting and Downsizing", Proceedings of the Third Annual Southeast SAS Users Group Conference - 1995.
- Shipp, Charles Edwin and Kirk Paul Lafler (1995), "Training in a World of Cost-Cutting and Downsizing," - Awarded "Best Contributed Paper", Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual SAS Users Group International (SUGI) Conference - 1995.
- Simon, Alan R., How to be a Successful Computer Consultant, Third Edition, Mc-Graw-Hill, Inc., 1994.
- The Free Dictionary by Farlex, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/skill>, 2011.
- Weinberg, Gerald M., The Secrets of Consulting, Dorset House Publishing, 1985.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank John Taylor, SCSUG 2011 Potpourri Section Chair for accepting our abstract and paper, as well as Lisa Mendez and Ed Bettie, SCSUG 2011 Conference Co-Chairs for a great conference!

Trademark Citations

SAS and all other SAS Institute Inc. product or service names are registered trademarks or trademarks of SAS Institute Inc. in the USA and other countries. ® indicates USA registration. Other brand and product names are trademarks of their respective companies.

About the Authors

Kirk Paul Lafler is consultant and founder of Software Intelligence Corporation and has been using SAS since 1979. He is a SAS Certified Professional, provider of IT consulting services, trainer to SAS users around the world, and sasCommunity.org Advisory Board member. As the author of four books including PROC SQL: Beyond the Basics Using SAS, Kirk has written more than four hundred peer-reviewed papers, been an Invited speaker and trainer at more than three hundred SAS International, regional, local, and special-interest user group conferences and meetings, and is the recipient of 18 "Best" contributed paper awards. His popular SAS Tips column, "Kirk's Korner of Quick and Simple Tips", appears regularly in several SAS User Group newsletters and websites, and his fun-filled SASword Puzzles is featured in SAScommunity.org.

Charles Edwin Shipp is a programmer, consultant and author, and has been using the SAS and JMP software since 1980. He is credited in the original JMP manual for his roles in the early days. He has written more than one hundred papers and has been an invited speaker at more than one hundred International, regional, local, and special-interest SAS and JMP conferences and meetings, and is the recipient of 10 "Best" contributed paper awards. Charlie is the co-author of three books including the ever-popular Books by Users (BBU) book, Quick Results with SAS/GRAPH Software. Currently, Charlie is involved as an eBook author, sasCommunity.org Advisory Board member, application developer, and consultant in JMP and JMP Genomics.

Comments and suggestions can be sent to:

Kirk Paul Lafler
Software Intelligence Corporation
E-mail: KirkLafler@cs.com

~~~  
Charles Edwin Shipp  
Consider Consulting, Inc.  
E-mail: CharlieShipp@aol.com

## SAS® Professional Skills Survey

SAS Professional: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

1. How long have you been using SAS?    \_\_\_ < 1 Year    \_\_\_ 1 – 5 Years    \_\_\_ 6 – 10 Years    \_\_\_ > 10 Years
2. How would you rate the level of your SAS expertise?    \_\_\_ Novice    \_\_\_ Intermediate    \_\_\_ Advanced (Expert)
3. Have you been certified as a SAS Professional by passing the certification exam?    \_\_\_ Yes    \_\_\_ No
4. Are you a SAS Alliance Partner?    \_\_\_ Yes    \_\_\_ No    If you answered 'Yes' to previous question, how long?    \_\_\_\_\_ Years
5. What method(s) do you use to improve your SAS skills?    \_\_\_ CBT    \_\_\_ Instructor-led Training  
                          \_\_\_ Hands-on Workshops    \_\_\_ User Group Presentations    \_\_\_ Webinars  
                          \_\_\_ Podcasts    \_\_\_ Computer Based Training (CBT)    \_\_\_ support.sas.com  
                          \_\_\_ SAS Press Books    \_\_\_ SAS Online Documentation    \_\_\_ Other

6. Rate your SAS programming/skills in the following areas (1=None, 2=Novice, 3=Some Knowledge, 4=Very Good, 5=Expert):

|                                | Currently | 1-Year from Now | 2-Years from Now |
|--------------------------------|-----------|-----------------|------------------|
| - Base SAS®                    | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - SQL Processing               | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - Macro Programming            | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - DATA Step Hash Programming   | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - Output Delivery System (ODS) | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - SAS/FSP®, SAS/AF® and SCL    | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - SAS Enterprise Guide® (EG)   | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - Business Intelligence        | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - Statistical Consulting       | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - SAS/IntrNet®                 | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - SAS/PC®                      | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - SAS/Connect®                 | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - SAS/ETS®                     | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - SAS/OR®                      | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - SAS/Graph®                   | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - SAS/XML®                     | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - Data Mining                  | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - Data Cleaning                | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - Other _____                  | _____     | _____           | _____            |
| - Other _____                  | _____     | _____           | _____            |

7. What makes your skills unique and/or successful? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

8. What are your goals, directions, and future plans? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for participating in this survey! We expect that the results of this survey will be compiled, analyzed, and used in future papers. Send us an email with your completed form and we will send you an update to this paper.

**Figure 1. Professional SAS Skills Survey**