

ORGANIZING A LOCAL GROUP OF COMPUTER USERS

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Abstract

This presentation concerns itself with the organization, development, and management of local/regional user groups in support of communication among computer system users. Additionally, considerations for the relationship among RUGs, with the HP General Systems Users Group, and with Hewlett-Packard is also presented. The objective of a local users group is to promote the active interchange of ideas, techniques, and software among the users. This interchange can take place with only two people. The topics discussed below are some ideas that may be used to promote the success of users in a local group.

A Simple Approach

Undoubtedly you have one or more friends that you confer with regarding your computer system problems. If you and your computer friends have met over lunch to discuss a computer technique you have the beginnings of a local users group. Most likely you will return to work with a new piece of software or computer technique to try out. Let us identify the basic aspects of such a users' meeting:

Meeting Arrangements--one of the group called the others and invited them to join him for lunch.

Meeting Opening--The objective of getting together was, in some fashion, stated and any new persons were introduced.

Technical Discussion--One of the group explained how he had solved a system problem and discussed associated software used. As the discussion progressed questions were asked and comments made by the others in the group. During the discussion reproduced copies of the software listing were handed to the group.

Computer Products--Since each day a new product for the computer market is introduced, one of the group discussed his research of the new product that may be useful to the others.

Social Hour--After all the involved technical material the group relaxed over coffee.

Next Time--Because members of this group had several other computer problems they decided to meet again to share more information.

As you can tell by the description a local users group meeting took place--simply and easily.

Needless to say with more and more users becoming involved with HP systems such a small meeting could rapidly grow. The basic meeting elements will not change but a little more planning and organizing is required. A meeting of computer users need not constitute an official group; but it is useful to have a spokesman to convene the group and communicate with the larger users group. The following paragraphs present the considerations involved in organizing a group of local computer users.

Orientation

The object of such a computer users meeting is to share one's own knowledge and experiences of computer systems with others who may not yet understand the system. This, of course, provides self-esteem, a key psychological requirement in a group. Also, such sharing certainly provokes others to share their knowledge and experiences. Additionally the presentation of two items of information often times results in a synthesis providing a third and different item of information. For example, development of a file handling routine by one user may be put with another user's indexing routine to form a data management module. Through the users meeting, a user may discover a simple solution during a brief discussion with another user that he had been battling with for a week.

The collective of computer users can often provide the resources necessary to solve a problem not easily solved by an individual. For instance, comparison of tests performed with different data communication equipment or under different situations may yield enough data to solve a difficult problem. Or, you may just need the ideas from several other users to formulate a solution to your problem.

→ *[A users group does not make sense without user involvement]*

Likewise, individuals in the group may be able to contribute a mail listing program for distribution of mail to the group members. Economically, the formation of a group of users makes sense because software, an expensive item to develop, may be shared. An objective of a group may include one or more services such as publication and distribution of a newsletter and/or maintenance of a software library. In particular, a formalized users group can often arrange for technical experts to make presentations to the group as well as sponsor training seminars.

When a local group of users relates to a larger group such as RUGs to HPGSUG, it is important frequent communication take place between them. The larger group may be able to find solutions for users in your group who have problems. Certainly the larger group provides a larger base for sharing software. Such a relationship is a two way street, however, and contribution by your local group to the larger group is necessary. For instance, a local group could sponsor a technical session at an international meeting. By spreading such a work load the larger task is accomplished without over burdening any individual.

Thus, the formal orientation of a group of users is any objective which, by definition, must meet their needs. Before describing the technical aspects of organizing a group of users consider the individual user who would

make up such a group.

The User

The objective for most users of computer systems is to solve their problems and enhance their software/hardware to perform more efficiently with greater capability to do their job. The success of a users group is dependent upon understanding the member user's perspective; the perspective is to solve his problem in a simple expedient fashion. If a users group can meet this requirement both the user and the group will be a success.

The contribution a user makes to a users group depends upon his participation. Certainly a user's expertise and experience will allow him to participate easily in technical functions. For the inexperienced user participation may be in the areas of administration and support of the group functions, such as maintaining mailing lists. Together a users group can function. The inexperienced users will advance to the experienced levels, the experienced to more sophisticated problems, and new users will join at the inexperienced stage. As professionals we have an obligation to contribute; each user taking a small responsibility can produce a useful benefit for all users.

The most important user attribute to pay attention to in a group is the user's attitude. Since most groups of users depend upon volunteers to keep the group active particular attention needs to be paid to keeping the atmosphere around the user's involvement positive and self-satisfying. The dedication of a user varies over a wide range as does his sensibilities. Recognizing these traits and managing them can be an asset. For the most part this involves common sense, responsiveness, common courtesy, being observant, and giving recognition.

A user's expectation is easier to meet in a volunteer organization than in a commercial organization. In the former the user is usually intimately involved and the destiny of his expectations is a function of his own effort. In the latter the user always expects more when he is paying money and is not involved in the "product".

Watch out for users who promise a great deal but contribute little. It is difficult to prevent users from taking advantage of a volunteer group for their own ends; on the other hand, there are most likely a few individuals who contribute a great deal. While it is impossible to satisfy the latter's desires or repay them, public recognition is most fulfilling. Psychological satisfaction is often an important and satisfying reward.

—→ *[Apathy is the worse enemy of a volunteer group.
Enthusiasm is a group's greatest asset.]*

Who should be included? Too often with larger computer systems only the computer center specialists get involved. While they have an in-depth enthusiasm the users at the terminals should not be overlooked. A special local users group program for clerical personnel who interface with the computer might help dispel "computer fears." The "upper" management who

must make key decisions regarding your system might be interested in a limited involvement to better educate themselves in the way of the computer system as well as meet other managers making similar decisions.

Now that some awareness of individual users has been brought out and objectives made clear where does one start to organize a group of computer users?

Where/How to Start

Why organize? It would be nice if the interface of all people just fit together to arrive at the desired goal. Since this is not the case in the real world someone needs to plan the sequence of events to arrive at that goal. Any organization is predicated on an agreed-upon group objective. This may come about through an informal conversation with a few friends with a common product or application interest who decide to interface among themselves in the future. The user interface may manifest itself through a meeting, newsletter, software library, or a combination of each. The user meeting is one of the easiest to start with since people like to socialize. The particular subject matter may be around a special interest such as word processing or a particular vendor product, or both.

An effective method is to get a few "key" friends involved who you can count on to at least carry out an initial meeting of users. Make sure the communications between the key group is free and easy since a time lag and a hinderance of communications can postpone activity and dampen any enthusiasm. The next item of business is to establish communications with other users.

A first meeting at your company or local hotel facilitates easy arrangements and control. By organizing the basic meeting aspects described in the opening of this presentation your meeting will be a success. Depending upon how ambitious the key group is the meeting advertisement may be by word of mouth or a formal, mailed, invitation.

→ *[Frequent user meetings over lunch are easy and effective.]*

If the meeting sparks some interest and a definable need to interface among users in the future exists then a more formal group may be organized; although, several meetings may take place prior to serious organization of a group. A key to a successful first meeting is to arrange for all attendees to return home a "winner," that is, make a contribution to the user's future success. Such a "prize" may be a software program or inside information on a vendor's product. Before the first meeting has adjourned the next meeting or user interface mechanism needs to be planned and volunteers designated who will implement it, thus the next "key group" is formed. Note, if there are no volunteers either abort the group organization or be prepared to perform a GREAT deal of work.

For the first meeting keep expenditures and meeting operations to a minimum. To offset any dollar costs collect a donation at the door. An alternative is to find a sponsor such as a product manufacturer or user company whose interests are served by such a meeting. Most likely both clerical assistance

and operations support, such as reproduction of notices and mailing, for the first meeting will come from the "key" group companies. Thereafter a more formal mechanism for funding and incentive for manpower needs to be found. Some ideas will be discussed later.

User Education

One of the most attractive elements of a users group is its capability to educate users. Informal education is done through user meetings and technical publications; while this is rewarding the more organized/formal technical seminar is popular. Corporations seem to support the specific seminar since managers can easily relate specific seminar topics to their projects. Both the area of special application interest and computer system (or subsystem) product have their "gurus" who are willing to speak. The vendor usually has specialists who can present such a seminar. A users group could make the necessary arrangements while charging each attendee a required fee to pay the specialist for his preparation and any handouts. For example, a RUG on the West Coast sponsored a very successful seminar on HP3000 peripheral user maintenance given by Hewlett-Packard. This is a win-win seminar since HP benefits from more knowledgeable users and users can solve their problems faster. Such a seminar is an easy success.

Note that computer professions are hungry for computer knowledge. This need makes it easy for a users group to establish an educational objective. It just remains to focus in on a topic.

Communications

During the formation and subsequent operation of a users group the most important element is communication. If those in the key group do not relate their problems and successes then plans are difficult to make, let alone adhere to. Likewise constituents of the group probably will not respond if they do not receive some form of communication from the key group. In fact users who have contributed to the group who do not receive communication when expected can become bitter to the detriment of the group. If advice is requested in the communication then accepted when it is received individual cooperation is increased.

→ *[Communication is a terrific professional pacifier.]*

Individual cooperation in a volunteer group is valuable; the greater the individual member communication the greater chance for group success.

The information that must flow in a technical organization is tips, techniques, hints, kinks, along with meeting times and places. Communication needs to take place as often as necessary. This means if you communicate while you are thinking about it the link is made and progress can take the next step. A number of simple and easy acts of communication can build an effective network.

→ *[Lack of effective communication has been the downfall of many groups.]*

Different requirements dictate different methods. For instance, the post card or note is easy and quick especially if mailing labels are already printed. Letters are more formal but do show more thought for a professional approach and they serve as a good audit trail so new ideas can build on past actions. A good secretary can make all the difference in the world in getting communication out.

The newsletter of course is a more formal but easy way to communicate with a number of users. However, a newsletter requires a dedicated volunteer and considerable user contribution. Special publications are very useful since they are specific in nature and usually treat technical material in-depth. Such a publication results from the dedication of a very few users but unlike the periodic newsletter it is usually a one-time task. Both of these methods of communication can be very effective and simple to produce. These publications may, however, be quite formal and require a complex publishing operation. The most effective newsletter/publication is not necessarily the "slickest," easy and simple techniques for production of these items is found in the literature [1].

The telephone is quick and easy for most users. While it is difficult to communicate many details over the telephone this instrument is very effective for directing a group of users by the key group and receiving status on activity. An automatic answering device can provide an easy method to communicate to the members and collect brief comments; such a device can be made available for communication 24 hours a day, unattended.

If the expectations of member users are to be met then mechanisms for user feedback need to be devised. This may take the form of a questionnaire or telephone campaign. Keep in mind that tallying responses and performing an analysis on the results may overwhelm the uninitiated; so keep responses very simple. Also, keep in mind that the number and accuracy of responses is directly related to the complexity of the questionnaire. Again, keep the questionnaire short and simple. It is better to have several short questionnaires than one long one.

If your group warrants it, effective communication may be supported by clerical assistance; it is well worth hiring a professional secretary part time for typing tasks. Of course, micro computers, simple printers, and an elementary text editing program can serve well as a secretary (except for spelling).

Handling the information flow and keeping it moving is important since newsletter editors thrive on new items and the key group needs the information to formulate plans to support the group. A central address and desk is useful for this purpose. Information must be appropriately redistributed in a timely fashion as well as just accepted. The formal information flow by mass mailings requires some serious thought. The key member responsible for such mailings needs to be aware of the considerable effort required to stuff, seal, address, stamp, and mail a large set of letters, not to mention printing. The cost of mailing can be optimized by planning the weight just below a postage price break and by using photo reduction techniques.

With the advent of word/text processing on micro computers the tasks of producing mailing labels, letters, etc. are easy. Even simple FORTRAN programs and simple text files on the HP3000 computer system can effectively support these tasks. Multiple, personalized letters, can easily be printed. Also, computer data communications can be used most effectively to get users to contribute articles; it is easy for a computer system editor to "type" an article. For instance, many HP3000 computer installations have a terminal dial-up facility. Thus, a newsletter editor could dial up such a system and copy the contributor's text file to a terminal tape cartridge or printer for subsequent use in producing a newsletter.

The local users group can perform a real service to its members by communicating with other local users groups and the international groups; the communication is two ways. You might consider exchange of newsletters and notices as well as software. Good seminar speakers can also be found this way.

The Users Meeting

Computer users need to get together to discuss their successes and problems of their systems. In most instances a local group can have a very successful but simple meeting by considering the items discussed in the introduction of this presentation. Consider the aspects of a more organized meeting, although these aspects also apply to the small simple meeting where appropriate.

There needs to be a central managing committee to insure consistency and follow-through before and after the users meeting. Be very aware of the effort required by each committee member; each member should commit themselves in a formal manner as a warantee on dedication to complete the job. Make sure the meeting tasks are well defined and assigned. The magnitude of each task needs to be evaluated in light of the committment made by the committee member to perform it; the work effort is double that of any reasonable estimate.

→[Large meetings supported by weak committees
can turn a meeting into chaos.]

Smaller informal user meetings can take place often at convenient times such as over lunch or in the evening. However, the larger full day meetings require planning a day when there is a minimum of conflicts with member users. Multiple day meetings should be avoided due to accommodation problems, competition for a member's time, and user saturation levels. The location of a meeting should be central to the group; however, special locations are attractive. Depending upon the budget and nature of the gathering meetings are easily arranged at hotels, schools, homes, or vendor facilities. The city to hold a users meeting is most likely obvious for a local group of users...except in Los Angeles.

Economics are always difficult for local groups since "seed" money is often lacking; asking for pre-registration fees or vendor contributions can be helpful. Group projects to raise money are also helpful. The larger the meeting the more difficult to budget since all cost factors must be analyzed

and scrutinized since profit margins are very narrow. A simple meeting fee is to have each member contribute a fixed amount towards a single budget item such as a meal/refreshments.

Since the computer field is expanding at a phenomenal rate there are a great number of resources for technical presentations. The simplest and easiest is the group membership; many computer professionals have a speciality topic he/she could discuss. The meeting committee can be very helpful in encouraging a user speaker and helping him prepare. Vendors of audio visual equipment often have booklets on making technical presentations. Vendors and universities are also two good sources for speakers. Keep in mind any audio visual support required by speakers. It is often enlightning and fun to have a special speaker during the meeting talk about a non-computer related topic; it relaxes the minds of the listeners. Be sure to recognize the speakers in some manner; a free meal ticket is usually easy while a speaker's gift is nice. In any case send a letter to each speaker before and after the meeting to give him meeting particulars and thank him. A key to a successful meeting is to give sufficient lead time for users to plan to come and speakers to prepare; plenty of mailings help. Each potential attendee should be made to feel that if he/she comes to the meeting they will return home a winner and a greater success.

Proceedings and technical papers require a definite dedication on the part of a meeting committee. Remember each submittal needs to be edited and evaluated not to mention all the mechanics necessary to publish them. There are some techniques and guidelines, however, that make this choice easier. For local group meetings a simple Xerox reproduction or offset printing will suffice for handouts at the meeting. Attendees seem to like even the briefest of descriptions on paper.

Vendors can often be a great source of support for a users meeting. They may even be willing to sponsor or underwire costs, refreshments, facilities,... provided they can display their wares. This approach works even on a small scale by contacting a vendor salesman.

Don't forget to have some fun at user meetings by having a drawing for a "crazy" door prize. If funds permit a more serious door prize is good and/or a small gift for the meeting host, presented before the whole group. Kudos for all who contributed to and participated in the meeting is a necessity. Then, end the meeting on a high note with the attendees thinking about the next "great" meeting.

Software Library

All computer users like to get a hold of another user's software contribution but often does not have time to contribute himself. An easy rule for this situation is, tit-for-tat, only those who contribute have access to the other contributions.

The form and format of a software contribution must be simple and easy but consistent so a user can easily compare, search for and retrieve entries. The quality of contributions is difficult to maintain but if the user has documented his source code well, and provided a working example and

a simple user's guide then the recipient should be delighted. Assuring quality is very time consuming but a minimum quality can be maintained if the thorough examples can easily be proven to work.

Collection and distribution of software library entries needs serious thought. The media is the first consideration (floppy, paper tape, etc.), organization of supplementary documentation second, and third (but most difficult) how to get the job of reproduction/distribution done. There are many approaches but the more the contributing user does in formatting and testing his contribution the easier collecting and organizing the software becomes. Indexing a software library is not easy but a permuted title index is one easy method, provided each title is meaningful.

Managing and Administration

For small local groups this aspect is relatively easy since the atmosphere is informal and activities are minimum. As the group grows a serious effort on the part of the leaders needs to be put towards the business aspects, i.e., the transition from a "club" to a "business" is considerable. Consider,

1. How to best meet the needs and expectations of the users.
2. Volunteerism and getting the tasks done.

When computer professionals become involved and passionate towards a group they may tend to show emotion and be sensitive to personal reactions. That is, leaders need to pay attention and be sensitive to personal politics enough to make most of the users successful most of the time.

→[Cater to active enthusiasts since they are
the heart of a users group]

Only volunteers who are responsive and serious about contributing can be asked to perform a task. The task requested to be completed must be well defined and feasible within the necessary time frame. Keep in mind that such a volunteer type task is probably low on the volunteer's priority list. Thus, be generous in designating a time frame but be definite about the required completion date. Make sure the volunteer knows when he is done, i.e., recognizes an end point. Do not be vague nor overwhelm the contributor if you wish the task completed.

Unfortunately the family related to the enthusiastic professional may suffer and account should be taken of this fact. There needs to be some recognition or activity planned to involve them. An individual's contribution to the group can be adversely effected by his family and vice versa.

Administration of a larger users group requires establishing well-defined objectives, a guideline for operation, and specification of particular services to users for particular costs.

Vendor Interface

If a users group is focussed on a particular vendor product such as the HP3000 computer system establishing an interface with the vendor is

important. Such a relationship is mutually beneficial since the vendor has an indepth knowledge about how his product works and a successful user assists in promoting vendor sales and provides valuable feedback for the vendor.

It is important to recognize that a vendor company is made up of individuals, each giving a different response to a users group. Recognize also that the vendor's priorities may not be the same as yours. A users group, however, can assist the vendor in clarifying items of common interest to users that merit priority consideration. Clearly a users group, as a group, could possibly provide alternative solutions. An example might be support of a user who maintains a particularly useful utility program.

Since the vendor is in business to make a profit users group activities that promote sales are more easily supported by the vendor. Thus user meetings open to vendor sales prospects are a success. Successful vendor customers support sales and thus vendors tend to support software libraries and technical communication media such as journals.

A good, friendly working relationship between the users group and the vendor is necessary if both are to be successful. Caution, however, only a minimum of requests should be made of the vendor; if the users group is a success the vendor should volunteer more than adequate support. If the users group remains independent from the vendor the group has a freedom needed by enthusiastic computer system users and the users group need only moderate eccentrics to keep progress in motion.

Business Approach

If a group of users can function as an informal group and accomplish their objectives then that is the easy and simple club approach. When the group grows to a state where a significant amount of organization is required, People are hired, and considerable money is processed. The club needs to become a business.

This transformation is considerable and requires a business plan, legal status, financing, and the like. There is legal counsel available that will assist in such preparation. Of course, when a users group becomes a "business" the user services, operations, and resources, along with costs and expenses need to be well defined. The "official" users group needs to plan for carrying on each day, for a directorship to make decisions, and a plan for passing the group on to the future. At this level the users group must be run as a business and not the informal club if it is to be a success.

Structure

The more formal structure of a users group is not required unless it is needed. The need comes when the key group cannot administrate the group easily and/or it is necessary to form a consolidation of communication channels. For volunteer groups this threshold is very low. In a volunteer

group each subgroup can more easily complete a clear limited task. The sum of such efforts if coordinated well, can produce useful results.

The subgroups formed may be around the group's operational tasks such as meetings and publications. Other subgroups may form around application areas, vendor products or geographical areas. The important point here is that each subgroup must have a specific task to perform with a definable end point; the subgroup must commit to accomplishing that task. Continual follow-up, encouragement, and assistance is required by users group management. If this effort cannot be put forth then just lists of committees are a burden and the subgroup should be dissolved.

Conclusion

Becoming involved in a users group is a learning experience. You must realize that while you will gain a great deal of information your rewards will never match your contributions. There is, however, a great latitude for self satisfaction. The alternative to involvement is stagnation, an unchallenging position. If you do not belong to a group of users then join one or form your own, it is easy and simple.

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