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INDEPENDENTLY MINDED

Networking opportunities, knowledge sharing and independent views – just some of the reasons to participate in the Training Special Interest Group, a thriving part of the SAP UK & Ireland User Group.

These are exciting times for the SAP UK & Ireland User Group as the organisation enters a new era. Committed to developing its operations and membership services, the group appointed Craig Dale as Operations Manager in September 2004. “A robust and active user group is vital for both SAP and its customers,” he says. “Our aim is to be regarded as the independent voice of SAP users, and SAP certainly sees the importance of this role. With our strong links at senior management level we offer an important channel for customers to influence SAP in the development of its products and services.”

Membership is open to every company using SAP, and since its foundation in 1988 with five R/2 users, the group now boasts over 250 corporate members representing a broad cross-section of SAP customers of all sizes and types – but is looking to expand still further. “The greater the number of members, the greater our overall influence will be,” confirms Craig. “A growing membership also offers even more opportunities to share knowledge and network with other SAP customers.” A number of initiatives are underway to develop the group’s UK membership services – including the creation of a new, dedicated website due to be launched in June at www.sapusers.org – to provide even better value for the modest annual company subscription fee of

£500 plus VAT. At the same time, the SAP UK & Ireland User Group is forging stronger international links as it discusses affiliation with the US User Group (ASUG) and develops relationships with other user groups across Europe – designed to extend its influence with SAP yet further.

Promoting best practice: the Training SIG

The SAP UK & Ireland User Group currently comprises 13 Special Interest Groups (or ‘SIGs’), most of which focus on a particular SAP application or vertical market. The exception is the Training SIG, a particularly vibrant and thriving group operating across all platforms and areas. “Our members cover just about every type of SAP customer from massive multinationals to smaller companies, universities and local authorities,” says Colin Rice, SAP Training Manager with energy giant Centrica, who took over as Chairman of the Training SIG in December 2004. “By its nature, SAP training – and in particular end user training – touches all parts of an organisation. It is this diversity – as well as the outgoing nature of training people in general – which gives the Training SIG its unique character.”

Like all the SIGs, the Training Group meets four times a year – usually at members’ sites – to discuss topical issues of importance. “The content is dictated by members and could cover any aspect of training, from strategy or methods of proving return on investment to demonstrations of the various training tools available,” explains Colin. “Holding the meetings at members’ premises not only gives us the opportunity to tour their sites, but also enables us to hear the ‘warts-and-all’ story: the challenges they faced, the mistakes they might have made, and how they resolved them.” Typically, between 25 and 35 members attend these quarterly meetings – sufficient for a wide spectrum of views to be expressed, but not too many to inhibit the usual informal, lively and interactive atmosphere. The gatherings are also an excellent opportunity for the SAP Education team to hear at first hand the issues and challenges facing SAP customers: “I’ve attended almost every meeting in the past couple of years and have found them an invaluable source of customer feedback,” says Lisa Clark, Education Director, SAP UK & Ireland. “The recent meeting on strategy was absolutely fascinating and a great opportunity to share the experiences and thoughts of a variety of customers.”

As well as the scheduled programme, individual members also organise additional ad hoc meetings or visits depending on their specific requirements. “It’s an important aspect of networking and vital to the culture of knowledge sharing rather than problem sharing that we’re keen to promote,” continues Colin. “Another important part of this is the production of a series of new or updated best practice guides for members covering a range of training topics.”

Commitment and drive

Perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of the SAP UK & Ireland User Group and its SIGs is that they are run on an almost entirely voluntary basis by a number of committed individuals who give freely of their time despite hectic work schedules. Colin’s own company Centrica, for instance, is in the midst of a major transformation programme as it upgrades to mySAP ERP 2004. “We’re re-engineering all of our business processes to come into line with SAP recommended processes and drive cost efficiencies,” he says. “It’s a massive undertaking that will involve training around 2,000 people – and we’re working to extremely aggressive timescales!”

Clearly excited by the future prospects, Colin is quick to pay tribute to predecessor Bill Batchelor of Rolls-Royce plc for his key role in the Training SIG’s development: “Bill is largely responsible for bringing the Training SIG to where it is today and has left it in an extremely good state. My job is to take it on from here, and I’d like to see more companies coming forward to enlarge the nucleus of involvement and further broaden the range of topics and experience we cover.”

To find out more

If you would like to join the SAP UK & Ireland User Group or would like more information about its activities, please contact Craig Dale, Operations Manager.

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