

Lessons Learned from a Retired SAS® Programmer

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ABSTRACT

I had a successful 38-year career as an epidemiologist and as a statistical SAS programmer. I retired in August of 2021 and have had time to reflect on my career. I have seen a lot of innovation in my 38 years. I used to write reports using DATA _NULL_. The advent of ODS and PROC REPORT has made report writing much simpler. Today's servers are smaller, but more powerful than the mainframe computers that I used early in my career. But I have also learned a lot of lessons along the way, and I would like to share the lessons that I have learned. I'll also share some tips on preparing for retirement.

INTRODUCTION

I have previously talked about how I became a statistical programmer (Smoak 2020). Briefly, I graduated in the early 1980's with an MSPH in epidemiology. I then began my career as an epidemiologist by working at several medical schools doing research, such as case-control studies and cohort studies. In the mid-1990's, I became interested in clinical trials and switched from working in medical schools to working for a biotechnology company as a statistical programmer. In the mid-2000's, I moved into managing statistical programmers. After being a manager for many years, I worked as a consultant. I then retired in August of 2021.

I have seen a lot of innovation over the years. Initially, I learned how to write reports using DATA _NULL_. With the advent of ODS and PROC REPORT, report writing has become much easier. Today's servers are smaller and much more powerful than the old mainframes that I worked on.

LESSONS LEARNED

Here are some key things that I have learned over the years of my career:

PRESENTATION SKILLS

Being an introvert is not a good excuse for not being able to stand in front of an audience and do a good presentation. Presentation skills can be learned just like any other skill. It takes practice to learn to do a good presentation, but introverts can learn to do good presentations as well as extroverts.

There are a variety of ways to learn presentation skills. In high school, I took a debate class. In the class we had to learn both sides of an argument (pro and con). When it came time for the debate, the teacher flipped to coin to decide if you were doing the pro or con side of the argument. You had just two minutes to organize yourself before the debate began. This class taught me how to look at all sides of an issue and how to be organized for a presentation. Of course, you may find other ways to develop presentation skills.

PEOPLE SKILLS

People skills are just as important as technical skills to be a good statistical SAS programmer (Smoak 2022). To be a successful SAS programmer, both technical and people skills are necessary. People skills are needed to clarify your work tasks, to resolve conflicts and to communicate effectively with others (including your manager).

Developing people skills can be difficult for introverts, but it can be done. For example, being an usher can help you with greeting people and helping them to their seat. Attending conferences is a great place to learn to network with people. Take the initiative to introduce yourself to attendees. Take a course on communication is another way to develop people skills.

SPEAK UP

This goes along with having good people skills. Learn to speak up at work – to your manager, in team meetings, when you have questions etc. Especially let your manager know what you want out of your career. For example, if you want additional training, speak up to your manager and let them know what you want.

A part of learning to speak up is to realize that you have something of value to contribute to a discussion. So, share your ideas and opinions in meetings. You do have something of value to contribute. Do the same with your manager – share ideas and opinions.

RISK

This may go along with speaking up. Don't be afraid to take risk. Risk may be things like having a new idea on how to work more efficiently. In this case, talk with your manager about your idea. Risk could also mean changing jobs for one with more opportunity for growth.

Again, taking risk is hard for introverts. An example of taking risk could be that you may have an idea that would improve workflow in your department. Speak up and share your idea. Change is hard, but your idea may be just what is needed to improve things in your department.

MISTAKES

Don't be afraid to admit mistakes. We all make mistakes. It is much better to admit your mistake right away rather than your manager finding out about your mistake from someone else.

As a manager, I have found mistakes by one of my programmers. It is not a fun conversation to have with them when I discover their mistake. I would rather have them to come to me and admit their mistake in the first place.

ENJOY WORK

Do what you enjoy the most. Sometimes people really enjoy programming, and someone may suggest that you would be good at managing a group. But if you really enjoy programming stick with what you enjoy doing the most. You will be happier doing what you enjoy the most.

Don't work the money. Yes, statistical programming can be a good paying career choice. You may even have good programming skills, but if you don't enjoy your work, you won't find personal satisfaction. A satisfying career is worth pursuing.

PREPARING FOR RETIREMENT

Most people know that you need to prepare financially for retirement, including needing healthcare if you retire before age 65. So, I will not cover these issues.

Personally, I took four years to think through and prepare for my retirement. First, I thought about what I want to do in retirement. I have seen people retire and then unretire because they were bored. Do not retire until you have determined how you want to spend your time in retirement! The easiest way to do this is to ask yourself what you value in life. Once you answer that question then you can think of activities to do that reflect your values. One thing that I determined that was a value for me was mentoring young people. Thus, a part of my time in retirement is spent on mentoring young people.

Second, prepare for transitioning to retirement. My last year of work was as a consultant, and I limited my hours worked to 20 hours per week. Most of the time, I worked in the morning and had the afternoons free for appointments. This helped me to transition from working full-time to not working. I would highly recommend this strategy.

CONCLUSION

I have had a satisfying career as an epidemiologist and as a statistical SAS programmer. I have enjoyed my career, but I am now enjoying retirement. Along the way, I learned some valuable lessons:

- Introverts can be good at doing presentations

- People skills are just as valuable as technical skills in being a good statistical programmer
- Speak up at work
- Don't be afraid to take risk
- Don't be afraid to admit mistakes
- Do what you enjoy the most

Prepare for retirement. Do not retire until you know what you want to do in retirement! The best way to do this is to determine what you value in life and do activities in retirement that reflect your values. I also recommend work part-time for a year before retiring.

A final piece of advice: To make good decisions, do your due diligence in gathering information and talk to experienced people about the decision you want to make.

REFERENCES

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