



Powering ***THE POWER TO KNOW[®]***:

How SAS Leverages Cloud Academy
to Create Customer Value & Beyond





SAS is the trusted analytics powerhouse for organizations seeking immediate value from their data. SAS has been applying analytics to business problems for over 40 years. With a deep bench of predictive analytic solutions and broad industry knowledge, the company boasts trusted relationships with most of the Fortune 500 and is one of the world's largest privately held companies around.

We sat down with Sandy DeFelice, Director of Customer Advisory Support, and Connie Marthinsen, Principal Learning and Development Specialist. We wanted to understand more about SAS and how its investment in Cloud Academy has proven strategic at both a functional and global level.



Sandy DeFelice

Director of Customer Advisory Support



Connie Marthinsen

*Principal Learning
and Development Specialist*



The Context

Cloud computing has not just changed the way that software is deployed, but it has also changed the way that solutions are sold. DeFelice is responsible for the Customer Advisory team supporting the US Consumer and Communications commercial sales business unit and she has seen that shift first-hand. Today, SAS customers seek out trusted advisors who can speak authoritatively on a number of topics such as SAS deployments to cloud and hybrid cloud, performance considerations, and leveraging SAS alongside open source modeling techniques. “From a sales perspective, we needed to be able to present deployment options to our customers in a meaningful way – even before we got to the actual deployment or the start of services,” says DeFelice. “The cloud has really become a very important delivery mechanism, and it is part of pretty much every conversation that we have from a sales perspective.”

Anticipating the shift, DeFelice began to seek out ways to develop a skill set for the sales organization that would help drive effective customer conversations and ultimately add more value to the customer relationship. In some cases, SAS customers were new to the cloud, which meant the knowledge she needed to develop at scale would need both breadth and depth.

Meanwhile, the results were coming in from Connie Marthinsen’s annual training needs assessment, which surveys management’s priorities for technical development and drives the corporate strategy for technical learning efforts and needs. Marthinsen’s role is the embodiment of the culture of learning at SAS; the company is very forward-looking in terms of supporting its customers and understands how investments in employee education translate to value. Marthinsen collaborates with business units across SAS to ensure alignment with ongoing initiatives, leverage identified strengths, and eliminate redundant activities. She is responsible for formulating and implementing quarterly and annual strategic technical learning development plans that span multiple divisions based

on the assessment of requirements through surveys and interviews. In the fall of 2018, Marthinsen’s survey indicated an overwhelming need for training around cloud technologies both domestically and internationally.

The large volume of requests prompted Marthinsen to look outside of traditional instructor-led technical training delivery.

“It became apparent to me that there were more efficient options than offering onsite training given the demand,” she recalls.

She began researching a number of online options with the assistance of subject matter experts from various divisions globally. At this same time, DeFelice came to her with her needs.

DeFelice had spearheaded the idea of cloud training and had taken it to her US counterparts whose business units are made up by some 250 people. With everyone in agreement on the need, DeFelice was tasked with figuring out how and where to deliver the training. When she teamed up with Marthinsen, the initiative took on an even greater scale and expanded internationally. The selection requirements for a solution expanded accordingly.

Risk mitigation is a phrase more typically associated with software deployments than with training deployments, and it is one that Marthinsen and DeFelice reference with regularity. With Marthinsen’s almost two decades of experience rolling out technical training initiatives, she anchored the vendor selection process in continuous risk assessment. “Every decision that she made, every decision that I made was based on risk mitigation,” DeFelice says.

The training content would need to be of high quality and highly relevant, and they would need to find real value in the features and functionality of the software.



“We did a lot of points of comparison. We move fast and we're demanding. The education aspect is so critical to us, so we really ask for a lot of performance out of people and vendors.”

De-Risking the Initiative

When SAS selected Cloud Academy as its cloud training provider, Marthinsen found a platform and a partnership that empowered the de-risking of the cloud technology training initiative at SAS. [Training Plan Cycles](#) would play an important role. “We wanted to be able to monitor the progress of the students by setting up training plans, which allowed us to focus the teams on what they need to accomplish for a certain period of time,” says Marthinsen.

Content was also important. It had to be relevant and up-to-date, given the diversity in and the amount of training SAS anticipated assigning in connection with their training cycles.

In preparation for the deployment of Cloud Academy across SAS globally, Marthinsen and DeFelice partnered with Cloud Academy's Customer Success organization. SAS integrated single sign-on with the Cloud Academy platform to ensure a seamless experience for staff while Marthinsen liaised with the various stakeholders to lay out initial training plans.

“From an end user perspective, implementation seemed immediate,” says DeFelice. “It seemed like we signed – and we were on the platform the next day.”

If there had been any doubt about whether Cloud Academy's Customer Success program was just a sales pitch, that doubt was eliminated quickly. “They have just been tremendous in their support for us,” says DeFelice.

“I'm really pleased with the incorporation of the customer success piece into the price point. That, for me, has forever kind of changed my approach to thinking about how we go after other vendors – it has been an inclusive strategy that has been quite meaningful and helped us with this deployment.”

“As the Administrator for the Cloud Academy portal, I found the support from the customer service team with getting the global teams assigned to the appropriate training plans to be invaluable. I couldn't have done it without their training and quick responses to my questions,” says Marthinsen.

A New Level of Confidence

Six months in, the launch of Cloud Academy at SAS has not only been de-risked – it is off to a meaningful and successful start. More than 250 staff have been through a Training Plan Cycle. “They introduce accountability around training. If students know that they're being asked to follow a certain training plan with a certain date attached to it, the engagement increases a lot,” reports Marthinsen.

DeFelice equates the platform to getting a good deal on a luxury sports car:

“I feel we have Ferrari-like access to lots of different things – the platform, [labs](#), and instructors – and all that for what I would say is very fair pricing. We really were able to get some of the best training that's out there in the industry.”



Team Managers are actively using Nudge functionality within training plan cycles, which Marthinsen says helps inspire employees to continue training toward their goals. As SAS continues onward, they are gaining valuable knowledge and experience, as well as industry certifications. Marthinsen adds that the partnership with Cloud Academy has even enhanced the SAS skill development playbook: “We have learned the value of assigning stakeholders to various regions and teams to monitor student progress and report back to management.”

“The more people hear about the Cloud Academy program and our success with it, the more people come to me who want to be involved,” says Marthinsen. Nearly all of the customer-facing roles at SAS are represented in the program. It is a global training initiative thanks to Marthinsen.

“It has been extremely valuable for us to really deepen out those skills and have those certifications. It has built credibility with our customers when they know we really understood the problem,” says DeFelice. “Speaking for my part of the organization, there is a new level of confidence that has increased based on their knowledge.”

Strategic Alignment

As the industry continues to evolve from a technology perspective, SAS is committed to staying ahead of those changes and helping its customers by advising and bridging learning gaps.

“Why did we do this to begin with? To be more valuable in front of the customer,” DeFelice points out.

For SAS, this is a differentiation story about providing thought leadership to their customers as well as idea sharing. SAS is driving teams toward idea sharing both internally and externally. “We’re having conversations about different flavors of cloud, the most efficient way

to deploy our product, what kind of performance our customers can get, how data can be stored on premises and in the cloud, and how SAS works with open source modeling techniques,” DeFelice describes. “These are situations where we can explain different techniques for our customers and provide them strong ideas on how to improve their approach to deploying analytics. Idea sharing is a big piece.”

The SAS deployment of the Cloud Academy training program is aligning strategically with where the company is heading in a much more specific and intentional direction. That direction includes its product platform called [SAS® Viya®](#). Viya is a platform on which the SAS data science community can interact with both SAS and open source and, because it can be deployed anywhere, offers speed, flexibility, and a reduction in total cost of ownership. With the Cloud Academy platform, customer-facing staff at SAS will have the breadth of knowledge and the skills to understand, anticipate, and guide customers’ evolving architectures.

The power of the Viya product platform highlights the value to the organization of technology skills that are both broad and deep. As for depth, staff will have hundreds of Hands-on Labs and access to thousands of hours of training material at their fingertips.

As for encyclopedic depth of knowledge? Perhaps Marthinsen said it best when discussing her selection criteria: “We really liked that staff could download courses to their mobile phones. When teams are flying to an engagement and their phones are in airplane mode, they can still review training content they had studied before.”



Cloud Academy is the leading enterprise digital skills development platform accelerating innovation through guided Learning Paths, Hands-on Labs, and Skill Assessment. Companies trust Cloud Academy to deliver role-specific training on leading clouds (AWS, Azure, Google Cloud Platform), essential methodologies needed to operate on and between clouds (DevOps, security), and capabilities that are unlocked by the cloud (big data, machine learning, IoT).

Leading organizations customize Cloud Academy to contextualize learning and leverage the platform to assign, manage, and measure cloud enablement at scale. Learn more at cloudacademy.com.

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