

# How SAP Expert Tom McGinnis Came to Value End-User Training

An Interview with Thomas McGinnis, Ph.D., ASUG Instructor



**Thomas McGinnis, Ph.D.**

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According to the ASUG 2019 State of the Community study, the greatest need among ASUG members is knowledge. More than 40% of respondents indicated that they want ASUG to provide more training and education—a response that more than doubled from the previous year. As organizations gear up for their SAP S/4HANA implementations and start to recognize skills gaps, that need will increase.

## End-User Education Is Key

SAP end-user training is rarely the top priority for an organization. The everyday end user typically learns in real time, on the job from an internal guide that has been passed around their organization for years. As a result, what ASUG has seen manifest is a knowledge deficit that can create serious inefficiencies across an entire organization. As executives and managers search for answers, the business case for end-user education begins to grow in importance and value. Company leaders are ultimately responsible for improving employee performance.

ASUG has created a curriculum to answer the call for skills growth and development across the entire SAP ERP ECC and SAP S/4HANA platforms. We sat down with Thomas McGinnis, an ASUG instructor with more than 20 years of experience, to discuss what and how he teaches and how our courses can help you avoid a skills gap at your organization.

## ASUG: What is your background in the industry and area of focus?

**Thomas:** After I graduated from college in the '80s, I began working for Dow Corning, a subsidiary of Dow Chemical in Midland, Michigan. I started my career by working on end-user

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computing and relational databases—essentially all the new things I didn't learn about in school.

There was a lot of self-teaching involved in the early days, especially because I was thrown in headfirst. But it's what got me on my legs for the business process side and eventually what led to my experience in global systems and project management.

I first heard of SAP in 1994 and was probably the biggest SAP naysayer within Dow Corning. But we saw ourselves at a competitive disadvantage without it. So, we decided to go with it. One of the best decisions Dow Corning made at the time was to allow us to play in a sandbox for six months. We were building a global design but weren't going to take a big-bang approach for the rollout because, quite frankly, we didn't have the resources to do it all at once. And Dow Corning did not like working with consultants—the company preferred to keep knowledge in-house. Playing in the sandbox led us to a lot of discovery, and within six months, we figured out what we needed.

It took us about nine months from when we started to when we went live, and at that time, it was one of the fastest SAP implementations. This was before value road maps, so we built our own methodology and presented about our project at SAPPHIRE NOW that year.

## ASUG: How long have you been teaching people how to use SAP products?

**Thomas:** After 10 years at Dow Corning, I realized I wanted to try something more challenging and went to KPMG Consulting, where I worked on more than 20 projects. During this time, I also was helping a friend develop a programming class for Davenport University. That put a burr under my blanket and I thought, “Well maybe this is something I want to do full time.” So, I left consulting and earned my master’s degree at Central Michigan University, which is an SAP University Alliance school. I also taught there for a year. I went on to complete my Ph.D. and teach at the University of North Texas. I then moved to Grand Valley State University and taught SAP business processes, data warehousing, and business intelligence for seven years.

I’ve learned over the years that SAP is not something you train someone on. It’s something you need to teach. It’s process and knowledge. Training implies that you show someone how to push a button here and there. With SAP, you need to know

more than just which button to push—you need to understand the why. Many organizations never had done end-to-end training from a process standpoint, and that’s what a group of us at ASUG aimed to do when we designed these courses.

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## ASUG: Which courses do you currently teach?

**Thomas:** I teach our business process fundamentals courses, as well as the Transitions to SAP S/4HANA courses. I also teach the Transitions to SAP S/4HANA for Finance course, and I facilitate the SAP S/4HANA Discovery Workshop.

Our fundamentals courses address the basics of the make-buy-sell business processes (and the finance components they need). They are targeted to new

SAP users. We spend a half day each doing hands-on exercises on finance, procurement, fulfillment, and production. Along the way, we address topics such as navigation, searching, organizational data, and master data, to name a few. At the end, students know the basic business processes and are conversant in SAP terminology.

The Transitions to SAP S/4HANA for Finance course is aimed at experienced SAP users. These courses help users transition between ECC and SAP S/4HANA. From a process perspective, we compare the functionality, highlighting the changes and discussing the implications. This is done through discussion/lecture as well as hands-on exercises in ECC and SAP S/4HANA environments.

The discovery workshops are targeted for project team members who are starting their migration to SAP S/4HANA. We spend time working from the project perspective—not only covering security and migration implications, but also the available project tools to help with the migration.

## ASUG: What’s your teaching philosophy?

**Thomas:** A lot of the SAP training available to organizations is software-focused. I believe it’s important to focus on the end-to-end process. If you understand the needs of the overall business process, then it is much easier for someone to grasp how the software will address those needs.

Also, software training becomes compartmentalized. In most organizations, if you are a purchasing person, you only get trained on that specific aspect of the business process. You don’t understand what the other people in the process are doing or need. It’s important to show the entire process to everyone so they understand the context of what they are doing.

This approach also improves user adoption. Many people see SAP as a cookie-cutter system: This is the way it came and this is what we’re stuck with. But instead, if you see SAP as a skeleton that can be built for



all business processes and best practices, then it starts to make a bit more sense.

**ASUG: What do you see SAP end users struggle with the most?**

**Thomas:** The why. For instance: Why am I doing this? Why is it this way? Why does this impact somebody else? Users don't know because they usually only see their own piece in the puzzle. Then they struggle with the why, and they lack confidence in how to proceed.

One teaching approach I like is to throw people into the deep end of a business process. This allows them to struggle a bit and learn through controlled failure. They'll make mistakes, but that's all right because it helps to direct their questions. When you work with a student to discover the why behind a specific issue, it makes much more sense to them and provides a much deeper explanation. Soon they have the confidence to dig into problems on their own. This empowerment translates to much more productive and flexible users.

**Learn how you can get more from your investment in SAP ERP ECC or SAP S/4HANA and eliminate your skills gap. See our current course schedule.**

**ASUG: What's unique about our courses?**

**Thomas:** The courses are process-focused, not software-focused. All the SAP parts are addressed, just from a process perspective. How does the organizational structure support a process? What master data is required for a process? How should I fix a process error?

While introducing the process, we'll hit all the other aspects (navigation, searching, etc.). The end-to-end perspective of a process is the biggest value of all our courses.

**ASUG: What's the value of hands-on training? What about training done in a classroom of your colleagues?**

**Thomas:** With hands-on training, you get to learn through failure. That's important because making those mistakes allows you to figure out the why. The value of training done in a classroom of your colleagues is that it allows you to talk through those mistakes and failures with each other. You learn different ways of thinking about the why.

Broadly speaking, there are three types of learning styles: there are auditory learners (learning via words), visual learners (learning via images), and kinesthetic learners (learning by doing). We try to cater to all three in our classes.

**ASUG: Thinking back, would you change anything you've done to get to this point in your career?**

**Thomas:** I made the most of what was available back then. What I really wish I had was the type of courses I'm teaching now. In 1994, I would have loved a process-based perspective of SAP. I would have loved a discovery workshop for the transition between SAP R/2 and SAP R/3. (Yeah, that dates me.) The school of hard knocks provides a deep education, but it takes a lot of time.

ASUG courses offer a way for members to get that deeper education without having to go through the school of hard knocks. Members new to SAP need to see the wider process perspectives that the fundamentals courses have to offer. Experienced users need to see what the transitions to SAP S/4HANA will be like. And project teams need to see the transition as well as the tools they have available to make their SAP S/4HANA transitions smoother.



Founded in 1991, Americas' SAP Users' Group (ASUG) is the world's largest SAP user group, serving 2,300-plus businesses via companywide memberships. ASUG's mission is to help people and organizations get the most value from their investments in SAP technology. The Chicago-based organization accomplishes this by connecting and educating people through in-person and virtual events, delivering customer feedback to SAP, and advocating for its members. Find additional information at [www.asug.com/about](http://www.asug.com/about)