Uncertainty Sidekick Pro FAQs

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Integrated Sciences Group answers frequently asked questions about our Uncertainty Sidekick Pro software. The answers are intended to provide further clarification about the capabilities of our most cost-effective uncertainty analysis product. If you have any questions or comments regarding any of the FAQ topics listed below or would like us to answer additional questions, please contact us at isg@isgmax.com.

Question	Answer
I already use your Uncertainty Sidekick freeware, why would I need Uncertainty Sidekick Pro?	Our Pro version handles both direct and multivariate measurements; whereas, our freeware only handles direct measurements. Uncertainty Sidekick Pro also has a built-in Instrument Database that can be used for storing and retrieving instrument and parameter specifications.
	Consequently, Uncertainty Sidekick Pro is an ideal uncertainty analysis solution for calibration laboratories that support a wide variety of test and measurement equipment.
	Note: Analyses developed with our Uncertainty Sidekick freeware are upwardly compatible with the Pro version.
What is the difference between a direct measurement and a multivariate measurement?	The physical quantity that is measured may be a directly measurable value or derived from the measurement of other quantities. The former type of measurements are called "direct measurements," while the latter are called "multivariate measurements."
Are uncertainty estimates made with Uncertainty Sidekick Pro suitable for calibration laboratory accreditation?	Yes. Uncertainty Sidekick Pro is a comprehensive measurement uncertainty analysis tool for achieving compliance with ISO 17025 and ANSI/NCSL Z540.3. As with all our uncertainty analysis software, Uncertainty Sidekick Pro incorporates methods found in the *ISO Guide to the Expression of Uncertainty in Measurement* (GUM).
Has Uncertainty Sidekick Pro been approved by laboratory accreditation organizations?	No. Contrary to what other companies may claim, accreditation organizations do not (and should not) endorse any software application for estimating measurement uncertainty.
	Occasionally, a customer will encounter an assessor that prefers to see a simplified or "dumbed-down" uncertainty analysis. However, there has never been any problem with our software providing the uncertainty analysis and reporting requirements needed to achieve accreditation.

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What error distributions are accounted for in Uncertainty Sidekick Pro?	Uncertainty Sidekick Pro computes statistics for the normal, uniform (rectangular) and Student's t distributions. In general, the normal and Student's t distributions have been found to be relevant to most real world measurement applications. The uniform distribution is applicable for estimating the uncertainty due to the resolution of a digital readout or the quantization error resulting from the digitization of an analog signal.
How do I choose the appropriate probability distribution for each error source?	Uncertainty Sidekick Pro automatically selects the appropriate probability distribution based on user input for the given error source. The normal distribution is applied as the default distribution, unless otherwise indicated. Regarding the combined error distribution, if the degrees of freedom for the combined uncertainty are finite, then the Student's t distribution is used to develop confidence limits (or an expanded uncertainty) and coverage factors. If the degrees of freedom are infinite, then the normal distribution is used.
Is Uncertainty Sidekick Pro difficult to use?	No. Uncertainty Sidekick Pro utilizes interactive, step-by-step procedure checklists that access drill-down screens and worksheets that facilitate your uncertainty analysis. Users can also choose from a list of measurement configurations that instructs Uncertainty Sidekick Pro to de-activate screens and worksheets that are not required for the uncertainty analysis. In addition, Uncertainty Sidekick Pro has a full on-screen Help function and comes with a comprehensive user manual.
Why can't I simply use an Excel spreadsheet to develop my uncertainty analyses?	A main advantage of spreadsheet programs, such as Excel, is that most technical personnel routinely use them. However, considerable programming effort is required to fully implement the uncertainty analysis methods outlined in the ISO GUM. This includes the development of algorithms for computing partial derivatives of multivariate measurement equations. The resulting robust uncertainty analysis tool quickly becomes a full-fledged software application instead of a simple spreadsheet template. An ISG paper that details why spreadsheets are inadequate for uncertainty analysis

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	can be downloaded from our website.
Why isn't Uncertainty Sidekick Pro designed to run as a plug-in for spreadsheet applications like Excel or Lotus?	While most people are comfortable using spreadsheets, there are significant disadvantages of developing an uncertainty analysis tool within an Excel or Lotus spreadsheet program. These disadvantages, outlined below, are the primary reasons why only one off-the-shelf uncertainty analysis application is currently available as a spreadsheet add-in.

1. More and more companies and government agencies are realizing how difficult it can be to ensure the integrity of worksheet calculations and built-in macros after they have been widely distributed. The primary reason for this is that spreadsheet programs like Excel or Lotus are specifically designed to provide easy access to the full functionality of the program. Consequently, it is not difficult for someone with a moderate familiarity with spreadsheet programs to access and modify many of these "behind-the-scenes" macros by simply copying the spreadsheet template(s).

2. Employing password protections and hiding cells cannot completely prevent access to and modification of macros and equations without significantly degrading the overall functionality of the user interface.

3. An uncertainty analysis tool should always include error traps to ensure that realistic information and data are entered in the appropriate fields and cells. Error trapping is more difficult with Excel or Lotus spreadsheet programs because the cells in which data are entered cannot be completely secured.

4. As with other Microsoft applications, Excel workbooks and worksheets are particularly vulnerable to macro viruses. Simply opening an infected workbook can activate the virus. Utilizing Excel's security feature to block potentially unsafe macros often causes problems running plug-in applications. As a result, the security level must be set at low and you'll have to rely on your antivirus software to effectively scan and protect you from potential macro viruses.

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	5. It is unwise to assume that MS Excel provides validated math functions. Over the years we have identified several instances where the MS Excel statistical functions provide insufficient precision for uncertainty analysis calculations. Some of the functions are not defined properly, producing incorrect results. Kurtosis, a measure of the peakedness of the distribution of a sample of data, is an obvious example.
Why isn't the ability to modify spreadsheet macros a desirable feature?	If a company claims that it allows user's to modify their macros or other software code, it is an acknowledgement that the application is not robust or comprehensive enough to handle a wide variety of analysis scenarios. As a result, the software quickly becomes an uncontrolled shareware application. This an imprudent approach for developing freeware applications, let alone software products.
What reports can I generate with Uncertainty Sidekick Pro?	Uncertainty Sidekick Pro has a variety of reporting levels, including summary reports and "drill-down" reports for complete communication of your analysis results.
Has Uncertainty Sidekick Pro been validated?	Currently, there are no standards or guidelines for testing and validating uncertainty analysis software. However, there are many common-sense protocols that ISG applies, some of which are summarized below.

Validation of mathematical and statistical methods. ISG routinely publishes papers and articles that clearly describe the mathematical and statistical concepts that are incorporated in our software products. This serves two purposes:

1. It shows that we have an unsurpassed technical understanding of uncertainty analysis concepts and principles.
2. The information can be reviewed and scrutinized in the public domain.

Verification of numerical approximations and calculations.
Depending upon the sophistication of the numerical algorithms, our program calculations are verified via hand calculations, math and statistics applications such as

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	MathCAD and, in some instances, Excel spreadsheets. Verification of numerical algorithms are achieved in a number of ways including:

1. Extensive alpha testing via internal peer review and verification.

2. Vigorous beta testing via external review and verification by selected customer base.

3. Widespread peer review and verification via distribution of freeware subprograms and applets.

4. Large-scale customer use and feedback over the past 15+ years.

Verification of program functionality.
Another important aspect of our software validation is the verification that the program screens, templates, or worksheets function as intended and that data entered into drill-down screens are properly stored and transferred to other screens as needed. Our protocol for testing and validating program functionality is the same as described for numerical algorithms.

Note: When software validation is of primary concern, we provide customers with specific validation reports upon request. These reports are designed to help our clients verify that our software performs in accordance with its intended use.

Question	Answer
Will Uncertainty Sidekick Pro run on the Windows 7, Vista, Macintosh or Linux operating systems?	Uncertainty Sidekick Pro is a 32-bit Windows-based application. Therefore, it will run on the 32-bit editions of the Windows 7 and Vista operating systems. The Microsoft WOW64 emulator also allows 32-bit applications to run seamlessly on the 64-bit editions of these operating systems.

Uncertainty Sidekick Pro does not run on the Macintosh or Linux operating systems. However, several of our customers use our software on Macintosh computers running a PC emulator program without any degradation in functionality. Similar PC emulator programs are available for the Linux operating system.

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How does Uncertainty Sidekick Pro compare to other ISG uncertainty analysis software?	Selecting an appropriate analysis tool can often be as daunting a task as evaluating measurement uncertainty. A quick reference table comparing the features and capabilities of Uncertainty Sidekick Pro to our Uncertainty Sidekick freeware and UncertaintyAnalyzer software is accessible from our website.
How does Uncertainty Sidekick Pro compare to software offered by other companies?	As a developer and marketer of uncertainty analysis tools, it is important for Integrated Sciences Group to periodically assess the capabilities of similar software applications. An up-to-date review and comparison of several commercial and freeware applications is accessible from our website.
What kind of technical support can I expect to receive?	Technical support is a major consideration for many software users, especially when using a specialized analysis program. Registered users of Uncertainty Sidekick Pro have access to free technical support (via phone, fax and email) from professionals with established measurement uncertainty analysis expertise.
Why should I purchase uncertainty analysis software from ISG?	Since ISG has been a major pioneer in developing measurement science analytical methodology over the past 35 years, our software products embody the most advanced tools and methods available.
	Our state-of-the-art software products not only comply with ISO standards and guidelines, they also incorporate several ground-breaking measurement uncertainty analysis methods and techniques developed and published by ISG personnel.
	Our commitment to product excellence is epitomized by an unmatched level of software maintenance and support. Unlike other companies, we continually strive to improve the functionality of our software by including customer suggested new features or enhancements as part of our free service updates.