



How Information Builders Gives Clients the Skills Needed to Achieve ROI

If a company's customers lack the skills to achieve ROI from the deployment of a technology solution, it's a losing proposition for both the buyer and the seller. In today's tight technology market, where the need to demonstrate ROI is a prerequisite of every sale, smart solutions providers are assuming greater responsibility for the skills of their clients' employees. Information Builders has become one of the world's leading providers of business intelligence software, in part by taking responsibility for the skills of their customers.

"When we deliver a product," says Kristin Devlin, "we also deliver the skills to make it work. We provide our clients with training, and we back that training up with our own online skills assessment and certification program." As a longtime account executive and current Director of Customer Education for Information Builders, Devlin has spent more than 20 years working with the complex needs of the company's global clientele. With more than 11,000 customer sites depending on its real-time information delivery software and services, Information Builders now provides business intelligence solutions to most of today's Fortune 100 companies, as well as a variety of government agencies.

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Client Skills Drive Client ROI

The company's flagship product, WebFOCUS, gives clients the technology they need to turn data into business intelligence. The power of WebFOCUS to enable application development, comprehensive reporting and enterprise efficiency is driving an expanded use for Information Builders' products and services within client organizations. But simply delivering WebFOCUS to the client is not enough to ensure success. To unleash the intelligence that gives WebFOCUS its power and flexibility, a level of skill on the part of the client-side user is needed.

"We have to make sure our customers are successful with our products as quickly as possible. Our goal is to make them realize ROI quickly," says Devlin. "For Information Builders' clients, employee skills are crucial to translating our company's products and services into a significant return. That's why offering training and skills validation [certification] to client developers is crucial."

Skills Measurement and Certification—a Solution for Ensuring Client Value

"Saying you're going to train your customers and proving that you've done it are two different things. We prove the value of our training by following it up with skills certification. Clients see certification as a valuable feature of our offering. For us, it's a great competitive advantage."

Information Builders provides client-side developers with training and then offers online tests for their software to certify their Information Builders' skills. The use of skills measurement tools to certify job candidates and employees is a familiar practice for many business decision-makers, but few companies capitalize on the opportunity to create value and develop loyalty by these same tools to certify the skills of their own clients.

"When we sell the product, we sell the certification package with it. We provide the training to build an application, we provide the WebFOCUS solution, and we provide the ability to certify that they have the skills to build the application. If they show some weaknesses, they can go back and take training to make it up. Training takes about eleven days, and it's usually spread out over 3–6 months."



Tactics for Success—The Development of an Effective Skills Assessment

One of the major factors behind the success of Information Builders' certification program is the quality of the custom assessment that makes it possible. Developed by leading online skills measurement provider, Brainbench, Information Builders' certification assessment provides a challenging, repeatable skills assessment, available to test-takers online.

"The quality of the test is important," says Devlin, "we've learned a great deal from our experience with offering the certifications." For companies that want to certify skills for their products, Devlin notes that there are many temptations. "One of the biggest temptations" she says, "is to say you're going to build the certification test yourself. At first, it seems easy. A test is only some questions about your product, right? But it's more than that."

"The certification exam is not just a test, it's the result of a full length assessment development process that adheres to specific procedures. In the end, it is the development process that goes into the certification exam that gives the certification validity, and it's not something you would have the resources or expertise to do in-house. To make a custom test for your product, it's good to have executive buy-in. In our case, management sees certification as an extension of our commitment to help our developer constituency grow."

Skills Measurement and Certification System Supports the Sales Cycle

According to Devlin, the business need to measure and certify client skills is directly related to the sales cycle and today's tight economy. "We're finding that the people we sell to are very informed, experienced buyers in the corporate marketplace," she says. "Every purchase they recommend will receive tight scrutiny. They need to show how it affects the bottom line to get through the approval process. The advantage of adding skills certification to our offering is that it enables us to show the prospect that we are committed to getting their employees up and running with our product. The certification process is very important. It's not just words, it's something very real and tangible."

In addition to the business benefits for the client, Devlin also points out that there is a well-defined skills culture that dramatically affects how clients use WebFOCUS. "By IT industry standards," says Devlin, "we've been around a very long time. And back in the '70s and '80s, a lot of people were doing their own coding. It made our customers very successful. Today, we operate in a much more competitive market. There are a lot of products out there, and developers use what they're comfortable with."

"While some may be comfortable with our product, there may be others in the client organization who are not familiar, so we give them the training and certification. A developer who gets certified with our product becomes a champion for us. That's extremely important. For the individual, it's a valuable professional credential. To expand within the client, we have to get out there as much as possible, with the product, with the education, and with the culture to support it."

Moving Ahead—Skills for an Evolving Product

One of the challenges faced by Information Builders is the pace of its own evolution. "Our products and services must always change to meet new demands, new technologies, and ultimately, the needs of our existing clients," according to Devlin. "We have a constant commitment that as we evolve, our certification needs to evolve with us. What's the bottom line? The customers that use our product are able to go to market faster, and in the end that means we give them the ROI they need. The skills certification is worth it. It's an advantage we work to keep."