

Information Builders enables agile information solutions with business intelligence (BI) and integration technologies. WebFOCUS – the most widely utilized business intelligence platform – connects to any enterprise system or application and enables simple and intuitive interaction with information.

Florida Department of Financial Services

Snapshot

Organization

Florida Department of Financial Services.

The Challenge

Companies that sold goods and services to the state of Florida were having difficulty tracking down payment information. State employees were spending much of their time locating this information and forwarding vendor phone calls to other departments.

The Strategy

Using WebFOCUS from Information Builders, the department built a Web site that lets vendors tap into the database where the state stores information about vendor payments.

The Results

The easy-to-use system has relieved a substantial burden – for both vendors and state employees – particularly in staff time spent tracking down payment information.

Information Builders Solution

WebFOCUS.



WebFOCUS Grows in Florida

BI Brings State and Vendors Together

Sometimes technology can solve everyone's problems at the same time. Consider the Florida Department of Financial Services.

Its staff and those in other state departments were answering thousands of telephone calls from companies that sold goods and services to the state. These vendors wanted more information about payments received from the state, such as which service or invoice number the payment was for. The state's staff spent a lot of time trying to find that information in their computer system, while the vendors spent a lot of time trying to find that information in state departments.

This problem disappeared with the development of a Web site created by the department for state vendors, using Information Builders' WebFOCUS. Now vendors can get their payment information, state employees get fewer calls from frustrated vendors, and everyone is spending less time calling each other trying to find out where the payment went.

“Every day, we have vendors contacting us wanting to know the URL. Then they often call us back the next day and say, ‘Boy, this is sure a lot better than in the old days,’ ”

Integrating Existing Systems

The state had some special requirements that made this project more than an ordinary Web site. First, the software that delivered the data to end users had to run directly on the department’s mainframe. “We’re a mainframe shop, and we felt much more comfortable dealing with the security issues on a mainframe,” says Tamlyn Ellis, chief of programming design in the department’s Division of Information Systems. In addition, the department believed it would be easier to develop the system they wanted if they could do it in their existing mainframe environment.

Second, the Web site had to be capable of talking to the Adabas database in which invoice information is stored. WebFOCUS’ wide range of connectivity solutions, including the ability to read and write to Adabas from a Web browser, made it the obvious solution. The state is using WebFOCUS to update DB2 from Adabas extracts, with plans to report off Adabas with WebFOCUS in the future.

And finally, since the department was putting its mainframe directly on the Internet, the system needed to be reliable and secure.

Secure, Smooth Transactions

WebFOCUS, designed to deliver powerful database reporting on any system, was the only software that met all these criteria, and it delivered exactly what everyone wanted to see. Jack Peterson, who acts as a vendor ombudsman and oversees tracking of some of the more difficult exchanges between the department and vendors, describes vendor reaction to the new system quickly and briefly: “They love it.”

Any vendor that provides goods or services to the state of Florida can simply visit the Web site, type in their state-issued vendor identification number, and see all the payments made to them for the previous six months. Because the department is confident about security on the system, it is remarkably open. No registration is required – all a vendor needs to know is the Web address of the site where payment information is available.

“Every day, we have vendors contacting us wanting to know the URL. Then they often call us back the next day and say, ‘Boy, this is sure a lot better than in the old days,’ ” says Ellis. Peterson explains what a marathon some of those calls were. Someone trying to track down a payment from the Florida Department of Children and Families, for example, needed to know which of 15 offices around the state actually made the payment, information that might not be available on any of the documents they received from the state. Finding the right office could take several telephone calls and transfers to different offices. With the new system, “they get the right site the first time,” Peterson says.

Simple to Build, Simple to Use

For as much benefit as it delivered, the WebFOCUS system was remarkably easy to implement. It was assigned to a programmer who had no experience with either the Web or WebFOCUS (although the department had used WebFOCUS earlier for its intranet).

Find Out More

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“This system gets the right people talking right off the bat.”

“He took a few classes in HTML, Web design, scripting, and WebFOCUS. He then worked on the project half-time for about six months,” says Ellis. He did have other work to do: He was his section’s lead on Y2K conversion.

When the Web site for vendors was finished, the Florida Department of Financial Services had a system which, after a few tweaks and some suggestions from users, has been running happily ever since. Although the state has an interactive voice response system, which helped reduce some telephone calls, the Web site seems to have made the biggest difference. It gets about 10,000 hits a month from vendors looking for information.

The state has 200,000 vendors, says Ellis, and she expects that most of them will eventually use the Web system, not only because of its convenience, but because it delivers better information. Vendors get much more detail about payments, including crucial data such as the voucher control number that agencies use to track all the information about an invoice and payment. Any vendor needing more detail about a payment can call the agency, read back the voucher control number, and have access to all the information that the agency itself has.

Ellis says that in the future the state will allow vendors to input invoices over the Web, using WebFOCUS. This will significantly reduce paper handling and input errors, and will increase the efficiency of the payment system. However, the state is moving carefully on this phase of the project, because it will require tighter security than the current information-only Web site.

Time Saved, Vendors Relieved

Peterson says it’s difficult to quantify the benefits of the system because the problem was so widespread, and it created inefficiencies for both the state and private businesses. But Peterson believes that the WebFOCUS solution offers large payoffs in greater efficiency, vendor and state employee time saved, and perhaps most important, sheer mental health.

Normally pleasant people who have spent several hours trying to track down a payment and have been shuffled around in the bureaucracy tend to be frustrated, sometimes taking that frustration out on the next employee they end up talking to.

“This system,” says Peterson, “gets the right people talking right off the bat. If they can talk to the right person and get the information they want right away, everybody is much happier.”

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