

Customer Profile

Information Builders enables agile information solutions with the WebFOCUS business intelligence (BI) platform and integration technologies from iWay Software.

WESCO

Snapshot

Organization

WESCO International, Inc., a worldwide distributor of industrial and construction products.

The Challenge

Select an enterprise business intelligence solution to combine widely dispersed information and centralize decision-making, while making analysis tools easier to use and more widely available.

The Strategy

Establish a cohesive, user-friendly enterprise business intelligence environment for data migration, analysis, and self-service reporting.

The Results

An enterprise standard reporting environment that has improved visibility throughout the enterprise, centralized management, and vastly decreased turn-around time for reports; saved millions of dollars in operational costs through improved supplier agreements; and created a higher adoption rate for analytic tools.

Information Builders Solution

WebFOCUS enterprise business intelligence, iWay enterprise integration, Consulting.



John Conte, director of information systems at WESCO.

WESCO Standardizes

WebFOCUS, iWay Create Self-Service Support Environment

Achieving centralized decision-making is a tall order for large, geographically dispersed companies such as WESCO International Distribution. With 350 warehouses, 6,000 employees, 200,000 products, and more than 130,000 business customers worldwide, rolling up information in a timely manner is an ongoing challenge. That's why WESCO chose Information Builders' WebFOCUS to devise a powerful yet cost-effective standard framework for enterprise-wide business intelligence, analysis, self-service reporting, and making updates to production databases.

"We have a very decentralized information architecture," says John Conte, director of information systems at WESCO. "We needed a way to pull together disparate information from hundreds of UNIX servers to create more cohesive management tools, and enhance decision support processes by deploying a single, centralized business intelligence solution across our entire enterprise."

Headquartered in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and with annual sales of \$3.7 billion, WESCO distributes industrial and construction products to manufacturers, data communications companies, and electric utilities. WESCO was an early adopter of

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data warehousing and decision support technology. However, the company’s aging information systems were due for an upgrade.

“Our applications weren’t user-friendly,” admits Jennifer McMaster, a senior database developer at WESCO. “Our management team had not embraced or adopted the analytic tools – and those who did required assistance from professional analysts to execute many of the reports. Additionally, although managers could perform basic sales and margin analysis, we realized that to be successful in growing the business, we needed to find ways to enhance our reporting and analytic capability.”

Previously, WESCO used an Informix data warehouse in conjunction with a multidimensional database developed with Pilot Lightship. However, this complex reporting infrastructure required database administrators to follow a tedious process to prepare the data for reporting. “It used to take two or three days to extract the data from the database, and another week to 10 days to load that data into the cubes,” recalls McMaster. Furthermore, Pilot Lightship users needed client-side software to access the information, which made it difficult for the IT staff to support the reporting needs of the company. “Not only was it a lot of work, but the licensing costs prohibited us from making the reporting software available to everyone who needed it,” continues McMaster. “We needed a Web-based solution – with the same capabilities – that could automatically roll up and distribute reports to users in any format.”

A Comprehensive, All-Purpose Environment

Looking for new data warehousing technology and enterprise business intelligence software, WESCO examined tools from Teradata, Cognos, and Information Builders. “As our understanding of the technology grew, we narrowed the field to Teradata for our data warehousing technology and WebFOCUS for our analytic tool,” says Conte. “One of the things that made WebFOCUS attractive was the number of platforms it supports. WebFOCUS can combine data from many platforms, sparing our developers the arduous task of writing code to support data access, transformation, and movement while dramatically simplifying the report development process.”

WESCO also favored WebFOCUS for its executive dashboard, portal integration, and browser-based reporting capabilities. “We can economically distribute WebFOCUS applications to thousands of users through a Web browser,” adds Conte. “Many of the other tools we reviewed required a separate license for every one of our users. With WebFOCUS, whether we create a reporting environment that supports 2,000 users or 10,000 users, our license costs remain flat because we’re pushing information out through the browser.”

Getting It Online

Information Builders’ Consulting used WebFOCUS and iWay enterprise integration to help WESCO create an enterprise-wide self-service reporting environment, and then duplicated dozens of Pilot Lightship reports in WebFOCUS. They leveraged an existing security architecture created in Microsoft Windows NT to permit or deny access to these new reports based on previously established access requirements.

“It only took Information Builders’ Consulting about six weeks to recreate a set of reports that originally took us 18 months to write,” explains McMaster. “After that, our developers took over. We had no prior FOCUS knowledge at all, yet WebFOCUS was very easy to learn.”

“WebFOCUS is hands-down a much faster, more powerful tool to learn and utilize,” adds Conte. “It’s quicker than almost any other tool or development environment that we’ve encountered.”

"We were very pleased with the consulting services, and the customer support is excellent. If we run into a technical problem, we get a fast response and always get the problem resolved."

Today, WebFOCUS is installed on a Microsoft Windows NT server and communicates directly with Oracle, Teradata, and SQL Server databases through iWay gateways. "The iWay environment was easy to set up," says McMaster. "We just installed it on a UNIX box, configured it to communicate with the pertinent data sources, and after that it worked automatically."

WESCO developers appreciate having a mature fourth-generation language underlying the graphical toolset. "GUI-based development environments work well for some projects," acknowledges Conte. "However, there are instances where you really need to examine and modify the base-level code. Some of the other business intelligence products we reviewed had strong graphical development interfaces, but you really couldn't get under the covers like you can with WebFOCUS."

Driving Worldwide Adoption

With its new data warehouse and reporting architecture in place, WESCO now has an enterprise-wide decision-support environment that enhances centralized purchasing, inventory management, financial reporting, and global supplier agreements. Intranet users throughout the company need only a standard Web browser to access a wide variety of reports through WESCO's self-service reporting portal. "We moved all of the information over to the data warehouse so we could get a 'single version of the truth' that includes both historical and trended analysis," explains Conte. "Having a single archival point for all of our data helps to drive adoption of the new system. We also found that integration between the WebFOCUS reporting environment and our Oracle portal/intranet was fairly straightforward and simplistic."

Standard reports present users with a wide range of parameters for searching on particular industry segments, customers, suppliers, date ranges, and products, with output generated in familiar formats such as Adobe Acrobat PDF and Microsoft Excel. "It doesn't take long to turn around a report request," explains Jeff Parker, manager of e-commerce and database development for WESCO. "And since we can put them out on the Web site, they're available almost immediately. We don't have to worry about distributing software, complex user configurations, or licensing requirements. It's a very effective and efficient environment."

Some users subscribe to alert-driven reports. Others receive regular monthly reports, which are automatically sent as information is updated in the database. "We use WebFOCUS ReportCaster to send alerts via e-mail to desktops and, in the future, to handheld devices," adds Parker. "It simplifies the whole process. For example, before, our users would have to connect to the network, login to Citrix, open up the application, connect to the database, and then run the report. Now they make a few selections through their browsers and the results are e-mailed to them."

Trended and historical data in the warehouse is updated each month and is available for immediate reporting across the enterprise, since WebFOCUS doesn't require analysts to build multidimensional cubes. "It's a huge productivity boost for the company," says McMaster. "It used to take two weeks to prepare the cubes. Now users can perform these same types of analysis exercises almost immediately, and the results are instantaneous."

In between monthly warehouse updates, users can run reports against the live data residing in WESCO's production business applications. Some reports even combine data from the warehouse with real-time information from the production systems. "WebFOCUS pulls these data streams together into a single cohesive report," says Parker. "For example, we can take historical pricing data from Teradata and combine it with real-time sales data from Oracle. WebFOCUS combines it on the fly."

Find Out More

To find out how our solutions can help your company succeed, talk to an Information Builders representative today. Contact your local Information Builders office, visit us at **informationbuilders.com**, or in the U.S. and Canada, call **(800) 969-4636**.

Enlightening the Enterprise

Conte estimates that WESCO currently has about 2,000 WebFOCUS users creating many different types of reports. "People request reports that compare the current year to the previous year, as well as trended multiyear analysis," he says. "The most commonly run reports permit detailed analysis of product categorization and penetration, supplier performance, customer service, and customer profitability. In many cases, these are complicated reports that would have been difficult and time-consuming to create in our former development environment. We're now able to leverage many of the prebuilt components and functions within the WebFOCUS product suite to reduce overall development time and complexity."

Conte also likes how the self-service reporting environment can be customized to suit each user. "We can set up a different interface for different people," he says. "Our analysts can drill down to the actual line-item detail, while managers utilize a higher level format that walks them through a step-by-step process. We also use WebFOCUS to allow designated users to update the data. We call this closed-loop business intelligence, since it allows us to update information stored in databases."

Through it all, WESCO appreciates the support it obtains from Information Builders. "We were very pleased with the consulting services, and the customer support is excellent," confirms McMaster "If we run into a technical problem, we get a fast response and always get the problem resolved."

Bringing Home the ROI

WESCO's formerly "BI-shy" executives now use WebFOCUS to monitor business operations. "They started with sales and margin data," says Conte, "but have now expanded their analysis to optimize inventory processes, purchasing, and expense management. Margin reports go out daily, expense reports go out weekly, and purchasing and supply reports go out monthly."

These analysis activities have given senior managers a clearer degree of visibility into the inner workings of the enterprise. For example, by carefully examining claims and supplier agreements, they were able to find areas for improvement that were not readily apparent before. "The issues were always there, but the problems simply weren't visible until we could easily drill down through the data and ask the right questions," says Conte. "By addressing key issues in our claims agreements and supplier contacts, we have already saved between 3 million and 5 million dollars."

Overall, WESCO finds WebFOCUS to be flexible, affordable, powerful, and comprehensive. "It can touch many different platforms, allowing users across the enterprise to access everything from branch reports and profit trends to purchasing analysis," concludes Conte. "There's literally no piece of operational data that we don't have centralized and accessible from an Information Builders report."