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Life as a WebFOCUS Specialist

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From the sidelines, I have been watching an online forum conversation started by a gentleman named Larry about the seemingly low hourly rates offered for WebFOCUS BI developers. Today, I decided to respond with, I hope, minimal backlash. Here are my personal opinions:

Against my better judgment, I will add my thoughts on the current status of the WebFOCUS services market.

We all realize that while Information Builders was the leader in the 4GL market in the 1980s; they are one of the smaller players in today's big BI market. Some customers like how IBI is privately held and innovative but most want the security of buying a big name like Microsoft, Oracle, SAP, and IBM.



Information Builders seems to be happy where it is and is organized to handle its \$300 million in annual revenue where it has been for the past decade. It seems happy not becoming a multi-billion dollar BI giant. It is like the corner pizza shop with a cult following with no desire of becoming the next big Pizza Hut in the mass market. If this is a hobby and a lifestyle for the owner, there is nothing wrong with the approach.

The job market has lower demands for a small software vendor's products; there is less respect which translates to lower wages for practitioners. To Larry's point, that can mean lost opportunity costs for WebFOCUS people. You might personally be losing money specializing in WebFOCUS instead of in a product from one of the market leaders. It could be a bad career choice.

IBI is not just a software vendor; it has its own quasi-independent professional services firm. Most new customers will go the safe route and choose the vendor to do initial and difficult projects despite the high cost. After that, customers want to build their own internal expertise so as to not be held captive by vendors. Outside firms and independents competing against IBI services will only get the table scraps. If they really want to get in on the game, competitors must offer quality services at a much lower price.

The WebFOCUS marketing message is that it is very easy. Customers get the idea that anybody can sit down at the screen and do it. Here enters the "McDonald's principle" of wages. If you can take any average Joe off the street and train him quickly to do a job, there is no reason to pay him more than minimum wage. You can always replace him with another when he complains about wages. Only when more experience and training is needed and it is harder to replace the person does the wage need to increase.

WebFOCUS is an enterprise BI tool which means a practitioner needs to know lots of different things: platforms, databases, security, web application development, and so forth. I've heard this called being a "T-professional." Represented by the horizontal top of the T, you have a broad understanding of lots of things but no real in-depth knowledge. For the vertical part of the T, you have a deep understanding of one thing, which is WebFOCUS and (as we have seen) not highly respected in the

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marketplace. That is Larry's point of being paid less to do WebFOCUS and Oracle together than just Oracle work by itself; to make more money, you have to flip the T to be respected.

The idea of 4GLs as viable development tools died in the early 1990s. Customers do not want to have to know a 4GL to build a web dashboard. They do not want to have 4GL coders on staff.

WebFOCUS must hide the 4GL under the covers and IBI sales people only mention the code when it can be used in a positive difference from other products that don't have an underlying, accessible language. This general anti-4GL sentiment means WebFOCUS developers must be proficient with the GUI and only touch the 4GL code in rare instances behind a closed door. So even if you are a really great 4GL coder, you are forced to keep your mouth shut or be perceived as anachronistic trying to use technologies from decades ago. The market has no respect and no demand for 4GL coders.

For all these reasons and more, there is a dearth of WebFOCUS professionals. Seize the day!

To be truly successful, however, you should deepen your knowledge of enterprise business intelligence and web application development. Flip your T and go deep in technologies that are widely respected and in demand.

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