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Kathy Apple’s announcement to retire from NCSBN gave both organizations the opportunity to look back on this 14-year journey and assess the value of this special business relationship.

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To learn more, contact us at 888 627 7357 or visit PearsonVUE.com

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A time to be brave

In 1997 NCS-VUE was a three-year-old emerging testing business that delivered computer-based certification exams for information technology (IT) hardware and software providers. Exams were administered through authorized, independently owned testing centers around the world.

In 1997 the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) was looking for ways to markedly improve delivery of its preeminent National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX). At the time, the NCLEX was used by US state boards of nursing to assess competence in order to grant a professional license.

Since 1994, the NCLEX had been administered through third-party test centers where NCSBN, state boards and candidates alike experienced wide-ranging inconsistencies and customer service issues. In its attempt to gain greater control of the testing environment while maintaining convenience for candidates, NCSBN could find no competitive options in the professional testing market.

It became clear that a third-party test center channel wasn’t a good fit to deliver high-stakes licensure exams like the NCLEX. Thinking that perhaps the program may be large enough to build an alternative and improve the competitive landscape, teams from VUE and NCSBN began working on a better delivery model.

The list of requirements was both broad and deep. NCSBN delivered a computerized-adaptive exam which demanded the industry’s best test development teams in addition to a consistent, secure and high quality delivery environment. The goal to deliver the NCLEX securely and conveniently would be met only through company-owned and -operated test centers; an industry first. After many months of joint discussions and analyses, VUE submitted a proposal to build 200 of the world’s most advanced test centers in the U.S. and abroad. Several months of negotiations followed, and with the approval of the NCSBN Delegate Assembly, VUE’s proposal was accepted and an agreement was finalized.

After two years of successful collaboration behind… and two years to build this network of test centers ahead, the contract with NCSBN was signed on August 1, 1999. “It was a little scary,” said Kathy Apple who accepted the position of NCSBN’s CEO in 2001. “To take a leap like this with a company that had never done anything of this magnitude before was a real risk for NCSBN, state boards and nursing students alike. But there was so much positivity about this opportunity,” she said. “The Board of Directors saw both the risk and potential reward and made the right decision.”

The chance to be imaginative

At the time that NCS-VUE was acquired by Pearson in 2000, the effort to launch NCSBN was well underway. Bob Whelan, VP, sales and marketing with NCS Education Division, was tasked to lead a two-year special project team to develop the new Pearson Professional Centers. “We started from a blank slate,” said Whelan. “Financial approvals, building plans, logistics, real estate and architects. From advanced surveillance to comfortable chairs … every detail was meticulously planned.” Central to each PPC (as they’re known at VUE) is a patented, glass-enclosed proctor (invigilator) station. “Our goal was to build the gold-standard in testing environments,” he said.

As with nearly every important decision, selecting test center locations was done in collaboration with NCSBN. “We established centers based largely on where NCSBN candidates (nursing students) would conveniently take the exam,” said Whelan. As a result, most PPCs are located in and around large cities in the US and its Territories. The schedule to open all 200 PPCs within an eight-week window was daunting. According to Whelan, renting space too early wasn’t financially smart, and opening after the committed launch date wasn’t an option.

State boards of nursing that use the NCLEX to make nursing licensure decisions were also an important stakeholder in developing PPCs. “Changing the status quo isn’t always easy,” Whelan said. “So I made it a point to visit every state that had concerns about this effort.”

As expected with a launch of this size, the NCSBN transition to Pearson VUE met several challenges. New to her position as CEO, NCSBN’s Kathy Apple managed operational implementation. “I was so impressed by the NCSBN and Pearson VUE staffs,” she said. “Everyone just rolled up their sleeves and dug in. Both teams worked hard every day and attended to every detail to get this program off the ground.”

The first Pearson Professional Center opened in August 2002 in Columbia, Missouri. Interestingly the first exam was delivered for the American Society for Clinical Pathology, another new customer. By October 1, 2002, 200 PPCs in the US and its Territories; Guam, American Samoa, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico and US Virgin Islands, began delivering the NCLEX for the client that two years prior ‘took the leap’ with Pearson VUE.

The investment to develop this state-of-the-art network now allowed Pearson VUE to serve customers beyond IT, including testing programs in health care, finance, admissions and academic markets.

Brave, Imaginative, Decent and accountable.

Which do you admire most in NCSBN?

“I really think Pearson VUE’s level of service, responsiveness and attitude come from the concepts of brave, imaginative and decent. I’ve never worked with a company more decent, transparent and honest as Pearson.”

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Bob Whelan as a leader.

“With a “firm but fair” style, working with Kathy has been a real treat for Pearson VUE and for me personally. We enjoyed great chemistry — not always a requirement for success, but it sure makes success more enjoyable!”

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“Kathy Apple as a leader. “Bob Whelan is an honest and honorable man. He hires good people and lays out very clear expectations. It provides a great deal of confidence that he continuously attends to the high level of competence in his management team.”

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The rewards of being brave, imaginative, decent and accountable

A business success story

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