



The rewards of being
brave, imaginative, decent and accountable

A business success story

PEARSON



NCSBN

National Council of State Boards of Nursing

A time to be brave

Brave, Imaginative, Decent
and accountable.

Which do you admire
most in Pearson VUE?

“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.”

Kathy Apple

Which do you admire
most in NCSBN?

“It is hard to argue with decent when the name Kathy Apple is mentioned.”

Bob Whelan

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.

Bob Whelan 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.”

Kathy Apple

Kathy Apple 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!”

Bob Whelan

Pearson VUE ... a great partner.

“Even though Pearson VUE has grown a great deal, and we appreciate how busy everyone is ... we’ve seen the great level of customer service remain steady over the past 14 years.”

Kathy Apple

NCSBN... a great partner.

“The best customers challenge you to be a better company and NCSBN has certainly done its part to make us a better business. Kathy is not afraid to challenge our thinking and help us collectively make the right decisions.”

Bob Whelan

Fourteen years and still decent

Hundreds of thousands of men and women have been licensed to practice nursing in the US and Canada since October 1, 2002 — after passing the NCLEX. Both Whelan and Apple are keenly aware of the exam’s impact on the lives of individual patients who depend on qualified nurses and on health care globally.

“I think together we [NCSBN and Pearson VUE] have provided the state boards of nursing with a high quality, high stakes, psychometrically sound, legally defensible, secure, competence assessment for their purposes of making licensure decisions,” said Apple. “State boards make the very important legal determination that says a person is competent and safe to practice. We help them with this public mandate, and take the responsibility extremely seriously.”

The effects of Pearson VUE’s relationship with the NCLEX is both local and global. “We’re proud that in 2005 access to the exam expanded to international cities for candidates seeking nurse licensure in the US,” said Whelan. “And that today, nearly every province uses the NCLEX for Canadian nurse licensure. This strategic expansion is an excellent example of both teams working together to support NCSBN’s vision of regulating nursing as a truly global profession, and the NCLEX’s role in helping to support international nursing standards.”

Always accountable

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.

Whelan credits much of this success to a collaborative and ‘no-surprise’ philosophy. “From the very beginning, we’ve operated honestly and proactively,” he said. “We made sure the client heard about any bumps from us before anyone else. This combination of accountability and transparency allows us to solve problems together ... and that’s the right model.”

Apple agrees. “Certainly like any relationship, there are ups and downs. But the fact is, we are both committed and honestly value this partnership. That gives it a different flavor in terms of how to manage it over time. So when something goes astray, the immediate response is ... let’s get in and fix it...no whining, no complaining, no blaming. What can we learn? How can we prevent it from happening again? It’s that kind of responsiveness that we have appreciated all these years.”

Mutual respect has, and continues to drive the NCSBN-Pearson VUE relationship. “Kathy’s leadership has been an example for all of us,” said Whelan. “She is dedicated to her profession and her actions and decisions reflect her commitment to doing the right things ... and doing things right.” For Apple, “The last 14 years has been a study in how to do business,” she said, “and I’m proud to have been part of it.”

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