CASE STUDY

BURGERS' SMOKEHOUSE
Finds a Solution in IBM i Education at imPower Technology

Customer	Size of IT Team	# of Employees Trained	imPower Courses
Burgers' Smokehouse	4 Developers	2 New IT Graduates	IBM i Concepts & Operations Programming in ILE RPG

IBM i is utilized by businesses of all sizes, yet the need for highly-skilled and educated RPG developers remains the same across every business. Acquiring information technology talent with experience in both the RPG language and the IBM i platform is an ongoing challenge for every company we meet. From the need to replace retiring developers to scaling the team to meet growing business demands, open positions can remain unfilled for months causing concerns about business continuity, technical debt and more.

Burgers' Smokehouse, a manufacturing company of meat products, is no exception. They use the IBM i to run their business, and more recently rely on it as a **"database backbone"** of their company.

Businesses like Burgers' Smokehouse aren't looking to move away from the platform to solve their talent challenges, rather they are seeking solutions that support long term growth on IBM i.

"We have found no database engine anywhere that can compete with the IBM i on Power Systems platform," states Allan Mortenson, Burgers' Smokehouse's Vice President of Information Technology, **"The longevity, dependability and ease of use make the IBM system a great platform for us."**

CHALLENGES

Burgers' Smokehouse, a 70 year old, family-owned company, manufactures and distributes meat products to consumers, grocery stores and restaurants across the nation. As their VP of Information Technology, Allan is faced with two individual yet interwoven challenges: hiring and training.

Allan, the team's leader, is planning his retirement and needs to replace his expertise before he leaves. **"After 33 years, I'm hanging it up only because I have reached an age where I feel like I should," explains Allan.**

It was challenging for Allan to find developers to begin with considering the company's rural location between Kansas City and St. Louis, Missouri. He recently hired two more developers, growing his team to four. He found the new hires right out of technical college with basic programming in a variety of languages including, Visual Basic, C#, SQL and more.

Once hired, he knew they would need to not only learn the IBM i platform and RPG programming, but they would also need to learn the business operations and systems.

In addition to training his new recruits on the platform, Allan had users requesting modern user interfaces, reports integration, improved response times and more. He needed his team up to speed quickly, so they could meet this growing demand.
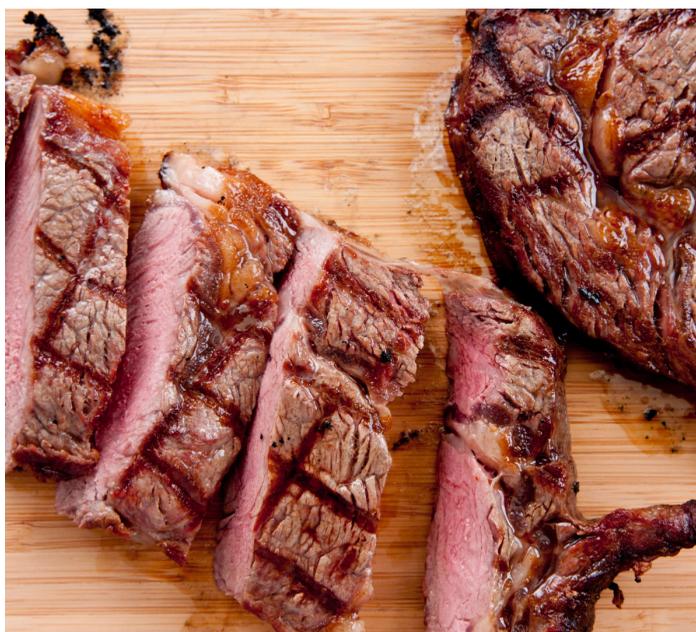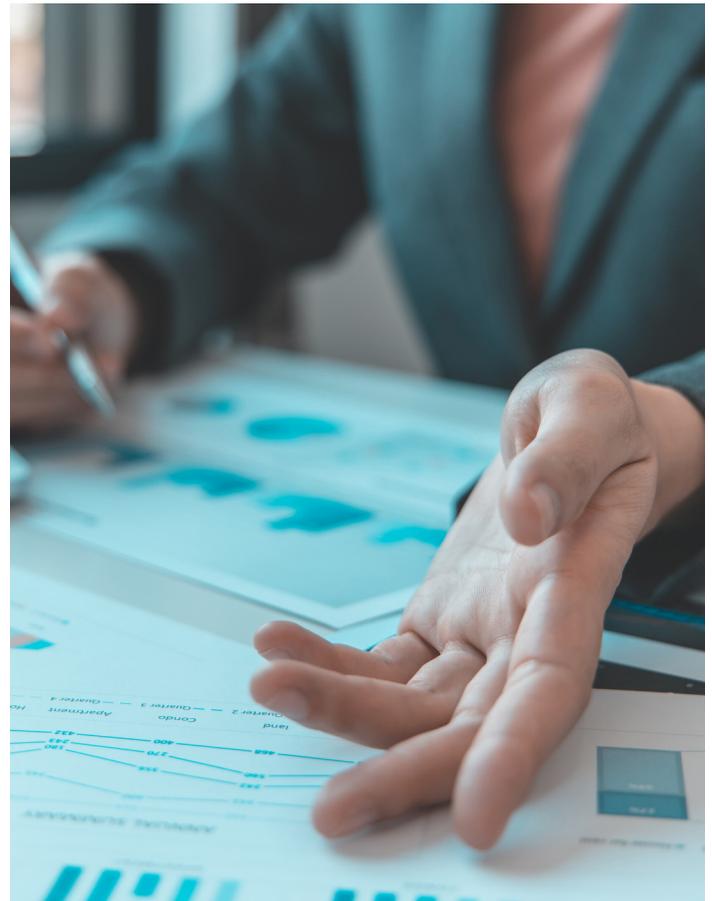
SOLUTION

Like most of us do when we need a solution to our problem, Allan searched Google for "RPG training." When he landed on Jim Buck's imPower Technologies course, he knew it would be a good fit.

"I was familiar with Jim Buck and had sat in on some of his classes at COMMON throughout the years," stated Allan, "I knew he was knowledgeable and based on the class curriculum, I felt they might be just what we needed to get a "fresh out of college" recruit to a level of knowledge that would make them valuable to our company."

The goal was to get his two new developers up to speed quickly on the platform. imPower would provide the IBM i and RPG programming education and training, while Allan and his two senior developers would share the business operations with them.

"From the very beginning, the experience with imPower was quite good. Jim and his team are very hands-on, and they were there every step of the way throughout the classes," Allan shared, **"Enrollment in the courses was a piece of cake. Jim was very transparent and right there every step of the way."**

RESULTS

Once enrolled, Allan was able to "walk away" for several weeks and let his developers work through the entire course on their own.

"That was a pretty good testament to how well the classes were structured," Allan explained, **"And the outcome of the classes was just what we had hoped for."**

Allan also found the accountability and transparency aspects of imPower's courses helpful, including the graded assignments and progress reports, which allowed him to identify issues or topics that his new developers might be struggling with. **"All of this, along with Jim's hands-on philosophy makes for a great experience,"** Allan said.

Upon finishing the two-month course, his two developers were prepared to start developing in RPG, and even knew more than Allan knew after 41 years as an RPG developer. Allan was able to hand just about any project to them knowing that they would be able to complete it without issue. He found that he only needed to coach them on company rules and systems, rather than train on IBM i and RPG.

"It is difficult to put an ROI on the training classes, but I can tell from the results that there is a definite positive result that could not be achieved without the imPower training," Allan shared. **"imPower has made [my new recruits] viable, productive RPGLE developers that have the ability to do just about anything on the IBM i."**

Allan said he would recommend these courses to anyone who wants to learn RPG development or who wants to sharpen their skills.

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THE MANHATTANLIFE STORY

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David Parsons, senior vice president of IT operations, began his career with ManhattanLife 25 years ago. In that time, he's seen the company grow from 40 people in one office to 600 employees in five states. Parsons' IT team supports ManhattanLife in its mission of helping their policyholders achieve health, wealth and security.

CHALLENGES

ManhattanLife has operated on IBM systems since the advent of the company's computer operations. For decades, universities and colleges taught students how to specialize in IBM systems, but today, that's no longer the case. ManhattanLife found that current generation students receiving general computer science degrees weren't familiar with IBM or its languages.

Transitioning to a new platform would be tedious and time-consuming, as well as an overwhelming learning curve for the entire department. **"We realized if we can't find people with this knowledge of IBM systems, we need to train them from within," Parsons said.**

ManhattanLife created a strategy to train and mentor their younger generation staff members, not only in IT skills but also "knowledge transfer about the way we do business," Parsons noted. This would benefit all levels of their workforce, including senior programmers who need to continue staying updated about technological advancements.

"With technology, there's always something new you have to learn. If you don't stay up, you fall behind quickly," Parsons said.

ManhattanLife was looking for a comprehensive training resource to assist them with this new strategy. After members Les Turner and JD Williams attended a function for MidRange, the team learned about IBM training with imPower Technologies.

SOLUTION

imPower Technologies teaches the RPG language on IBM i, giving programmers new skills and experience in this operating system. Employees at ManhattanLife have consistently utilized this training, not only both new and seasoned programmers but also business analysts.

In March 2020, Parsons asked imPower team about training on RDi and Modular Programming, which imPower taught via live instruction at that time. **"Owner Jim Buck told me they usually do it in person, but to give them a few weeks and they'd put together a digital course for us," Parsons said. "We were the first group to utilize the online program, and it worked really well."**

ImPower's digital course combines video instruction, quizzes and lab exercises to teach RPG developers how to use IBM's RDi 9.6.x Development tool and introduces participants to the latest RPG ILE and SQL techniques.

For employees who are participating in imPower's RPG ILE training, ManhattanLife pays hourly wages, with a wage increase upon completion. Hours spent on course participation also count toward fulfilling probation requirements for new employees. Comprehension is emphasized over quick completion; employees all work at their own pace.

"ImPower is really important to our business model now. We're so busy, we really don't have the time to directly train staff, but we knew what they needed to learn. This training gives them a uniform way to learn and makes sure they're all on the same playing field," Parsons said.

imPower's online courses are convenient for both employers and staff. Team member Michael Gabrysch oversees the progress of mentor program and receives status reports throughout the course to monitor the staff's progress.

The quality of imPower's training is also superior to others ManhattanLife has tried. **"You don't just send imPower a check and get a link, which is part of why it's successful," Parsons said. "They're very involved; they check in with us, or get on the phone with us if we need it."**
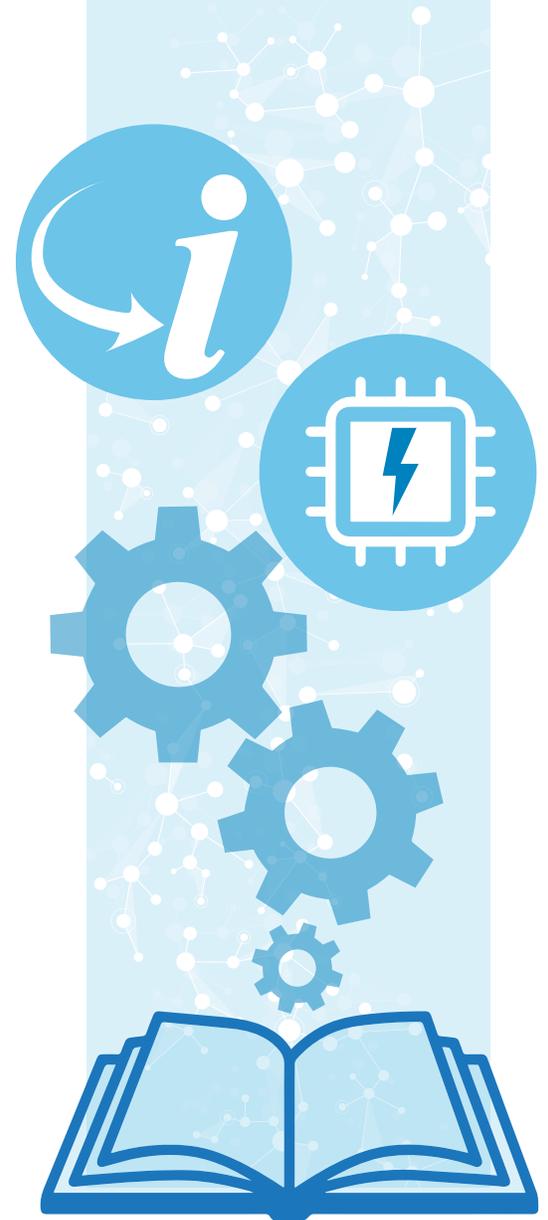
> "With the cost of the course, we're far ahead for our total investment and have quickly increased productivity. It's the best training out there; I'm not sure how else you would train anyone effectively."

RESULTS

ManhattanLife has seen a **100% success rate with employees training completion**, with most employees completing training within a couple of months. Even more encouraging for Parsons is what he's witnessed while staff members are training together.

"Eventually, I'd see them huddling up on one machine, trying to figure out something that someone was hung up on. This has really taught them how to work together as a cohesive team and improved their communication," he said.

Without imPower's training, ManhattanLife acknowledges they "wouldn't have gotten a lot of things done that we have over the last couple of years." With a new group of employees now trained on RPG ILE and RDi, IT is working with the marketing department on the company's enrollment platform to increase efficiency for processing new applications. Plans are also in place to rebuild the company's entire annuity system.

"Our employees perform all kinds of things they couldn't do before. Previously, they didn't even know what an IBM i was; now they're able to be very productive coders on the system," Parsons said.

Training from within has been significantly beneficial to ManhattanLife and has improved ROI.

In the past, Parsons has experienced issues with onboarding new employees, only to spend a significant effort educating them on company practices. Rather than "breaking old habits," today the company coaches and reinforces skills that are relevant to their current system.

"For the price of one good contractor, you're getting multiple folks eager to learn and contribute," he said. **"With the cost of the course, we're far ahead for our total investment and have quickly increased productivity. I couldn't be happier with the results from training."**

As ManhattanLife adds to their employee base, they plan to continue this model of training and building mentoring relationships between new and seasoned staff members. imPower Technologies' RDi and RPG ILE training is a valuable piece of this larger effort.

"It's the best training out there; I'm not sure how else you would train anyone effectively," Parsons said. "This is our game plan to continue to compete in the marketplace."

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