

Channel certification: *Maximize sales and opportunities through online channel training*

A White Paper by Akuter Inc.



Chantal Couturier
VP Business Development

ccouturier@akuter.com

Table of Contents

Channel readiness	3
A changing environment.....	3
Knowledge transfer, key element of partner management	3
Partnering with channels.....	4
Challenges.....	4
A blend of techniques	5
Ubiquitous and easy to deploy.....	5
Content rich and adaptive	5
Instant knowledge	5
Learner's adoption	5
Communication and Alerts	5
Cost	5
Tracking, measurability and integration	6
A New Approach	6
Akuter Enterprise.....	6
How it works.....	6
Technology	9
Integration with the Enterprise infrastructure.....	9
Benefits	9
Summary.....	10
Contact information	10

Channel readiness

A changing environment

Distribution channels for the IT industry have changed significantly over the last decade, and channel partners handle now more than 50% of the total IT market. This percentage is even larger when it comes to solutions with an average selling price under \$100K.

Despite these numbers, the automation of interactions between vendors and channel partners is still at its beginning, while the interactions between vendors and direct customers receive most of the investment.

The biggest changes in Distribution Strategies over the past two years were an acute competitive environment leading to price compression, pressure to deliver quick Return On Investment, increased roles and responsibilities for both vendors and partners, and a growing lack of partner loyalty.

An overwhelming majority of vendors utilize their partners for integration at the customer site. In most cases these partners are System Integrators, Application Vendors, or IT Services firms, acting as a reseller and/or as an implementation partner. Their existing relationships are primarily contractual and are enhanced by special programs tied to performance. Performance in channel management is mainly measured against the sales revenue, the delivery capacity and the customer satisfaction depending on the main role of the channel (sales or implementation).

Most of the channel partners are small to medium size companies, which face a tough competitive environment. They need to build the key competitive strategies to succeed, and face day-to-day business issues such as finding enough people with the right competence, react quickly to market changes, satisfy customers' demands and maintain their margin. For that reasons they favor vendors bringing value not only in terms of technology, but also in terms of supporting their operations' efficiency.

These trends push for a more automated and integrated channel partner's readiness about vendors' products, resources and strategies.

Knowledge transfer, key element of partner management

As most of the interactions with end customers are handled through partners, it is key for enterprises to integrate these channels into their value delivery chain at all levels, and channel partner relationship management has become a key element of competitiveness.

While a certain number of CRM and PRM systems are starting to address the needs of sales automation through indirect channels, these interactions would not exist without sales channels fully prepared and ready to sell and deliver the solutions offered by the various vendors. The management and the quality of the customer experience are for a large part dependent on the channel value-added services, operational efficiency and competence. The channel's knowledge, competence and capability of implementing the solutions they represent are at the core of any vendor-partner relationship.

Partnering with channels

The pressure for vendors and channels alike to perform at the best competitive levels leads to a specific demand on the way knowledge is shared and transferred between vendors and their channels.

Partner's point of view:

From a partner's point of view, key attributes of a knowledge transfer program include:

- Minimizing the impact on the day-to-day operations. Each hour spent training or gathering information rather than with a client can be a lost business opportunity.
- Minimizing the total overhead cost of traveling or participating in expensive remote meetings.
- Increasing the number of staff trained on more than one solution.
- Allowing an instant easy access to key up-to-date sales and technical information.
- Providing a meaningful certification process that creates a genuine channel differentiation.

Failure to deliver a knowledge transfer program addressing these requirements will inevitably lead to a poor readiness on the part of the channel and will have a direct impact on both customer satisfaction and sales revenue.

Vendor's point of view:

From a vendor's point of view, key attributes of a knowledge transfer program gravitate around executing flawlessly on the customer value propositions, as well as building loyalty at all levels. Vendors' partner programs follow a double objective of strict efficiency and differentiation. This translates into:

- Keeping the channel's Sales and Services proficiency up to date.
- Finding a cost effective and scalable solution to knowledge transfer.
- Ensuring consistency and quality in various communications.
- Measuring and accurately tracking the knowledge and certification of the vendor's sales and services force.
- Creating a knowledge base and managing knowledge objects.
- And most important of all, continuously building a competitive advantage through the development of its human assets across the large enterprise (employees and partners).

Challenges

Akuter, Inc. has surveyed panels of managers in a cross-section of companies to identify the challenges that eLearning technologies must address. Though numerous vendors were already trying to deliver solutions, this survey has shown that the market was still not being served effectively.

To deliver on partners' and vendors' expectations, a channel knowledge transfer and certification solution faces the following challenges.

A blend of techniques

The solution must encompass a blend of training techniques that can include product launch conferences, mentoring, distance learning, simulation-based training and certification and information portals. In any case, a one-on-one relationship must be implemented, whether this is a multiparty live web-event or a one-on-one communication between a learner attending a self-pace course and an instructor or mentor. The system should accommodate several communication means such as chat, web-conference, web cam, etc...

Ubiquitous and easy to deploy

Due to the global nature of today's business, the new enterprise learning environment needs to be ubiquitous, easy to deploy and easy to access. Courses must be simple to implement and maintain, because of the changing nature of training materials. The training material development process must support the design for reusability of knowledge objects.

Content rich and adaptive

Course development tools such as authoring tools must seamlessly integrate any type of content format to let the vendor's experts deliver training and certification that best fit the very nature of the vendor's product. This will include videos, audios, simulations, graphics, etc. A lack of quality course and certification content would make the solution unattractive

Instant knowledge

Course's resources must reside where they are the best maintained. They can be live, or stored media of all kinds, located on the training delivery system or simply linked to the course from their original location. This will allow continuous access to up-to-date documents and media.

Learner's adoption

Delivery must offer several modes such as passive learning, interactive learning, knowledge evaluation and formal exams. The system must allow designing a superior training experience adapted to the learners knowledge level and pace, supporting various certification techniques including simulation-based training, scored exams, labeling different levels of certification, and promoting the vendor's communication style and brand.

Communication and Alerts

To build a true partnership with channels the vendor must be able to receive and compile feedback information from its partners as well as receive automated messaging on the knowledge transfer progress and status. A reliable and protected knowledge base must remain available for future enquiries conducted for business or legal needs.

Cost

The system must be cost-effective at all usage levels. In addition, it must be instrumental in developing and maintaining partner's loyalty. A long deployment schedule would be cost-prohibitive and would lead to a poor Return On Investment.

Tracking, measurability and integration

The system must be able to track and record various usage elements in order to integrate with vendor's partner management process. It must track the number of accesses and time spent by each learner for cost analysis or billing purposes. It must also record the status of the various training and certification programs for further business intelligence, decision and adjustment. It must be designed to leverage the existing Enterprise Infrastructure and Applications, such as CRM and PRM solutions, to integrate with the company business processes and data model.

A New Approach

Akuter has designed Akuter Enterprise to address the channel's readiness and loyalty challenges, incorporating the latest advances in technology. Akuter has focused its efforts in designing the most cost effective and easy-to-deploy Knowledge Management and Certification Enterprise application. Akuter Enterprise's architecture has been designed for an effortless integration with other Enterprise applications and infrastructure and a smooth blend with other communication and information portals.

Based on interactive online learning techniques, it influences effectively the way partners learn, and their knowledge acquisition and retention. When deployed systematically, it can empower channel partners to efficiently grow their operations, develop a competitive advantage and stay ahead. It allows breakthroughs in both knowledge transfer and documentation.

Akuter decided to invest in the latest standards and to support smart learning objects and SCORM emerging standards. It recognized at the same time the fundamental need to reuse existing training material, and to support the well-deployed AICC compliant training materials.

Akuter brings a new pricing model to maximize the Return On Investment by charging according to the actual usage of the system.

Akuter Enterprise

Akuter Enterprise is a Server Driven learning system that offers the 'best-of-breed' in Learning Content Management. It supports existing training materials, emerging AICC/SCORM standards and provides applications for the rapid development of quality learning materials that are only limited by the user's imagination.

How it works

Figure 1 below shows the different Akuter Enterprise modules and user profiles as well as their interactions within the system.

Enterprise Knowledge Management Solutions

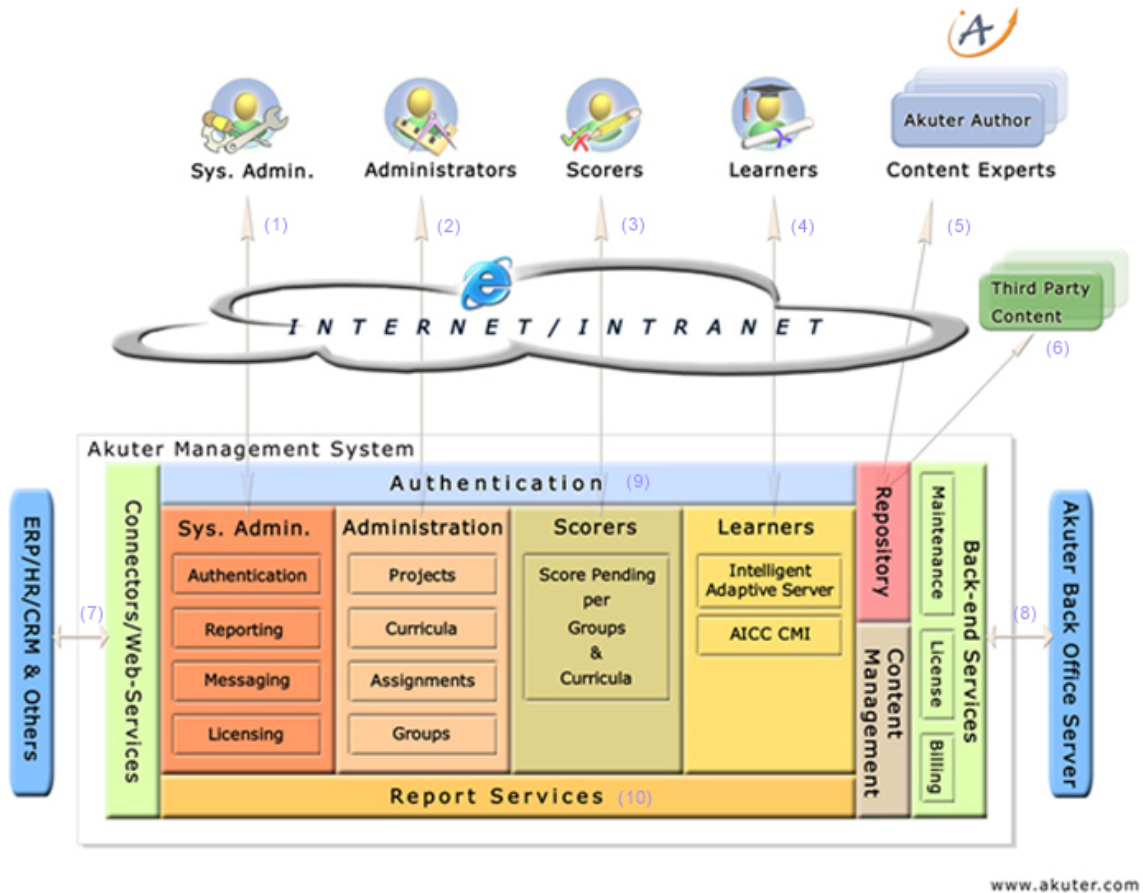


Fig. 1 – Akuter Enterprise architecture

Each user profile is recognized by the system from the user's unique login information. Only screens corresponding to their profile's rights and current tasks are presented.

(1) System Administrator:

A System Administrator controls the system configuration, license, and key system parameters such as authentication protocol, reporting platform, messaging configuration, timeout values, etc.

(2) Administrator:

A training administrator uses a standard browser to access the administration and configuration module. An Administrator has the responsibility to manage content, curricula, learners' assignments, tracking and reporting on schedules, activities and results. The Administrator will decide what content must be attached to the system, what version must be active and set the specific rules to deliver the curricula to each audience (groups or individuals).

(3) Scorer:

A Scorer, assigned to validate certification results, may be involved when an exam includes one or more essay questions or when a learner's answer needs to be reviewed and compared with a guideline provided by the course creator.

(4) Learner:

Learners' access is limited to assigned contents (as an individual or as a member of a group) or contents that have been defined as self-assignable by the Administrator.

The system launches selected courses, guides the learner page by page and tracks activity. The Akuter Management System (AMS) interacts with the learner; tracks each step, scores the automated tests and manages multiple attempts as set by the Administrator for each assignment.

(5) Content Experts:

Akuter provides an easy to use authoring system specifically designed for the marketing, sales or training staff who does not need to learn any new tools or technical skills. Akuter Author is a Windows based application that allows the designing and customizing of multimedia-rich, interactive on-line courses using the familiar MS Word environment as a user interface. People use what they already know. On course completion, the system produces the necessary code to package the training materials and load it to the Akuter Management System for further inclusion in curricula and assignments.

(6) Third-Party content:

In addition to designing their own customized contents one can blend off-the-shelf courses within a curriculum. For a seamless integration, these third-party courses must support AICC and SCORM standards. This allows taking from the market what already exists and customizing what is specific to the vendor or partner.

(7) Connectors:

Specific connectors to interact with vendor's existing systems such as ERP, CRM or PRM can be set and configured to integrate data related to the training and certification activity.

(8) Back-end Services:

Akuter back office offloads the IT and business operations and reduces the cost of ownership for the system. The license management and maintenance of the AMS are handled remotely, for a frictionless and dependable operation.

Akuter back office receives encrypted messages from Akuter Management System (AMS) to track usage. Detailed billing management services can be offered on request.

(9) Authentication:

As part of a need to comply with security and privacy constraints of the Enterprise system a unique login schema controls user's access and actions. The System Administrator can decide to use the embedded Akuter authentication or redirect logins to their own authentication using the radius protocol.

(10) Report Services:

Akuter Report Services extracts learners' activity and results from the historic database. An administrator can access all records while learners are limited to their own information. New reports can be designed and added by users.

Technology

Akuter Enterprise is an open and scalable application portable on multiple platforms. It was built for fast deployment with friendly installation and configuration management.

Akuter Enterprise is designed with high security in mind, with options to connect to the organization's authentication systems, such as Radius, as well as authentication and authorization at the local database level.

International languages are supported within the code and the database levels. Akuter integrates XML messaging system for configuration, web-services messages to the billing system and report customization. Messaging outside Akuter is encrypted and delivered through different transport mechanisms, such as HTTP and e-mail.

The Akuter system is based on the latest technology standards. It is built using the power of J2EE with XML and Web Services components. It separates the application layer from database, security, and presentation layers for easily extending the application or adding new modules to the existing system. Akuter Enterprise supports all popular operating systems (Windows 2000, XP, Solaris, Linux and AIX) and commercial databases (Oracle, SQL-Server, DB2 and Sybase).

Load balancing and multiple entities can be hosted on the same application and share common resources such as courses and learning objects.

Integration with the Enterprise infrastructure

Akuter Enterprise provides a centralized solution for all training and certification needs, from design to post-delivery. It interfaces easily with other enterprise applications and Customer/Partner Relationship Management systems. Data such as partner details, training and certification results, usage and billing information can be synchronized with the system of choice through connectors and web-services.

Benefits

Main benefits of deploying Akuter Enterprise to achieve channel readiness are:

- Increased qualified partners number and expertise.
- Shorter channel ramp-up time.
- Increased channels effectiveness in sales and services, leading to higher revenues and customer satisfaction.
- Better address partners' operational constraints, leading to an increased partners' loyalty.
- A breakthrough and cost reduction in training material and documentation management.
- Instant view and intelligence of the channel readiness.
- Means to control the budget and cost associated to channel training.

Summary

To manage channel partners readiness, vendors must put in place a knowledge transfer solution which is cost effective for all parties, optimizes sales and services processes across the value-chain and can be easily scaled. Cost, scalability and instant response to changes are the key drivers for vendors to shift expensive and non-scalable classroom or conference training to web-based training.

Vendors will attract more channel partners by creating and delivering value to them. Meaningful curriculum and certification, ease of access and up-to-date information, integration of all partner relationship processes are a few examples of services offloading the channel partners' time and cost.

Failure to manage correctly the channel partner readiness will have an impact on both revenue and customer satisfaction. It is not a one-time effort but a constant effort to keep the enterprise competitive, including its delivery chain

Akuter has developed an innovative end-to-end enterprise knowledge management and certification software that solves vendors' customer and partner training challenges.

It offers a rapid Return On Investment, is easy to deploy and scale, allows building a superior training and certification experience, blends and integrates easily with the existing infrastructure.

The Akuter Enterprise solves the challenges that the partner management and product training organizations encounter with today's business models. It provides a platform for developing, updating and measuring partners' sales and technical skills, leading to a more effective value-delivery-chain, increased revenue and customer satisfaction.

Contact information

Akuter, Inc.
177 Bovet Road, Suite 600
San Mateo, CA 94402
Call (650) 638-2338
Fax (604) 687-3821
E-mail info@akuter.com
Web <http://www.akuter.com>

CANADIAN OFFICE:
Akuter Technologies Inc.
146 W. 20th Avenue
Vancouver, BC V5Y 2C3
Call (604) 435-3473
Fax (604) 687-3821
E-mail info@akuter.com
Web <http://www.akuter.com>