

Why Should We Fight The Certification Hypes? or... Ask Yourself a Question.

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We all resist admitting this, but the money-grabbers have invaded the IT training industry. The result is a drastic drop in the quality of the training you depend on when planning for success. For the last two years, I have been fighting the “certification bonanza” marketing propaganda and marketing campaigns that trick you into thinking that only certification courses directly lead to a job with a nice paycheck. The money-grabbers (see some of the training companies) will declare almost *anything* to get at your money. They simply don’t care if you waste your time, efforts, and hard-earned dollars knowing that there will be no desired and expected result after the training is over.

Now observe what happened with many of those who flooded your brain with the magic word “certification”. About a year ago, the number of training companies advertised in Computer User was close to twenty-five. Today there are barely 9 companies (including 3 colleges) left. The Computer Learning Center that was shut down first comes to mind. Then Mentor Technologies and AmeriTrain... Many other training organizations still continue their “brainwashing” advertisements today.

I think it’s important to understand the *true* value behind certification. Let me give you a history overview first...

I. The History of Magic Word “Certification”.

1. The Beginning

To my knowledge, the very first company that introduced IT certification was Novell, Inc. – the creator of one of the first network operating systems. They introduced CNA (Certified NetWare Administrator), CNE (Certified NetWare Engineer), and later, Master CNE certification. What was *the real* purpose of it? It’s fascinating that almost nobody (!) asks this question these days. Have you ever thought about it?

The idea behind certification was very simple: to flood the IT market with *an army of free salesmen*. Why “free”? Because those salesmen need no compensation from Novell, and even better: *they pay Novell* for certification (taking the tests at Prometric). Why “salesmen”? See the benefit (2) below.

It is human nature to fight for goodies - similar to any other animal that Mother Nature created that fights for food, a mate, or its own life. Introducing certifications, Novell realized a very clever idea that almost flawlessly penetrated our brains. Novell certification had the potential to become the tool that would help you distinguish yourself from the rest of the crowd (means making more money and having higher standards of living than your peers).

So, what are the benefits of having an army of the certified “engineers”?

1. **They would generate revenue** that would come from different sources like:
 - Prometric Testing Centers that provide the exams;
 - The book publishers who sell the test preparation manuals;
 - Sale of the books on preparation to their own certification tests with sample questions from the tests;
 - The Authorized Training materials that are purchased by the training companies and individuals;
 - The membership fee for training companies wanted to become the Authorized Training Partners;
 - The software companies that sell the test preparation programs;

Who pays for almost all these “goodies”? *You do!*

2. **They would generate enormous revenue** that would come from selling more of their own software programs.
Let's face it: if you are Novell certified, you are familiar with the Novell software more than with any other software. What would you recommend to your boss when it comes to planning and budgeting? Obviously, whatever you are familiar with! That would automatically generate more purchase orders making you Novell's salesman! (See the statement above)
3. **They would generate more revenue** that would come from selling even more software programs also because implementing this strategy is a terrific way to get rid of competition and to establish the overwhelming presence on the software market.

What a clever idea!!!

2. More smart guys

So, what happened next? As you already know, many other companies realized that certification is an excellent revenue vehicle. Bill Gates was the next one who didn't want to miss the chance. Here we are: MCP (Microsoft Certified Professional) and MCSE (Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer). As soon as those certifications were advertised (Microsoft has one of the best marketing teams), the revenue flowed to their pockets.

Then we had Cisco, IBM, Compaq ... nobody wanted to miss the boat! They decided to bring more revenue to the corporate pockets by easily creating the certification tests and signing an agreement with Prometric or Vue (another testing company). That is when the "gold rush", or the "certification rush" began.

Well, as we found out later on, not only Novell had smart guys. CompTIA introduced the "vendor-neutral" certifications (A+, Net+, and so on). The idea was clever, too. They had no product to sell, so they figured, let's sell the certifications! Let's push the information to HR departments, brain-washing them with the statement that A+, Net+..., (or another plus) certification "simplifies recruiting and hiring and is a measurable competence standard" for entry-level IT position. Maybe...

That great idea generated more than 500,000 A+ certified folks (CompTIA info). Because the appetite was growing exponentially, the cost of exams increased to \$139. Do the math and you'll understand the amount of money we are talking about. With no product to sell it's an excellent result! ComTIA's marketing department did a really outstanding job. The "certification-plus" bug has spread-out to numerous vendors. CompTIA folks used various methods to generate more "plus-certified" people. They even got into agreement with Microsoft and integrated their certifications into Microsoft's MCSA certification. They expanded agreements cooperating with Cisco, Hewlett Packard, IBM, Intel, and Novell. Their latest gimmick was: "A Pathway to Good Jobs for Low-Income People?"

The followers were Brainbench folks who introduced free tests with worthless certificates. They finally changed to paid-only tests that many employers use today in attempt to filter out good candidates from the bad ones and save time.

3. The certification flood

Today, you can count **hundreds** of IT certifications. The same CompTIA multiplied the revenue introducing the Net+, Server+, Linux+, Security+, CDIA+, Network+, IT Project+, i-Net+, e-Biz+, Server+, HTI+, and CTT+ with the exams costing \$199 (one of the most expensive exams!). Basically every vendor who introduced one or two certifications now offers numerous variations of them. How can you blame them when it was awfully easy to add another variation of certifications because it's a low-cost investment that brings huge revenue?

The army of hardware and software vendors jumped on the bandwagon. How does the McAfee Anti-virus Certified Engineer sound? It's silly... Now we are talking about the "certification industry" because of large amounts of total revenue generated every year by numerous vendors, who are meticulously forcing you to take money from your employer's pockets, and your own.

II. The Real Value Behind Certifications

Today, every IT professional, career changer, or novice asks themselves the legendary Hamlet phrase: "To Be or Not To Be?" or paraphrasing it: "To Certify or Not Certify?" I don't want to repeat what you could find in numerous articles that discuss this issue. I would rather compress this information into several statements that highlight both positive and negative sides of this issue with my observations and comments.

A. POSITIVE

1. They Do Have Value

Anyone with a MCSE certification will have certain benefits, even with little experience or formal education. If you've passed the MCSE, you have the basics for an entry-level network job, at least. (I just don't know why spend \$8-10K for MCSE courses and exams in order to apply for entry-level \$12-14/h job. There are better ways to gain some real-world experience and then to apply for better job). The MCSE status might add a better chance to get an interview. But, be ready to answer real-world situation questions about Windows 2000 administration tasks. At the same time, a job candidate with the certification, education, *and experience* will obviously have the leading edge and better chances for being hired.

2. Some positive Changes

Some of the vendors try to improve the testing process by making it more sophisticated. The phrase "Paper MCSE" becomes less applicable with recent changes that Microsoft made to the certification tests. Microsoft has case studies with a scenario and questions to answer based on that scenario. Exams include the diagrams and pieces of a network puzzle, frequently refreshed test questions that potentially raise the bar making it less likely that anyone passing the MCSE will be using the information from "braindump" web sites. If you don't know your stuff, you probably are not going to pass.

A common complaint is that certification exams test the book knowledge rather than real-world skills. In April of 2002, our web site informed the public about the creation of a Field Certified Professional Association (FCPA). Since then, I didn't find any new articles about this organization. It might be because of what the FCPA Chairman Dr. Amir Elahi admitted: it is not appealing to some IT professionals:

"Something is broken in the IT certification process when the individual feels compelled to cram for an exam rather than learn actual technology and product skills. Performance-based testing resolves that contradiction."

FCPA is offering vendor-neutral certification that can be earned only by demonstrating a working knowledge using actual equipment. I personally was excited by this groundbreaking event. Obviously, this new approach to testing is not attractive to those who want to make quick money getting certified or to the training organizations making quick money, too. One of the online surfers noted:

"Sounds like the market may be responding to the vendor cert flood. Every person I've talked to who is looking for work says that employers could care less about what letters are after your name...they want to see proven results".

Visit www.fieldcertification.org for more information.

Numerous self-study courses, and on-line tutorials may not give you practical experience, but they can serve as a base of technical knowledge. At least some training vendors honestly inform future students that they must have either 6 months of experience with Windows 2000 (Microsoft's pre-requisite) or spend about two months of pre-study before you enroll in "bootcamp". I wish all the training vendors did the same.

I wish Maryland Higher Education Commission and One-Stop Career Centers would control it rather than falling in the same "certification soup" making no difference between the training for certification and training for professional job skills.

3. The Job Skills Criteria

Most of the HR departments employ people to work in Human Resource who are, in the best-case scenario, slightly familiar with the IT field. Therefore, because of lack of particular knowledge, they are looking for magic "capital letters" after your last name to separate good candidates for IT job

positions from the flow of resumes. At least, HR employees have *some* criteria for inviting you to the screening interview. But that is where the problem begins:

B. NEGATIVE

1. The limitations of many of the standardized test-oriented certification exams.

One of the online chat members posting a message made very good points worth considering:

- *"A standardized test score reflects someone's aptitude or knowledge on a single day.*
- *Standardized tests don't reveal troubleshooting ability or overall systems knowledge (very important).*
- *Standardized tests don't force you to write code or find a solution to a problem, which has obvious limitations.*
- *People can (and do) become certified without using the products they are certified in. (He is talking about learning without using a product first. Also, thanks to "braindump" web sites that post questions and answers from the real tests and the test preparation software).*

... A passing score on a certification exam shows some basic understanding and level of competence, but in an interview situation, I know I would still expect questions requiring me to demonstrate some hands-on technical skill and to discuss real projects and experience I have had using the technology".

Another concern is the level of knowledge tested during certification exams. For instance, the passing score for the Microsoft Windows 2000 Server test is 660 out of a possible 1000. Therefore, a person who might pass the test with a score of 660 doesn't know more than 30% of the material! So, what do you certify? Let's face it, what the certification vendors want more: fairly certify your knowledge or your money? Most of them want the latter (see the beginning of this article). The result is a low-level requirement to pass the test.

Jon Hawkins wrote: *"Consider this. Would you rather hire an individual who understood the practical application of the subject matter, even if (s)he didn't memorize the exact location of 100% of the menu items, or have an individual who learned the menu locations for everything without knowing exactly how and when to apply them? On the job, I wish I could always truthfully claim to have the answer figured out, memorized and ready, but I can't. So I'd rather make sure that when I don't know the answer right off the head, I do have the base understanding and skill to "hunt" for the solution. Make sense?"*

It's a known fact that many tests do not test the real skills needed to successfully perform job duties. Some of the topics are not relevant and even outdated. For instance, the CIW Associate test contains a mix of topics from several IT fields (Basic Web Design, Computer Networking, and Information Security). And those individuals who spent money and time on 40 hours (often 5 days in a row) course trying to assimilate huge amounts of completely new (and often quite specific and technical) information from the three IT fields, and even passing a test, call themselves Certified Web Master? And, hey, this is after the prerequisite to this course is "no experience with Internet required"? So, what does the CIW Associate certificate really certify?

I recently reviewed several resumes with this certification across the title. Sorry to note, but the Certified Web Masters demonstrating their "creations" (I mean web pages) did not know how to use the table cell padding parameter properly. Therefore, the text in the cells was without any margins (something a professional Web Designer would never publish). But I don't blame them! They wanted to get into the Web Design field but have chosen the wrong path, and became just ordinary victims of the certification hype.

2. The certification hype

As soon as the "certification rush" reached full spin, an army of training companies flooded the training market. The competition became very tough. Therefore, the results after training were important from the marketing point of view. 100% certified means more customers! A regular question you could hear those days: "Can you guarantee that I'll be certified after your course?" So, how do you compete and get more customers?

I don't want to jump into details on how some of the training companies fighting for a 100% result tried to cheat and assisted their students during the tests. I don't want to point a finger at the companies that hire a full-time lawyer to protect the company against angry customers. But good marketing is

everything. It had started in numerous magazines, newspapers, and on the Web where you could see a picture of guy holding a bunch of \$100 bills in his hands and screaming: "YES! I got my MCSE in just two weeks!" It started when you could hear advertisements on the radio about \$65-75K jobs after taking MCSE "bootcamps" and passing the tests.

It had continued in the ads "100% Certification Guaranteed! 30% off! Enroll today because others already enrolled!" It is continuing in flyers, brochures, e-mails, and TV ads "drilling" the brains with the same idea: "Gimme your money and I'll make you certified tomorrow". "Change you career in 2 weeks with Intense School!" To learn, to memorize, to ask questions, to understand, to test, to try hands-on, and finally, to be ready for the corporate world in 2 weeks?! Dear readers, you won't believe how many folks really think it's possible!

It's still continuing now. Today I searched on the web for the word "MCSE." Here are some of the results. CertifySky provides the Best Realistic Questions! MCSE Practice Tests - On Sale for only \$18 each! Pass Certification Exams. First Try Guaranteed! ITpassZone Realistic IT exam study guide! MCSE & A+ Study Cassettes! MCSE Test Vouchers at a Discount! AudioWiz's Self-Study Certification Study Tools that an idiot could use to get certified! Two week MCSE and CCNP BootCamps by TechTrain with a 95%+ historical pass rate, all-inclusive features (hotel, meals, vouchers & more), 100% financing and guaranteed certification!

God bless America! You can buy anything your mind can imagine...

It's like a virus that infected a huge pool of career changers and novices. Even more! Yesterdays' landscapers, clerks, or car mechanics realized that with IT certifications they could earn a lot more money quickly. It's time to change your career! Just invest \$8-10K and enjoy \$70K job! There is nothing wrong in such a desire. But the results are usually regrettable. Even reputable universities and colleges did not want to miss the boat. They joined their efforts with private investors and began to suck in money like everyone else. Get certified!

The result? Now, there are many frustrated people who were fooled by the marketing gimmicks of the training organizations. They enrolled in the "quick training programs" without having ANY hands-on experience, received one or more certifications, and still cannot find a job or have extreme difficulty meeting the demands of the job. I often compare them with a certified dentist who took a two week "dentistry boot camp" training and is ready to "fix" you teeth. Ouch!

3. HR Confusion.

It happens often when a good idea dies without being realized because the wrong people tried to realize it. One of the ideas of certification was to help HR departments to separate good candidates for IT job positions from the flow of resumes. Now the Human Resource folks are confused because their criteria to choose only certified applicants failed. It failed because the job candidates with similar certifications have a wide variety of backgrounds and skill set from zero ("paper" certified) to several years of paid industry experience.

Basically, HR departments are still in the same situation. But they make more hiring mistakes than in the past because of the wide spread talks about the value of certifications. The result is the certifications' confusion.

4. Wrong message.

Every week I have to deal with at least several folks who think that MCSE or CIW *is* a profession. When I am talking about Web Development they are asking: "Is it a CIW?" It's scary! People, what are we coming to?

Numerous certification vendors sent wrong messages not only to the HR departments or novices but also to two categories of existing IT professionals: those who are experienced enough to handle any workload even without certification; and to those who assumed (what a good marketing can do!) that the number of certificates automatically leads to the growth of the compensation level.

The first group of professionals has been faced with Hamlet's dilemma. They often find that their industry expertise is not enough to get a job interview because the criteria of filtering good candidates

has shifted toward a piece of paper with the word “Certified”. The second group began the hunt for a number. They became the “certification collectors”. I cannot resist recalling the story about one Microsoft Certified Trainer (MCT) who also was MCSE, and Master CNE (total about 20 exams). I had to fire this instructor in the middle of the course after he could not demonstrate to the class how to configure a legacy network card for the Novell file server.

After the Annapolis training company, Mentor Technologies, lost business and was dissolved, more than 150 highly paid trainers began to look for another job. I have interviewed three of them. My impression was that all of them were highly trained professionals who could teach you on how to pass the tests. However, they were not qualified for teaching professional computer networking skills because of their lack of recent corporate experience. I was shocked when I counted more than 70 (!) certifications in one of the resumes. This fellow used his home network to learn the latest network operating systems (a good idea, by the way) but asked \$100/hour compensation even if he was working in a real corporate environment 4-5 years ago. I still respect his persistence and good teaching skills, but there is something seriously wrong with this picture.

5. So, What Is It Really Worth?

One of the articles posted on www.MCMCSE.COM mentioned a myth existing among many newcomers to the IT industry that the certification is a ticket to success.

Here is the excerpt from that article:

...”This is the most common and scariest attitude that we see. Certifications are pieces of paper that tell others that you passed a few tests. And honestly, nearly anyone can pass these tests nowadays. It just isn’t that difficult now that all of the exact exam questions are posted all over the web. It is just a matter of memorization if you choose to go that route (and we hope that you don’t).

You must realize that many employers are already aware of this fact. In reality, a certification is a nice supplement to an already existing skill set. When we use the term "skill set" we aren't necessarily referring to technical knowledge - there are many other qualities that you can bring to the table that can make you valuable. The point is, if ALL you have is a certification, then you are worth what it cost to print the piece of paper”.

It could not be said any better.

The reality is that there are very few positions that *actually* require a certification in order to get hired (even if ads say so).

III. Conclusion.

I can almost see the faces of those who want to scream that I am wrong and that I hate certifications so much because I don’t see the value behind it, that I could not pass the exams myself, that I am wrong because getting certified helped hundreds of IT professionals to become successful networking engineers, and so on. To reply to those angry voices – yes, I am also certified by Microsoft, Novell, Check Point, and Tricord but I dropped all those capital letters after my last name as trivial these days (when there are more than 3 million certified IT pros). Yes, I know many success stories with certifications (as well as many without!).

I also know a lot of stories of “Paper Certified” people, who were unable to find or hold a job.

This article is not about “to be or not to be” certified. Certification is not a bad thing. It is just about time to tell the truth about certification value to the rest of the “uncertified” world. My advice to all of you:

*Do not fall in a trap of "certification heaven" if you just want to begin your way to the Information Technology world. The reality is that only **hands-on experience** can demonstrate your level of competence, and the certification merely serves as a formal proof of knowledge. Thoroughly evaluate several training companies and only then make a decision were to spend your hard-earned money. There are many known ways of getting hands-on skills. Get them, and only then certify your knowledge.*

With the coming changes of economy and new job market requirements, the quality of education is more important than ever before. It is the right time to educate the “not-yet-certified” public, non-IT corporate management, and Human Resource employees about the real value of certifications ... and **stop the hype.**