Certification:
FAQs to help you obtain your MCSE & more

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The purpose of this site is to help you obtain your IT Certifications by sharing some of my own experiences. Rather than duplicating resources, I will recommend other web sites available via the Internet as we go along. Alternatively, you can contact me if you have any questions, I will try my best to answer them or direct you to someone who knows the answer.

My Certification Story
Although I've been working in the IT industry for quite some time I am never really that adamant in taking any IT related certifications. The 'hot Item' when I first started working was the Certified Novell Administrator (CNA). Novell was the first vendor to introduce such certifications and back then, the CNA the hot favorite of every IT employer, regardless of whether the company actually uses the product of not. It was just simply the 'status symbol' to have.

I did toy with the idea of getting the CNA back then but then came along the MCSE (NT) certification whose price tag simply shocked me, a cool S$15,000+ (a decent lunch at a normal food centre costs only about S$2.50 max., that was back in 1997 and I just started working). I procrastinated for a long period of time and was subsequently enlisted for my full-time National Service.

So why is it now that I'm joining the 'certification chase'? Well, to set the record straight, I'm not! The only reason why I am spending my time and money on this is because I need the skills in my current job.

How to prepare for the modules
Everybody have their own way of learning or studying. Some people prefers the traditional classroom style while others find it easier to study on their own, its really up to the individual(s) to decide which method best suit them.

However, the most important point is that if you have no prior hands on with the product you intend to get certified on (be it a firewall, an operating system or a router) you can at best only prepare for the exam (and become a 'Paper Engineer') and not the job itself. So if you already have some hands-on with the product, proceed on to;

- Attend a training class or read up the subject with at least two recommended textbook (ask your friends or at online forums)
- Make use of web resources like MCMCSE.com and MCPMag.com. Web portals like these offers really useful information, articles and tutorials for both the novice and expert.
- Join online forums like MCMCSE.com for discussion needs. Ask your questions nicely and you will be answered.

- **Check the test objectives on the relevant certification website so you know exactly what areas to concentrate on when you study for a particular module. E.g. Microsoft and Cisco.**
- **Install and play around with the product.**

If you have the free time, read this article on "Keeping Your Skills Updated". It shows you some tips and tricks on getting your certification the economical way.

Is certification really necessary?
This is a question that can only be answer by you. I have friends who obtained the MCSE because it is the 'hot item' in the IT job market and they don't even work with Windows 2000 Server at work (One guy confess that he has never administrate the OS before and he most probably never will. He is a sales person). People of such nature only help to devalue the worth of the certification.

Money is another factor; these certification exams are not cheap. It's about S$225 per Microsoft exam and it takes 7 exams to attain the MCSE, this plus the time you spend studying are all costs to be taken into consideration before you begin your certification quest. Don't waste your time and money if you don't need the certification.

But does it mean that one is not 'worth the salt' if (s)he is not certified? Well, I know of Engineers who are not certified but they sure know their stuff (way much better than me in fact). If I'm an employer, I rather have one of them than 100 'Paper MCSEs.

Who should take up IT Certification
MCSE (or CCNA and any other professional IT Certification for the matter) is not meant as an entry level certification, take a look at Microsoft website, it states that the certification is designed for those with a year or more experience, so if you are thinking of jumping on to the IT bandwagon (which is already overcrowded anyway), don't fall in a trap of "certification heaven" because only hands-on experience counts when it comes to real live environment, the certification merely serves as a formal proof of knowledge.

Therefore if you are totally new to the IT profession, go through some decent education or training and join an entry level helpdesk to learn from the basics before moving on.

Why not Comptia A+ and such
A fellow Engineer once query me, "Adam, you are pretty proficient with your hardware and troubleshooting, why don't you take the A+ certification?" I almost fainted when he made that suggestion.

Tests from Comptia are meant for entry level freshies technicians who would just started in the IT industry, why would I want to fork out good money for an overprice, undervalue certification? I first started assembling 486 PCs in 1996, back then you need to have a decent IQ to be assembling PCs and a higher than average IQ if you are performing troubleshooting. PCs nowadays comes with a label that says "No Brains Needed" because everything is "Plug and Play" and GUI based, you don't even need to think!

In fact, the curriculum that Comptia tests on are so basic that I think a decent Diploma holder is worth more salt than an A+ certificate holder, but of course, all these are just my personal opinions ....

Degree Vs IT Certification(s)

It has been an age-long debate on which is of more value, a college Degree or IT Certifications. In this age of time, almost every IT professional would come to a time when they wonder on whether "To Get Certify or Not To Get Certify?". While some would chooses to forsake the Degree for the latter, there are others would defend the worth of the former, which option among the two is the holy grail for IT professionals?

In my humble opinion, I think the two compliments with each other. While an IT certification prepares you with in-depth knowledge of how to effectively utilize the product, it doesn't have steep learning curve that a degree offers. Let me explain further.

A decent college education prepares an individual to be independent, problem solving abilities, critical and creative thinking skills while IT certifications focus on productivity and troubleshooting. IT certifications also represent an excellent way to show interest and initiative in technical aspect and ongoing education in the IT profession.

And for the record, I personally feel that it is easier to pass IT certifications if you already have a decent Computing Degree. Take the Microsoft SQL Server 2000 exams for example, the exams were based on fundamental Database concepts that one would surely have learned in tertiary school and this shorten the learning curve for me as I already know ANSI SQL as well as RDBMS concepts like relationships, normalization etc. (of course, I still suck big time with SQL2000 but then again, I am not a DBA by profession so I think I'm kinda safe)

In addition, I strongly believe that anyone can pass an exam (especially a MCQ styled exams) so obtaining certification without hands-on experience or fundamental knowledge is a good formula for throwing money down the drain.

How to book the exams

There are two methods to book an exam, online or offline. I personally prefer to book my exams online so I'll cover a little on it.

Currently, there are only 2 providers for major IT Certifications,

- http://www.2test.com (Prometric)
- http://www.vue.com (VUE)

Simply register with the relevant site (Prometric or VUE or both) for an ID and book the exam slot that best suit your location and time, for more information, surf to the following 2 website.

Get a debit card if you don't qualify for a credit card, you need it to pay for the exams. And while you're there, check out their FAQs section it because it provides some really useful information and guidelines on what you should do (and what not to do) on the actual test day.

Arrival at the test centre about 15 minutes beforehand visit the toilet if you need to, remember you might have to spend up to 2 hours in there. Once you're ready, they'll ask you to sign some nondisclosure documents and escort you to a little room with a computer that's connected with the Prometric/VUE server. Do your test (point and click your way through the test) and when you're done, a printout with your test results will be given to you before you leave the place. Keep your results .If you are entitled to a Certificate, it would be send to you via snail-mail a few weeks later.

PS: If you are complaining on why I did not mentioned anything about booking off-line, my reasons to you is: If you cannot even utilize a simple e-commerce website, forget about taking

IT certifications, you are not even competent at using a computer, let alone perform a support job.

The disastrous effect of becoming a 'Paper MCSE'

Hmm, what is the 'Paper MCSE' that I've been referring to throughout this article? It actually refers to one who took and passed the MCSE without any prior knowledge of the product and relied purely on braindumps or books.

In other words, a guy who is only good at passing exams and knows nuts about the the actual work that's the job requires. If you are interested in finding out more about 'Paper Engineers', read this article on "Excuse Me. Are You an IT Professional?"

The aftereffects of having 'Paper MCSE's around is that they devalue the IT Certifications and totally insult the entire IT profession. If an unsuspecting employer hires one of these 'Paper MCSE's and realize that they absolute do not qualify for the job, the employer would definitely think twice before hiring any other MCSEs (*I've once met a fellow administrator who asked me how to take out a HDD and later on, how to format it in DOS*), as the saying goes "Once Bitten, Twice Shy".

To quote the words of *Roman M. Zeltser*

"*Think about it, who would you 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*
- *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?"

Well, it makes perfect sense to me.

Contact

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