

# Do certificates matter?

by *P.J. Connolly and Tom Yager, InfoWorld Test Center*

*Many shops award vendor-certified IT candidates with better positions and more money, but are certified applicants really more qualified, or simply vendor-biased?*

The value of skills certificates issued by big vendors such as Microsoft, Cisco, and Sun has always been a topic of fierce debate. Should an uncertified job candidate be rejected from consideration? Or are there better ways to pick qualified workers? What exactly is a vendor-issued certificate worth, and what does it say about the person who holds it? Two Test Center analysts, grizzled veterans of corporate IT departments, face off on vendor certifications. They start on opposite sides but find surprising common ground in the end.

**P.J.:** I support vendor certification programs. Bear in mind, though, that I'm talking about well-designed certification programs, ones that are not just granted for theoretical knowledge but instead those that incorporate lab work to demonstrate that the certificate holder has mastered the subject both in theory and in practice. I think those kinds of credentials are good for employers, good for employees, and good for vendors.

From an employer's perspective, certificates can provide an easy way to identify qualified candidates. Of course a lot more has to go into the hiring process: Background checks and references are always more important in judging a potential employee's suitability than any certificate. But certificates provide employers a way to assess a person's technical ability, and let's face it, that's usually the most important qualification when you're hiring technical staff.

A company can also use certificates as incentives. The prospect of a paid-for certificate might be just the carrot you need to retain skilled crewmembers, especially if bigger bonuses and longer vacations aren't an option. Yes, it's true that the newly certified employee

might be considered a "flight risk," subject to temptation from higher-paying employers. But if you're not smart enough to write an agreement that binds the employee to repay the training cost if he or she leaves the company before an agreed upon time period has elapsed (say, for example, six months to a year), you might want to find another line of work.

Certification programs benefit employees, too. I can say from personal experience that employers value certificates, and right or wrong, you often won't get the job if you don't have the right piece of paper.

**Tom:** There are some certification programs — for example the ones that Cisco, big iron, and non-vendors such as professional organizations give out — that have real value because they emphasize practical knowledge. But most IT-related certification programs are just schemes to lock companies into a given vendor's proprietary technology. That's why I'm against them.

Things weren't always like they are now. There was a time when certificates existed primarily to let workers advertise their proficiency in a narrowly defined skill set, as in WordPerfect proficiency, for example. Later, certificates led to the formation of vendor-endorsed cliques, and there were usually many such cliques within a company. But nowadays, employers are flat-out denying jobs to applicants who won't pledge themselves to a particular vendor. That's not good for anyone except the vendors.

This situation is a lot like the authorized reseller and cooperative advertising programs that many manufacturers use. According to the manufacturers, these programs protect the resellers by keeping uninformed, low-margin resellers out of the market. Balderdash. What they really do is give manufacturers the power to set selling prices and freeze out competitors; and that's exactly what vendor-issued certificates do.

If resellers were free of manufacturers' restrictions, the \$16 music CD would be history. And if workers were free of vendor certificates, the high-tech market would be filled with vendor-agnostic experts who choose solutions based on their strengths and weaknesses, not the perks of the vendors' certification programs.

**P.J.:** Tom, I think you should change the movie in your VCR because your copy of JFK is on automatic replay. Of course vendors try to create brand loyalty. But that hardly matters, because as anyone with an hour of real-world experience could tell you, single-vendor shops simply don't exist. That's why integration skills are such an essential part of any certification course. Also, Tom, you're assuming that there's a widespread need for people to hold multiple certificates. You and I have the luxury of working with a wide range of technologies from one week to the next, but most IT jobs aren't like that in the real world.

At most companies, one team runs the network, another team runs the servers, and still another team handles development. The only way you can get all three groups to talk to one another is to liberally stock a conference room with pizza and beer. And because most shops aim for commonality among platforms, it's only natural that a company that uses MegaloSoft servers and Zorro routers is going to employ people who are proficient with those technologies. That, in turn, means that the company will always prefer those platforms. So it really doesn't matter how many certificates your employees hold. What matters is that they hold the right ones.

**Tom:** But, P.J., many companies are terrified that if they don't become (or stay) single-vendor, their infrastructure will fall apart. That's megavendor FUD — fear, uncertainty, and doubt — at work. You don't have to believe in the grassy knoll theory to see that vendors will do anything to “own” their big accounts, so that no competitor can get in and no alternative technology will ever be considered.

In other words, single-vendor shops are real and regrettably too commonplace. If a vendor convinces

you to weed uncertified workers out of your company, you should check your mouth for a hook; they've just purged dissent from your ranks. Dissenting opinions are a valuable commodity in technology-driven industries that rely on creativity. By insisting on certificates, you're telling employees that you're not interested in alternatives, even if these alternatives could catapult you ahead of the competition.

**P.J.:** Tom, certification works because it assures the employer that the candidate knows something about the field; but I admit that too many companies use certification as a crutch, ignoring practical experience. I think this is backward. On-the-job training can substitute for certification, but never the reverse. And in my opinion, no one should be able to earn a certificate without practical experience.

The problem isn't with the certification process but rather with how employers view certification. Too often, the human resources department takes the first cut at incoming résumés, looking only for the acronyms that the IT department has identified as key. It's easy to “overspec” a position by demanding that applicants have certain certificates without defining the equivalent practical experience. That's not the way to hire.

**Tom:** Right. But I'll do you one better, P.J.: Not only do employers overestimate the value of certificates, but some certificates are so easily obtained that they're barely worth valuing at all. Those expensive cram schools actually guarantee that you'll pass the certification exam. (Moron? Illiterate? No problem!) Silly me for doubting the value of vendor certification. If you're an IT professional and you need a new skill, buy a stack of books, order some Chinese food, and roll up your sleeves. Don't just study it; do it. And keep doing it until it makes sense. Knowledge acquired through experience, mistakes and all, is the only kind that makes you a valuable employee.

You know, when I was a manager, I found that most of my certified employees turned sullen and unproductive when they were assigned tasks outside their certified

skill set. Meanwhile, my uncertified workers loved being told to learn new skills, and they didn't need any baby-sitting or prodding to do it. But wait a second. Isn't it foolish to generalize that all certified employees share these negative traits? Certainly. That's my point. It's equally foolish to accept the idea that vendor-certified workers are more knowledgeable and productive or that uncertified workers are simply too stupid or lazy to pass the exam.

**P.J.:** If I were younger and wilder, I'd have to call you out, Tom. For the record, I'll point out that I am a Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA); it's the lowest rung of their certification ladder, and it means that I can be trusted to properly configure a Cisco router. InfoWorld paid for the boot camp, and I recall that more than one guy in my class — it was all male, but don't get me on my diversity soapbox — took the test three times and still didn't pass. And as I recall, no one in my class was "stupid" or "unlettered." Frankly, I passed because I know the fundamentals of AppleTalk, IPX, and TCP/IP cold. But then again, I'm a dinosaur who remembers when the first two protocols ruled the earth.

On the other hand, I refuse to certify for Microsoft Windows or Novell NetWare. That's because I've spent enough time working on those systems: I call myself "trench-certified." Granted, those kinds of skills are hard to test for; but that doesn't mean that testing is pointless, just that you have to put it in context. I'll concede, however, that many testing formats leave something to be desired. As is true of many standardized tests, vendor certification tests don't always reflect the test taker's knowledge or skill. For example, multiple-choice tests should offer "correct" and "more correct" answer options. I also agree that the lessons you learn from your mistakes are important. I've made my share of blunders, as well as decisions that were right at the time, although I now look back and shake my head.

And I'll grant you that self-starters are the best kinds of employees to have because they tend to think independently. But certificates definitely have their

place: A person who makes the extra effort to earn a certificate is likely to take pride in his or her work, and I want that person working for me.

**Tom:** P.J., we've both elected to remain bachelors, vendor-wise, and I think we're just two in a proud and growing group. But because we haven't been pinned, some organizations would refuse to hire us. The way I see it, not being certified helps us weed out undesirable employers. And I shake my head whenever certification-obsessed companies bemoan the dearth of high-tech workers. Um, hello?

When I interview someone for a job, I tell them to leave their cert and tie at home. If you want to impress me, tell me you write code at home for fun. Give me the URL of a functional e-business Web site you built to hone and showcase your skills. Reference a charity you helped by volunteering to build and manage their intranet. If you convince me you've got passion, creativity, and nerve to match your big brain, I'll ask you to stick around while I call HR. But if you strut in with the attitude that a certificate entitles you to a job, and for higher pay than all those people who worked their way up, I think I'll pass.

*Tom Yager, the InfoWorld Test Center's East Coast technical director, wants to assure certificate virgins everywhere that theirs is a valid lifestyle choice. If peer pressure threatens to weaken your resolve, draw strength from Brother Thomas at tom\_yager@infoworld.com. Senior Analyst P.J. Connolly believes that hands-on experience was the key to passing the CCNA exam. Although skeptical of many certification programs, P.J. believes that the concept remains sound. Contact him at pj\_connolly@infoworld.com.*

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