

Navigating the Maze of Professional Certification

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How do individuals and corporations select quality certification offerings that benefit their business and the ongoing knowledge acquisition of their workers? Numerous professional certification and training programs exist for Information Technology (IT) workers, targeting topics ranging from leading edge technology and application skills to project and process management. Understanding the offerings and deciding on an appropriate certification program can be a challenging experience.

Is professional certification a legitimate and well-known career credential? You bet it is. According to Lori Dowd, Director for Professional Development at CSU Denver Center, "A professional certificate shows not only the gain of a certain skill set but also a commitment to continuous professional learning. Somewhere between a short 1- or 2-day course and a multi-year diploma program, a professional certificate is very focused and practical. Employers see value in these skills sets, and a certificate can be one more way to differentiate one candidate from another."

Does certification allows its holders better and more rapid access to promotional ladders within their organizations and access to new job opportunities? According to the 2001 Global Training and Certification Study, released by Prometric and CompTIA, the majority of IT professionals seek certification in order to increase their compensation, increase their productivity and to help find employment. According to the study, 48% of IT professionals cited that assessing their skills and knowledge levels was the most important reason for seeking certification, followed by increased credibility and productivity.

Certification and training programs targeting IT professionals come in many flavors. A high level cross section of offerings might include offerings from

global training companies, colleges and universities, industry organizations and technology vendors. The majority of these certification programs require a specific training curriculum while others are based solely upon self-study. Typically, the individual is required to take an examination to show mastery of the subject matter in order to obtain certification.

Numerous professional organizations, such as the Project Management Institute (PMI) and the American Society for Quality (ASQ) offer professional certifications in their chosen disciplines. These programs focus upon professional experience and academic knowledge of industry standard best practices as the basis for certification. Professionals must pass a rigorous examination to be certified, and maintain this certification with additional professional development activity throughout their careers. Internal certification programs can also become external certification offerings, such as Motorola's "Six Sigma".

There are global training companies offering professional certification in both technology and management areas, such as Learning Tree International. Students take a select set of courses, are tested on that class knowledge and receive certification of a breadth and depth of knowledge in a specific area. There are also vendor specific certifications for technology and applications, typically offered by major vendors such as IBM, Oracle, Sun, and Microsoft. According to the 2001 Study, a majority of IT professionals believe certification is most helpful in providing them with the ability to understand vendor products and solutions and to use those products to perform their current job responsibilities.

Increasingly you will see professional certification programs offered in technology, project or process management by major colleges and universities. These programs are an adjunct to a college degree, consisting of for-credit courses with credits that can carry over to degree programs. According to Lori Dowd, in 2001 there were more than 2500 certification

programs at more than 400 universities in the United States. The number of students receiving graduate certificates in the programs exceeded those receiving doctoral degrees.

How do you select the certification program that is right for you? Certification program reputation, corporate hiring practices and word-of mouth seem to be the primary drivers for IT certification program selection and popularity. According to organizational psychologist, Dr. Hal Kane: "Core courses should reflect state of the art practices as well as the theoretical underpinnings of the discipline. The program should also carry strong reputational authority in one's field and be recognized by major organizations as having a value-added component to one's resume. In other words, hiring officials tend to favor those who hold certification over those who do not."

Lori Dowd also offers these questions for IT professionals seeking and evaluating certification programs: "First, does the curriculum cover problems I'll be called on to solve and skills I'll need to have? In other words, is the program targeted to *me*? Second, do the instructors have the background and expertise in the subject area, and are they adept at teaching adults? Third, does the institution have a reputation that speaks well and loudly?"

The challenge to IT workers and their employers is to winnow from the enormous number of training program and certification offerings those that provide the appropriate knowledge and skill sets required to get the job done and enable people to be more effective. Buyer beware - there is currently no set of standards that define quality levels for these certification programs, which can cheapen the value of certification and make it difficult to compare one program to another.

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