Perspectives

Specialist certification is still a somewhat vague concept in the IT world. Some see it as proof of participation in a training program, whereas others believe it demonstrates that an IT professional has certain proven qualities and experiences. The value assigned to any given certificate can vary widely depending on the granting organization’s credentials, and the reasons people seek certification can be just as varied. Many workers obtain certificates for self-development or career-improvement reasons, whereas others are obliged by their employers to qualify for certification to work on certain projects. On both ends of the employer–employee spectrum, substantial ambiguity remains in the case for and against certification. Is it just marketing hype, or does certification fit with the constantly evolving professionalization and industrialization of IT?

In this article, we discuss the pros and cons of certification by exploring why so much attention is focused on it, as well as the different kinds of certifications that are available, current changes in requirements, and where IT professionals can get certified. We also examine a core question: what’s the real value of IT professional certification? Whatever the answer, it’s clear that it’s no longer possible to imagine the IT world without certification because certification is rapidly maturing and its impact is increasing.

So Much Attention

Certification is part of a broad social trend that has developed over the past few years. Anyone who buys and sells products or consulting services wants to ensure the quality of results and underlying processes used in various fields and disciplines. In the IT sector, this occurs at both the organizational and departmental levels (think of ISO and CMM certification), as well as on the professional level.

The IT field continuously evolves, and from software development to network and enterprise architectures, the number of individual disciplines in IT continues to increase. As specific disciplines form and grow, practitioners naturally want to display their unique qualities and distinguish themselves from one another. They often come together in networks and unions, seeking ways to exhibit their professional expertise yet still accentuate their individual experience. In this manner, certification becomes an important instrument for setting someone apart from the crowd.

Employers also play an important role; most of them continuously seek new ways to measure employee qualifications, and certification is a useful means of hiring people or deciding which employees qualify for promotion or work on large projects. Similarly, when hiring a third-party organization to work on a client project, employers sometimes include requests for certified IT professionals in proposals, procurement specifications, and service-level agreements. Thus, solution providers who use certified IT professionals also gain a competitive advantage.

Certification: Who Dares?

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Various Types of Certification

The concept of certification programs has undergone many changes in the past few years. At first, a certificate primarily proved knowledge of a particular field, usually demonstrated through a series of multiple-choice questions. Obtaining a certificate mainly involved a time investment, usually spent simply studying the subject.

Today, certification goes a step further—not only does it test knowledge, but also insights and skills. The questions are open ended, and involve specific case studies and statements that the IT professional must address or solve. Simply studying a subject is no longer sufficient—the practitioner must demonstrate a thorough command of the subject, have practiced it with specific assignments, and prove any relevant practical experience. In short, certification now requires people to demonstrate that they can actually apply the knowledge, insights, and skills they’ve obtained successfully in their work. Moreover, they must document and thoroughly reflect this experience during the application process, which also includes in-depth interviews and background checks with the organizations at which they gained their experience.

Often, a distinction is made between product- and role-oriented certifications. For product-oriented certifications, specific methods, techniques, tools, or concepts might indicate the qualification level—for example, the SAP, TOGAF, RUP, and ITIL certifications. Role-oriented certifications pay more attention to underlying skill sets, knowledge, and experience, independent of the methods, techniques, and tools used. Examples include the IT Architect Certification (ITAC), Certified Information Systems Security Professional (CISSP) and Certified Business Intelligence Professionals (CBIP). Interestingly, role-based certification is becoming increasingly prominent in many product-based certifications. Take, for example, the new Microsoft certifications—they now test an IT professional’s knowledge as well as his or her skills.

Current Trends

One recent trend in certification is its evolution from a national to an international benchmark. Because of the increased emphasis on making organizations global, international certifications are likewise increasing. Typically, these certifications are in English, but they sometimes offer regionally based translations.

A second trend is that certification is becoming more open and less based on specific vendors; certifications now frequently comply with open standards and are often aimed more at proving expertise. Unions and international platforms provide the basis for many certifications—the ITAC and the IT Specialist Certification (ITSC) exemplify the new breed of globally recognized, vendor-neutral, and skills- and knowledge-based programs.

Another trend is for certifications to go beyond expertise and give priority to business skills, such as communication, project management, and consultancy. Everyone knows an excellent specialist who has knowledge about the entire IT organization at his fingertips but can’t communicate it to anyone. Mastery of both subject matter and interpersonal skills increasingly must be in balance for IT professionals to perform well.

The last trend in certification involves expiration dates—points at which a certification is no longer “valid.” After a specific time has passed, the certification institute urges IT professionals to get recertified. IT professionals must prove they’re up to date on the latest advances in the field and describe current relevant work experience.

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Certification Resources

One thing is certain: the once-strict relationship between training and certification is disappearing. Training remains important for fast professional growth, but for IT professionals to qualify for certification, they must offer demonstrable skills, practical experience, and recognized expertise. Certification is therefore becoming less associated with training providers and more recognized through independent standards bodies, which in turn is increasing the demand for organizations focused primarily on certification. In contrast, training companies must clearly specify that courses they offer provide better preparation for important certifications in their line of business.

Many large international employers and IT service providers are also increasingly promoting their own internal certification programs, which originated from the need to standardize their
organization’s best practices and the norm for professional growth of their employees. These programs are often role-oriented and primarily aimed at practical experience. The expectation is that if good external and independent alternatives become available, internal programs will conform or migrate to them.

What’s Certification’s Actual Value?
Because IT professionals often move from job to job or work as self-employed consultants or contractors, it’s even more important for them to demonstrate their qualifications to new employers or customers. But even those employees who remain faithful to a single employer face new environments, projects, or collaborations across organizational or national borders. Certification can give them an advantage as well.

The same logic holds true for employers and IT executives. They must staff their departments and projects with the right people and seek independent and uniform standards for their most important resource: their IT professionals. The total number of certified employees can boost an entire organization’s reputation.

Whereas IT professionals used to earn a certificate just by studying, today’s practitioner must demonstrate specific skills and suitable experience. By investing their time as well as money in this effort, technologists can build up their professional skills and receive independent acknowledgment of their qualifications when certified. Moreover, they can apply all of these things to each new work environment. Certification, therefore, truly is an investment in oneself.

It’s encouraging to see that most prestigious certification programs give ample thought to the competences required for specific IT roles and how to measure them. Qualifying for these certifications helps legitimize a professional’s capabilities. More important, however, is the fact that professionals who haven’t yet reached this level have a clear path for personal and professional growth.

The question for IT professionals now is whether they’re prepared to invest in themselves to take up this challenge and demonstrate their competency. People who are good at what they do, keep their skills current, and invest in their personal development have nothing to fear. However, from experience, we know that many professionals find it difficult to begin the certification process and fail to recognize the benefits it will ultimately provide. Doing so means they must prove themselves to an external third party—they can’t just depend on the people who already know their qualities and experiences to help them. Certification therefore requires commitment and nerve. Rest assured, though, it isn’t going away any time soon.

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