The 10 best IT certifications: 2010

By Erik Eckel

Just as with many popular arguments -- Red Sox v. Yankees, Chelsea v. Manchester United, Ford v. Chevy -- IT certifications are popular fodder for debate. Except that certifications, in an IT professional's microcosm of a world, have a bigger impact on the future. Just which certifications hold the most value today? Here's my list of the 10 accreditations with the greatest potential for technology support professionals, administrators, and managers seeking employment within consulting firms or small and midsize organizations.

1: MCITP

This best certification list could be built using 10 Microsoft certifications, many of which would be MCITP accreditations. The world runs on Microsoft. Those professionals earning Microsoft Certified IT Professional (MCITP) certification give employers and clients confidence that they've developed the knowledge and skills necessary to plan, deploy, support, maintain, and optimize Windows technologies. Specifically, the Enterprise Desktop Administrator 7 and Server Administrator tracks hold great appeal, as will Enterprise Messaging Administrator 2010, as older Exchange servers are retired in favor of the newer platform.

2: MCTS

With operating systems (Windows 2000, 2003, 2008, etc.) cycling through every several years, many IT professionals simply aren't going to invest the effort to earn MCITP or MCSE accreditation on every version. That's understandable. But mastering a single exam, especially when available examinations help IT pros demonstrate expertise with such popular platforms as Windows Server 2008, Windows 7, and Microsoft SQL Server 2008, is more than reasonable. That's why the Microsoft Certified Technology Specialist (MCTS) accreditation earns a spot on the list; it provides the opportunity for IT pros to demonstrate expertise on a specific technology that an organization may require right here, right now.

3: Network+

There's simply no denying that IT professionals must know and understand the network principles and concepts that power everything within an organization's IT infrastructure, whether running Windows, Linux, Apple, or other technologies. Instead of dismissing CompTIA's Network+ as a baseline accreditation, every IT professional should add it to their resume.

4: A+

Just as with CompTIA's Network+ certification, the A+ accreditation is another cert that all IT professionals should have on their resume. Proving baseline knowledge and expertise with the hardware components that power today's computers should be required of all technicians. I'm amazed at the number of smart, intelligent, and seasoned IT pros who aren't sure how to crack the case of a Sony Vaio or diagnose failed capacitors with a simple glance. The more industry staff can learn about the fundamental hardware components, the better.

5: CSSA

SonicWALLs power countless SMB VPNs. The company's network devices also provide firewall and routing services, while extending gateway and perimeter security protections to organizations of all sizes. By gaining Certified SonicWALL Security Administrator (CSSA) certification, engineers can demonstrate their mastery of network security essentials, secure remote access, or secure wireless administration. There's an immediate need for engineers with the knowledge and expertise required to configure and troubleshoot SonicWALL devices providing security services.

6: CCNA

Although SonicWALL has eaten some of Cisco's lunch, the demand for Cisco skills remains strong. Adding Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA) expertise to your resume does no harm and helps convince larger organizations, in particular, that you have the knowledge and skills necessary to deploy and troubleshoot Cisco routing and switching hardware.

7: ACTC

Here's where the debate really begins. Increasingly, my office is being asked to deploy and administer Mac OS X networks. In the real world, divorced from IT-industry rhetoric, we're being asked to replace older Windows networks with Mac OS X client-server environments. We're particularly seeing Apple traction within nonprofit environments. We've found the best bet is to get up to speed on the technologies clients are requesting, so it stands to reason that earning Apple Certified Technical Coordinator (ACTC) 10.6 accreditation won't hurt. In fact, developing mastery over Mac OS X Snow Leopard Server will help provide confidence needed to actually begin pursuing Apple projects, instead of reactively responding to client requests to deploy and maintain Apple infrastructure.

8: ACSP

Apple Certified Support Professional (ACSP) 10.6 accreditation helps IT professionals demonstrate expertise supporting Mac OS X client workstations. If you work for a single organization, and that firm doesn't use Macs, you won't need this certification. But larger organizations adding Macs due to demand within different departments or consultants working with a wide client base will do well to ensure they have Snow Leopard client skills. The ACSP is the perfect way to prove mastery.

9: CISSP

Unchanged from the last 10 best certifications list, ISC2's security accreditation for industry professionals with at least five years of full-time experience is internationally recognized for its value and validity. The Certified Information Systems Security Professional (CISSP) title demonstrates expertise with operations and network security, subjects that will only increase in importance as legal compliance, privacy, and risk mitigation continue commanding larger organizations' attention.

10: PMP

I fear organizations begin cutting project managers first when times get tough. Management roles and responsibilities often get passed to technical staff when layoffs occur. Even in challenging economic times, though, IT departments require staff familiar with planning, scheduling, budgeting, and project management. That's why the Project Management Institute's (PMI) Project Management Professional (PMP) accreditation makes the list. The cert measures candidates' expertise in managing and planning projects, budgeting expenses, and keeping initiatives on track. While there's an argument to place CompTIA's Project+ certification in this slot, PMI is a respected organization that exists solely to further professional project management and, as such, deserves the nod.

Honorable mentions: MCSE, ITIL, RHCP, Linux+, VCP, ACE, QuickBooks, Security+

In the previous version of this article, readers asked where NetWare certification stands. It's not on the list. That's not a mistake. It's gone the way of BNC connectors, in my opinion. Microsoft owns the market. MCSEs have more value.

ITIL has its place, particularly in larger environments. RHCP (or Linux+) and VCP have roles within enterprises dependent upon Red Hat/Linux and VMware virtualization technologies certainly, but those organizations remain hit or miss.

Acronis' ACE deserves a look. With some 3 million systems being backed up now by Acronis image software, it would behoove technology professionals to learn how to properly use the software. I think it's fair to say there's still some confusion as to the software's tremendous potential.

SMBs are also demonstrating a surge of interest in QuickBooks technologies. From QuickBooks Point-of-Sale to QuickBooks Enterprise platforms, there's strong, growing demand for QuickBooks expertise in the field. The company's growth is impressive. There's no other way to describe it. In a crappy economy, Intuit's growing.

Security+, really, is a no brainer, but I'll get lit up if I include nothing but CompTIA certifications in the top 10 list. However, my advice for anyone entering the industry or even veterans seeking their first accreditations would be to load up on CompTIA certs. How can you go wrong with the manufacturer-independent certifications that demonstrate mastery of fundamentals across a range of topics, including project management, hardware, networking, security, and voice networks? You could do much worse.

A word on the methodology

There's no double-blind statistically valid data analysis run through a Bayesian probability calculus formula here. I've worked in IT long enough, however, and with enough different SMBs, to know what skills we need when the firm I co-own hires engineers and sends technicians onsite to deploy new systems or troubleshoot issues.

Sure, I could have thrown in ITIL to satisfy enterprise professionals, included RHCP to sate the rabid open source crowd, and added VCP to look hip modernizing the list with a virtualization element. But I'm just not seeing the demand for those skills in companies with up to several hundred employees. My firm's been asked to deploy exactly one Linux server in almost seven years. And we've virtualized maybe a dozen systems. Therefore, I feel it would be a disservice to readers to include such accreditations when I see, on a daily basis, vastly greater demand for these other skill sets.