The 10 best IT certifications: 2012

By Erik Eckel
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1: MCITP: Enterprise Administrator on Windows Server 2008

I love Apple technologies. The hardware's awesome, the software's intuitive and their systems make it easy to get things done fast while remaining secure. But it's a Windows world. Make no mistake. Most every Mac I deploy (and Mac sales are up 20 to 25 percent) is connected to a back-end Windows server. Windows server experts, however, can prove hard to find.

IT pros who have an MCITP (Microsoft Certified IT Professional): Enterprise Administrator on Windows Server 2008 accreditation demonstrate significant, measurable proficiency with Active Directory, configuring network and application infrastructures, enterprise environments, and (if they've chosen well) the Windows 7 client OS.

That's an incredibly strong skill set that everyone from small businesses to enterprise organizations require. Add this line to your resume, and you may be all set to find another job should your current employer downsize.

Honorable mentions for the top spot include the MCITP: Virtualization Administrator on Windows Server 2008 R2 and MCITP: Enterprise Messaging Administrator on Exchange 2010. Microsoft Exchange owns the SMB space. Virtualization initiatives are only getting started and will dominate technology sectors for the next decade at least. Administrators who can knowledgeably navigate Microsoft's virtualization and email platforms will only grow in importance.

2: MCTS

Not everyone has time to sit as many exams as an MCITP requires. The MCTS (Microsoft Certified Technology Specialist) certification is among the smartest accreditations an engineer can currently chase. As mentioned above, it's a Windows world. Adding an MCTS certification in Exchange, SharePoint, Virtualization, Windows Client, or Windows Server will strengthen a resume.

There is no downside to any of these MCTS accreditations. Each of the above tracks provides candidates with an opportunity to demonstrate proficiency with specific technologies that organizations worldwide struggle to effectively design, implement, and maintain every day.

3: VCP

Virtualization is all the rage. It makes sense. Hardware manufacturers keep cranking out faster and faster servers that can store more and more data. Tons of servers sit in data centers using just fractions of their capacities. Virtualization, which enables running multiple virtual server instances on the same physical chassis, will continue growing in importance as organizations strive to maximize technology infrastructure investments.

VMware is a leading producer of virtualization software. Tech pros earning VCP (VMware Certified Professional) certification give employers (both current and future) confidence they can implement and maintain VMware-powered virtual environments. And if you talk to the techs responsible for maintaining data centers, you'll frequently hear that VMware remains a favorite over Microsoft's Hyper-V alternative, although most sober IT pros will have to admit Hyper-V is improving and closing the gap.

4: CCNA

The next politically correct certification to list is the CCIE (Cisco Certified Internetwork Expert). However, that's a massive exam that few professionals realistically will ever have an opportunity to obtain. And while Cisco equipment frequently composes the network backbone, fueling numerous medium and large organizations, most organizations don't need a CCIE and don't have the resources to pay one.

That's why I believe the more fundamental CCNA (Cisco Certified Network Associate) certification is a smart bet. A CCNA can help technology pros better familiarize themselves with the network OS's fundamentals, while simultaneously strengthening their resume. Particularly motivated candidates can proceed to earn a CCNA Security certification, as the network security focus is a critical component of enterprise systems.

5: CSSA

In early 2012, Dell announced its pending acquisition of SonicWALL. There's a reason Dell is buying the hardware manufacturer: SonicWALL has made great strides within the SMB unified threat management market.

Someone needs to be able to configure and troubleshoot those devices. The CSSA (Certified SonicWALL Security Administrator) certification not only proves proficiency in installing and administering the company's devices, certified professionals receive direct access to tier two support staff and beta testing programs.

Organizations are always going to require network devices to fulfill firewall, routing, and threat management services. SonicWALL has carved out quite a bit of market share — so much so that it will now have the marketing might of Dell helping fuel additional growth. Knowing how to configure the devices will help IT pros, particularly those who support numerous small businesses.

6: PMP

Too many chiefs isn't an IT problem I hear or read much about. Instead, it seems there's a lack of IT pros capable of sizing up a project's needs, determining required resources and dependencies, developing a realistic schedule, and managing a technical initiative.

The Project Management Institute is a nonprofit group that administers the PMP (Project Management Professional) certification. The exam isn't designed to earn a profit or motivate IT pros to learn its product and become unofficial sales cheerleaders. The PMP certifies candidates' ability to plan, budget, and complete projects efficiently, on time, and without cost overruns. Those are skills most every medium and large business needs within its IS department and such ability isn't going to be replaced by an app or third-party developer in our lifetimes.

7: CISSP

If you want to specialize in security, the (ISC)² (International Information Systems Security Certification Consortium, Inc.), which administers the CISSP (Certified Information Systems Security Professional) accreditation, is your organization. Its vendor-neutral certification has a reputation as one of the best vendor-neutral security certs.

Organizations' data, networks, and systems are increasingly coming under attack due to the value of personal, corporate, customer, and sensitive proprietary information. So individuals who demonstrate measurable success and understanding in architecting, designing, managing, and administering secure environments, developing secure policies, and maintaining secure procedures will stand out from the pack. In addition, the knowledge gained while earning the certification helps practitioners remain current with the latest legal regulations, best practices, and developments impacting security.

8: ACSP

There's more to the energy surrounding Apple than pleasant tablet devices, intuitive smartphones, and a stunning stock price. The company continues chewing up market share and shipping computers at rates 10 to 12 times greater than PC manufacturers.

The ACSP (Apple Certified Support Professional) designation helps IT pros demonstrate expertise supporting Mac OS X clients. Engineers, particularly Windows support pros and administrators increasingly encountering Macs, will be well served completing Apple's certification rack for technical support personnel. Benefits include not only another bullet for the resume but an understanding of Apple's official processes for installing, setting up, troubleshooting, and maintaining Mac client machines.

9: Network+ / A+

Yes, CompTIA's Network+ and A+ designations are, technically, two separate certifications. But they're both critical certs that test absolute fundamentals that every IT pro needs to completely understand.

In fact, there's an argument to be made that all IT pros should have both of these accreditations on their resumes. CompTIA is a well-respected, vendor-neutral (though vendor-supported) organization that continually develops and administers relevant certifications. The network, hardware, and software skills tested on the Network+ and A+ exams are basics that every self-respecting tech professional should master, whether they're performing budgeting tasks, deploying client machines, managing site-wide migrations, overseeing security, or administering networks and servers.

10: CompTIA Healthcare IT Technician

With an aging population, U.S.-based IT pros (in particular) should consider earning CompTIA's Healthcare IT Technician credential. Obviously, if you work in manufacturing, the credential may be a stretch. But manufacturers frequently lay off staff. And many others produce material for health-related purposes.

See where I'm headed?

The interest surrounding health-related technology is almost unparalleled. Look around the city where you live. During the recession, where have you seen growth? Are there lots of new bookstores opening? How about new single-family home developments? Seeing lots of new manufacturing centers?

Doubtful. Like many, you're probably seeing new medical services offices, immediate care centers, hospitals, outpatient facilities, dental practices, and similar health-related businesses.

They all need IT support. Support technicians, administrators, engineers, managers, and especially consultants who want to position themselves well for the future will do well to demonstrate their proficiency with health care technology's regulatory requirements, organizational behaviors, technical processes, medical business operations, and security requirements. IT pros could do worse with their time, that's for sure.