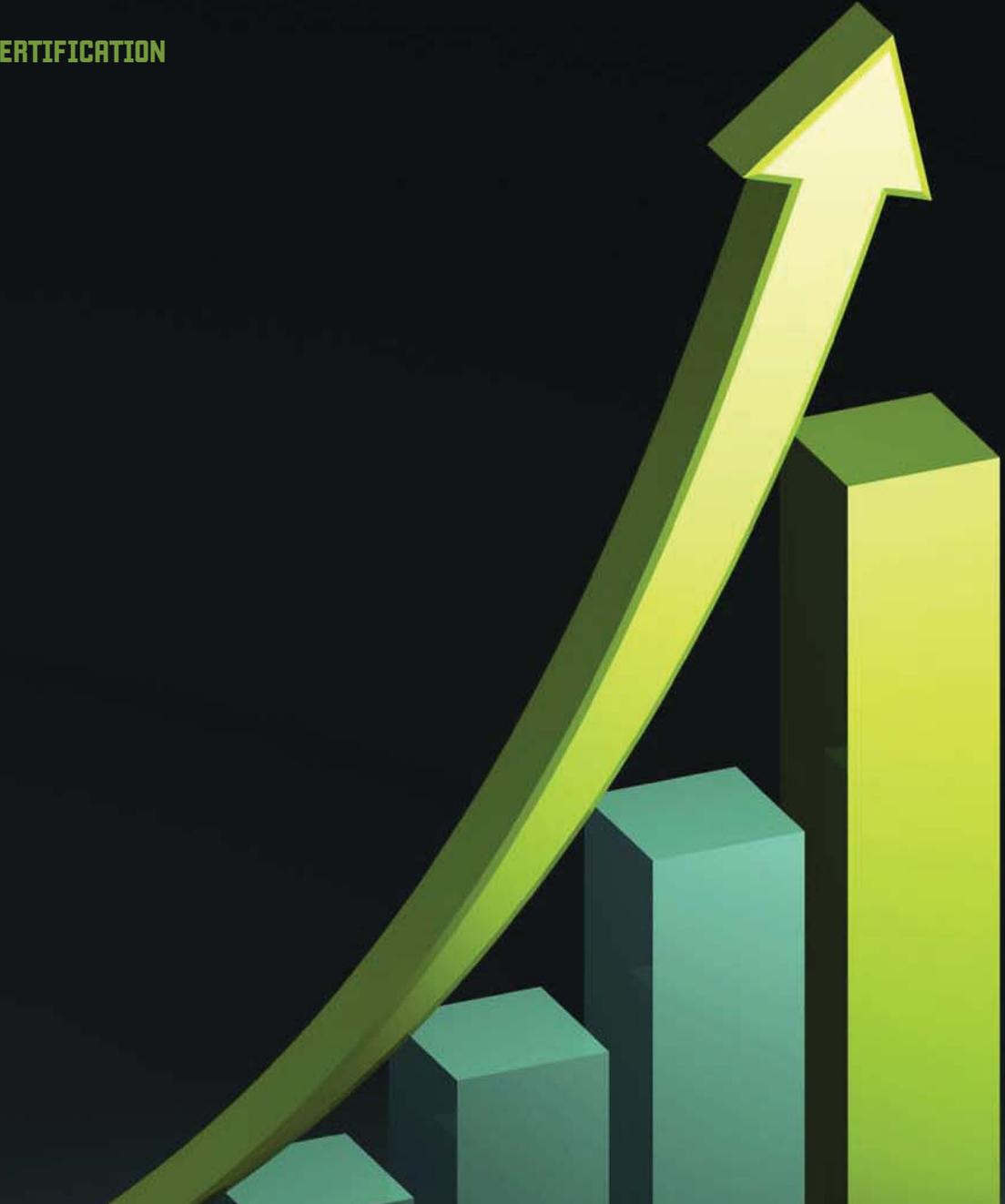


CERTIFICATION



Retain Your **VALUE** With Recertification

PETER MANIJK

In a tight job market, it is more important than ever for IT professionals to keep their credentials current. But today, professionals must weigh their recertification options to make the most effective and cost-efficient decision.

It seems as if every business article or report you see lately starts with a mention of the economic downturn. As a result, not only is having a credential of value increasingly beneficial for an IT professional, but keeping that certification current is paramount.

Yet, as purse strings tighten and head counts shrink, IT professionals must weigh the benefits of recertification with the time and money investment involved. Those considering recertification also should be aware of several key trends in the industry before taking the plunge.

To help the decision along, let's take a look at some of the critical factors involved, including the standard preparation time, durability of the credential, date stamping, cost and requirements.

What to Look for Up-Front

When first considering a certification program, you should carefully consider the following:

Is it easy to figure out how to get certified? A Web site that is easy find, easy to understand and easy to navigate is a plus. A program that is transparent — meaning it doesn't hide behind a firewall — is another plus. Companies should want to ensure customers and partners easily understand what skills and knowledge are being validated. This also will be useful when you return for recertification.

Check to see whether there is an up-to-date frequently asked questions (FAQ) file and an e-mail contact. Then, find out how long it takes for a program spokesperson to respond. Response time is an indicator of the quality of customer service and a 24- to 48-hour turnaround is the maximum amount of time it should take.

Does the program clearly spell out recertification rules? Usually a vendor channel partner program will require recertification every two years. If the program has a newsletter, it should spell out recertification rules yearly and notify you of any special training event or program changes.

Does date stamping apply? If you've been certified in the current year rather than five years ago, it certainly looks better to your employer or customer. If a credential does not have a date, there should be an easy way to verify it.

Is it easy to figure out where you can take the exams? There are testing centers available through-

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out the world, but if there isn't one near you, that may be a problem. The program should at least point you to the test-delivery vendor, and from there you can find the nearest testing center.

Ultimately, certification and recertification programs should provide the following benefits to participants:

- Validated knowledge and skills.
- Peer recognition.
- Increased value to employers.
- Increased marketability.

Training and Prep

Many certification programs these days offer virtual instructor-led training (vILT) — online courses taught by experienced practitioners. vILT courseware appeals to those who have to watch their travel budgets. Several recertification courses come in this format, as well. For example, Hitachi Data Systems offers past students a reunion vILT session to extend their learning experience and have the opportunity to put into practice what they learned.

Not only does using vILT courseware translate into less time away — which means more available billable hours for you and often less expense associated with backfilling your job — but it could lead to better peer relationships, as co-workers won't have to cover for each other as frequently.

Just keep in mind that some programs may require course attendance to gain or keep a credential, and

typically that involves validation of a demonstrated activity, such as an installation or other lab work.

Also, don't hesitate to contact the training provider to learn about available discounts. Sometimes, companies will offer deals to students who bring friends to a training course. Or they might negotiate prices for enrollment in multiple courses. Further, managers might be more inclined to let employees sign up for a program that lets them take unlimited training for one set price, like a buffet as opposed to a la carte.

Recertification Requirements

Each year, the rules for recertification should be evaluated. If a program is role-based and the credentialed individual has been performing that role, he or she should be able to test out fairly easily. But if a program has a combination of basic

product-level certs and role-based certs, what is the recertification strategy? Are test-takers required to take one exam or a series of exams?

It's important to know what you're getting into. Let's use Hitachi Data Systems as an example. The requirement for 2007 credentialed participants to obtain the equivalent 2009 credential via recertification is passing one of the Foundations exams. For example, if an individual obtained a Hitachi Data Systems Implementer cert in 2007, he or she will need to pass only the Foundations exam to gain the 2009 Hitachi Data Systems Implementer credential.

The principle reason for this is that the skills required for advanced positions in the field have not changed, but the base products have. The Foundation exams focus on those base products and technologies. According to feedback from test-takers, passing one test every two years to stay current is reasonable; the Foundation exams are updated yearly at the very least.

Another trend is for exams and credentials to be shared between programs. If you can leverage an exam across more than one program or even get credit for a certification in another program, it is a major bonus. For example, the Hitachi Data Systems Certified Professional Program leverages credentials earned from the SNIA (Storage Networking Industry Association) vendor-neutral certification program. In the case of Hitachi Data Systems, an SNIA credential is required to obtain expert status in the Storage

17 Days of Training

If you're like most folks in the high-tech industry, your employer offers you 17 training days to use as you wish. Typically that means any type of training, so you need to choose wisely. Here are some considerations:

- Keeping up on technology is a nonstop effort, so first you must get up to speed on your company's products. But then, you might want to supplement it with courses on new technology or concepts that can save your company money, such as reducing carbon footprints or cutting energy costs.
- If you frequently draft proposals and often work to get budgets approved, a class that focuses on business-writing skills can be helpful. A good writing class will teach you how to make your case in a way that decision makers can understand, such as including an executive summary and making your key points on the first page. Further, visually appealing documents are more likely to be read. Try to find a class that includes a design element so you can learn how to use space and graphics to help get your proposal noticed.
- Microsoft Excel expertise is a great to have, especially if you have to track and report on finances and projects. The bean counters always love a well-put-together spreadsheet and are likely to look upon your work more favorably. ☺

Manager and Architect tracks. At the same time, SNIA offers an expert-level cert that involves a vendor-specific credential as a prerequisite.

Recertification Road Shows

Test-prep road shows typically are designed for those who were already familiar with the products and technology and need some refresher training before testing. Often, an on-site testing center is available. Some companies also will provide counseling and chalk-talk sessions for students so they can break out into study groups after the initial training class.

Since everyday work is full of distractions, an opportunity to focus solely on certification often is a great help. To be able to prep for a test and then take the proctored exam immediately following also is a great time saver.

Trends in Certification: Storage

The results of *Certification Magazine's 2008 Salary Survey* found strong interest in the area of data storage.

If you're in IT and have not looked into storage certifications, now may be the time to do so. Or if you have several certifications all set to expire and you have to choose just one to renew, you might want to make it your storage credential.

From a storage perspective, while backing up data is one important function, it's not the only one. Using data to make the business succeed is even more critical. With the demands placed on IT to support data growth, business continuity and compliance, storage is an area in which IT professionals with the right credentials can be successful.

That said, the field of IT storage also involves planning and architecting IT solutions. This requires that an IT professional take into account such areas as data access, security, environment optimization, virtualization, performance, business continuity, replication and capacity planning. An IT professional who understands these concerns exponentially increases in value to the company and customers.

Further, even a base-level storage certification such as the Hitachi Data Systems Certified Professional raked in a high average salary in the Salary Survey results.

Large vs. Boutique Programs

A boutique certification draws between 500 and 3,000 test takers per year. For this reason, a boutique certification has to focus on quality, not volume. Value is the key ingredient. The companies offering boutique programs aim to be in the game for the long term, creating lifelong advocates and learners.

Large programs, such as those from big names such as Microsoft and Cisco, have more training opportunities and, of course, many more participants. It may be that a certification from one of the larger programs is a base-level requirement for certain job opportunities, but a boutique certification, such as a storage credential, could be a key differentiator in the marketplace. After all, there certainly are advantages to having more than one credential. ☺

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