

The Value of Professional Certifications.

Contrasting Professional Certification With a College Education.

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There has been a great deal of debate over the value of certifications. Some argue that they have little value, because most don't demonstrate real world skills. Others argue that they have great value, because they are an independent measure of knowledge. I believe that the truth lies somewhere in between those two extremes.

Frequently, when people ask for my point of view regarding certifications, I compare them to a college education. I ask, "How do you get a college degree?" Most people say something along the lines of: read, study and take exams. Then, I ask, "How do you earn a certification?" Then, they start smiling. I have always viewed the certification exams like college final exams.

This comparison is valuable, as long as you keep it in perspective. Also, there are advantages to one versus the other that would benefit from a detailed examination.

I've prepared a chart (see Chart 1), which contrasts these two methods of acquiring and demonstrating knowledge.

Chart 1

educational aspect	certification	college	comparative analysis
classroom training	usually done in compressed timeframes, of 8 to 40 hours, on consecutive days	usually spread over a semester or quarter, of 45 to 60 hours, at 3 to 4 hours per week	varies by college course and certificate
self study	self paced, based on the individual's goals	with the explosion of virtual universities, this has grown and usually follows a similar structure to the classroom	with the exception of the timeframes, they are very similar
reading	read the study guide and other reference materials	read the text book and other reference materials	virtually identical
exams	take a standardized exam, when you feel ready	take one or more instructor written exams, at designated times	both require exams, but certifications are standardized
currency of information	many are generalized and completed once, but many are release related	the information is current as of when the class is taken	certifications are more frequently a reflection of current knowledge
hands-on experience	varies by exam, most don't have a hands-on component, but several do or have an experience requirement	varies by class, most don't have a hands-on component, but science and technology classes usually do	varies by college course and certificate, but most people pursuing a certification find a way to practice the required skills

Obviously, I lean toward the 'certifications are valuable' camp. I've been earning certifications for over 20 years and have accumulated over 80 of them, by passing over 100 exams. Some were fluffy, with minimal required study time, and some were very difficult, with either multiple exams or extensive experience requirements.

Yes, it is a rather odd hobby, but I enjoy it!

Also, I have an Associate in Arts (AA) in Business and a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Liberal Arts, with concentration in Psychology, Sociology and Political Science. So, I also see the value of a college degree.

Regarding my BA degree, I completed it over a five year period, with 200 credits; the traditional number being 120-128. The reason for the high credit count was my use of the CLEP (College-Level Examination Program) program (<http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/clep/about.html>), to earn 60 credits, by exam. Yes, this test taking behavior is a life long obsession!

Further, my BA degree is from Excelsior College (<https://www.excelsior.edu/>), formerly Regents College, which is one of the great grandparents of virtual universities and distance learning. Back then, in the 1980s, they were called external degree programs.

To the people trying to decide what certifications or degrees to pursue, I give the following advice.

First, determine what your goals are before you start. There isn't much reason for someone with a primary interest in software development to get a psychology degree or much reason for someone interested in UNIX administration to focus on becoming Microsoft certified.

There are a number of good resources, on the Internet, that will help you match certifications to a job role, like these:

<http://www.cramsession.com/jobs/list-jobs.asp>

http://certification.about.com/od/certificationsbytopic/Certifications_by_Job_Role.htm

Second, be realistic about how much time, energy and money you are willing to invest. Have a plan, with both short-term and long-term goals. Self discipline is extremely important, for both degrees and certifications.

Lastly, while the World needs specialists, you may want your skills to cover a variety of interrelated disciplines. You should not put all of your eggs in one basket! Even if you primarily want to be Microsoft certified, certification in peripheral technologies would be of great value. For example, if the MCITP (Microsoft Certified IT Professional) certification is your primary goal, acquiring the CompTIA Network+ or CCNA (Cisco Certified Network Associate) would be an excellent complement to it.

To the prospective employers that will be hiring those that have degrees and certifications, I give the following advice. Remember that either of these education paths should be viewed as just one component in your evaluation of a prospective employee, along with items like experience, personality, references and career goals. True, a specific credential sometimes has greater value to a specific role, but it is still just one component. Also, you should understand what either represents, in terms of scope, depth, relevance and difficulty to acquire.

To the current employers trying to determine where certifications and degrees fit within their employee development framework, there is this perspective. Obviously, with tight budgets you will need to get the greatest return on your investment. There are many factors to consider, including: education requirements for advancement, education requirements to keep up with technological advances, education budget, employee retention and employee satisfaction.

There are a number of approaches available to employers. When it comes to training, you have: instructor lead training (ILT); Web based training (WBT) and self study. When it comes to motivating the employee, you have things like: making a certain credential a requirement for advancement, tuition reimbursement, allowing study time during normal business hours, exam fee reimbursement and incentive pay.

One note of caution to current employers, treat your well educated employees properly! Due to their credentials, with its associated knowledge, they are of greater value you and other employers, as well.

My closing thought is that the true value of certifications depends on the individuals and the specific situations that surround their job.

Good luck in your educational pursuits, whatever form they may take!

About the author

Pete Warchol has been in the Information Technology industry for more than 20 years. He has held many different roles, spanning software development, business analysis, project management, staff management, systems administration, systems security analysis, and most recently, systems performance analysis. He has earned more than 80 professional certifications, including MCITP (Microsoft), CPHIMS (HIMSS), VCP (VMware), CCA (Citrix), ASE (HP), CATE (IBM), Security+ (CompTIA), and CEH (EC-Council). He is employed by Siemens Healthcare and is a CMG Officer for the Philadelphia regional group (<http://regions.cmg.org/regions/phcmg/index.html>).