



Chapter XIII

Information Technology Certification: A Student Perspective

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Abstract

Certification has become a popular adjunct to traditional means of acquiring information technology (IT) skills, and employers increasingly specify a preference for those holding certifications. This chapter reports on a study designed to investigate student perceptions of both the benefits and risks of certification and its importance in obtaining employment. Certification was perceived as an important factor in achieving employment and students undertaking it anticipate that it will lead to substantial financial benefits. Yet, higher salaries are not seen as the most important benefit of certification. The potential benefits that students believe are most important relate to 'real-world' experience. The respondents were aware of the possible risks of certification but did not appear to be overly concerned about them.

Introduction

Certification has become a popular adjunct to traditional means of acquiring IT skills, and increasing numbers of job advertisements specify a preference for those holding certifications. Certification intends to establish a standard of competency in defined areas. Unlike traditional academic degrees, certifications tend to be specific to narrow fields or even to individual products. They are designed to provide targeted skills that have immediate applicability in the workplace.

Vendors such as Microsoft and Cisco Systems dominate the vendor-specific certification market worldwide, with qualifications such as the Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer (MCSE), Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA) and Cisco Certified Internetwork Expert (CCIE). Vendor-neutral certifications, such as those provided by the Institute for Certification of Computing Professionals (ICCP), the Computer Technology Industry Association and the Disaster Recovery Institute, also play a role. It has been reported that there are more than 300 IT certifications available and that approximately 1.6 million people have earned approximately 2.4 million certifications (Nelson & Rice, 2001), and no doubt these figures have already increased dramatically. Gabelhouse (2000) quoted an IDC Inc. report that found that the IT training and testing industries had revenues of \$2.5 billion in 1999 and were expected to reach \$4.1 billion by 2003.

Vendors create certifications as a way of promoting widespread adoption of their products and technologies, but they have also become important for educational institutions in attracting students and placing graduates (Brookshire, 2000). This chapter explores the perceptions of students who are undertaking courses of study that can lead to certification. It reports on a study designed to investigate student perceptions of both the benefits and risks of certification and its importance in obtaining employment.

Benefits of Certification

Numerous benefits have been proposed to result from IT certification. As Nelson and Rice (2001) note, many of the claims of benefits have originated in the brochures and Web sites of certification agencies; however, there also seems to be a wider recognition of their importance. The major benefits that have been claimed can be categorized as relating to employers, educational institutions and students (i.e., potential employees). The major benefit for employers is believed to be the provision of more capable employees (Ray & McCoy, 2000), and one in eight IT job advertisements have been found to mention certifications (Clyne, 2001; Nelson & Rice, 2001). Some support for the benefit of employee certification to employers is provided in a study by IDC Inc. (1999), which found that 92% of managers

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