

By Erik Eckel

IT certifications boast numerous benefits. They bolster resumes, encourage higher salaries, and assist in job retention. But which IT certifications are best?

Technology professionals generate much debate over just that question. Many claim vendor-specific programs best measure a candidate's skills, while others propose vendor-independent exams are the only worthy way of measuring real-world expertise. Still other observers believe the highest-level accreditations—Microsoft's MCSE or new Architect Series certification, Cisco's CCIE, etc.—are the only credentials that truly hold value.

Myself, I don't fully subscribe to any of those mindsets. The best IT certification for you, after all, is likely to be different from that for another technology professional with different education, skills, and goals working at a different company in a different industry. For that reason, when pursuing any professional accreditation, you should give much thought and care to your education, experience, skills, goals, and desired career path.

Once a career road map is in place, selecting a potential certification path becomes much easier. And that's where this list of the industry's 10 best IT certifications comes into play. While this list may not include the 10 best accreditations for you, it does catalog 10 IT certifications that possess significant value for a wide range of technology professionals.

1 MCITP

The new-generation Microsoft Certified IT Professional credential, or MCITP for short, is likely to become the next big Microsoft certification. Available for a variety of fields of expertise—including database developer, database administrator, enterprise messaging administrator, and server administrator—an MCITP validates a professional's proven job-role capabilities. Candidates must pass several Microsoft exams that track directly to their job role before earning the new designation.

As with Microsoft's other new-generation accreditations, the MCITP certification will retire when Microsoft suspends mainstream support for the platforms targeted within the MCITP exams. By matching the new certification to popular job roles, as has been done to some extent with CompTIA's Server+ (server administrator), Project+ (project manager), and A+ (desktop support) certifications, Microsoft has created a new certification that's certain to prove timely, relevant, and valuable.

2 MCTS

The new-generation Microsoft Certified Technology Specialist (MCTS) helps IT staff validate skills in installing, maintaining, and troubleshooting a specific Microsoft technology. The MCTS certifications are designed to communicate the skills and expertise a holder possesses on a specific platform.

For example, candidates won't earn an MCTS on SQL Server 2008. Instead, they'll earn an MCTS covering SQL Server business intelligence (MCTS: SQL Server 2008 Business Intelligence), database creation (MCTS: SQL Server 2008, Database Development), or SQL server administration (MCTS: SQL Server 2008, Implementation and Maintenance).

These new certifications require passing multiple, tightly targeted exams that focus on specific responsibilities on specific platforms. MCTS designations will expire when Microsoft suspends mainstream support for the corresponding platform. These changes, as with other new-generation Microsoft certifications, add value to the accreditation.

3 Security+

Security continues to be a critical topic. That's not going to change. In fact, its importance is only going to grow. One of the quickest ways to lose shareholder value, client confidence, and sales is to suffer a data breach. And no self-respecting technology professional wants to be responsible for such a breach.

CompTIA's Security+ accreditation provides a respected, vendor-neutral foundation for industry staff (with at least two years of experience) seeking to demonstrate proficiency with security fundamentals. While the Security+ accreditation consists of just a single exam, it could be argued that any IT employee charged with managing client data or other sensitive information should, at a minimum, possess this accreditation. The importance of ensuring staff are properly educated as to systems security, network infrastructure, access control, auditing, and organizational security principles is simply too important to take for granted.

4 [MCPD](#)

There's more to information technology than just administration, support, and networking. Someone must create and maintain the applications and programs that power organizations. That's where the new-generation Microsoft Certified Professional Developer (MCPD) credential comes into play.

The MCPD accreditation measures a developer's ability to build and maintain software solutions using Visual Studio 2008 and Microsoft .NET Framework 3.5. Split into three certification paths (Windows Developer 3.5, ASP.NET Developer 3.5, and Enterprise Applications Developer 3.5), the credential targets IT professionals tasked with designing, optimizing, and operating those Microsoft technologies to fulfill business needs.

A redesigned certification aimed at better-measuring real-world skills and expertise, the MCPD will prove important for developers and programmers. Besides requiring candidates to pass several exams, the MCPD certification will retire when Microsoft suspends mainstream support for the corresponding platform. The change is designed to ensure the MCPD certification remains relevant, which is certain to further increase its value.

5 [CCNA](#)

The Cisco Certified Internetwork Expert (CCIE) accreditation captures most of the networking company's certification glory. But the Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA) might prove more realistic within many organizations.

In a world in which Microsoft and Linux administrators are also often expected to be networking experts, many companies don't have the budgets necessary to train (or employ) a CCIE. But even small and midsize corporations can benefit from having their technology professionals earn basic proficiency administering Cisco equipment, as demonstrated by earning a CCNA accreditation.

As smaller companies become increasingly dependent upon remote access technologies, basic Cisco systems skills are bound to become more important. Although many smaller organizations will never have the complexity or workload necessary to keep a CCIE busy, Cisco's CCNA is a strong accreditation for technology professionals with a few years' experience seeking to grow and improve their networking skills.

6 [A+](#)

Technology professionals with solid hardware and support skills are becoming tougher to find. There's not much glory in digging elbow-deep into a desktop box or troubleshooting Windows boot errors. But those skills are essential to keeping companies running.

Adding CompTIA's A+ certification to a resume tells hiring managers and department heads that you have proven support expertise. Whether an organization requires desktop installation, problem diagnosis, preventive maintenance, or computer or network error troubleshooting, many organizations have found A+-certified technicians to be more productive than their noncertified counterparts.

Changes to the A+ certification, which requires passing multiple exams, are aimed at keeping the popular credential relevant. Basic prerequisite requirements are now followed by testing that covers specific fields of expertise (such as IT, remote support, or depot technician). The accreditation is aimed at those working in desktop support, on help desks, and in the field, and while many of these staffers are new to the industry, the importance of an A+ certification should not be overlooked.

7 PMP

Some accreditations gain value by targeting specific skills and expertise. The Project Management Professional (PMP) certification is a great example.

The Project Management Institute (PMI), a nonprofit organization that serves as a leading membership association for project management practitioners, maintains the PMP exam. The certification measures a candidate's project management expertise by validating skills and knowledge required to plan, execute, budget, and lead a technology project. Eligible candidates must have five years of project management experience or three years of project management experience and 35 hours of related education.

As organizations battle tough economic conditions, having proven project scheduling, budgeting, and management skills will only grow in importance. The PMI's PMP credential is a perfect conduit for demonstrating that expertise on a resume.

8 MCSE/MCSA

Even years after their introduction, Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer (MCSE) and Microsoft Certified Systems Administrator (MCSA) credentials remain valuable. But it's important to avoid interpreting these accreditations as meaning the holders are all-knowing gurus, as that's usually untrue.

In my mind, the MCSE and MCSA hold value because they demonstrate the holder's capacity to complete a long and comprehensive education, training, and certification program requiring intensive study. Further, these certifications validate a wide range of relevant expertise (from client and server administration to security issues) on specific, widely used platforms.

Also important is the fact that these certifications tend to indicate holders have been working within the technology field for a long time. There's no substitute for actual hands-on experience. Many MCSEs and MCSAs hold their certifications on Windows 2000 or Windows Server 2003 platforms, meaning they've been working within the industry for many years. While these certifications will be replaced by Microsoft's new-generation credentials, they remain an important measure of foundational skills on Windows platforms.

9 CISSP

As mentioned with the Security+ accreditation earlier, security is only going to grow in importance. Whatever an organization's mission, product, or service, security is paramount.

(ISC)², which administers the Certified Information Systems Security Professional (CISSP) accreditation, has built a respected, vendor-neutral security certification. Designed for industry pros with at least five years of full-time experience, and accredited by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), the CISSP is internationally recognized for validating candidates' expertise with operations and network and physical security, as well as their ability to manage risk and understand legal compliance responsibilities and other security-related elements.

10 Linux+

While pursuing my first Microsoft certification 10 years ago, I remember debating the importance of Linux with several telecommunications technicians. They mocked the investment I was making in learning Microsoft technologies. These techs were confident Linux was going to displace Windows.

Well, didn't happen. Linux continues to make inroads, though. The open source alternative is an important platform. Those professionals who have Linux expertise and want to formalize that skill set will do well adding CompTIA's Linux+ certification to their resumes.

The vendor-neutral exam, which validates basic Linux client and server skills, is designed for professionals with at least six to 12 months of hands-on Linux experience. In addition to being vendor-neutral, the exam is also distribution neutral (meaning the skills it covers work well whether a candidate is administering Red Hat, SUSE, or Ubuntu systems).

Let the debate begin

Technology professionals almost always have strong reactions when debating certification's value. Listing the top 10 certifications leaves room, of course, for only 10 credentials. That means many favorite and popular designations, such as HIPAA and Sarbanes-Oxley (SOX) certifications, have been necessarily omitted. Other important accreditations, including those for VoIP providers and from PC manufacturers, Red Hat, and even Apple, have also been left out here.

Which certifications would you leave off this list and which would you add in their place? [Join the discussion](#) and share the logic behind your choices.

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