



Alphabet soup ousts MCSE

A quiet revolution has been gradually bringing in a new breed of Microsoft qualifications, ousting the well-known MCSE. Gary Flood looks at how Microsoft certifications for IT professionals and for users are changing.

Remember the good old days when milk arrived on the doorstep, the AA saluted when they came to fix your car, and when a job seeker said they had a Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer (MCSE) qualification you knew where you stood?

Well, maybe the last one was always a bit questionable. In any case, the revolution has happened – and you may not have noticed it.

MCSE as a qualification is on the way out. Welcome, instead, to a slightly more complicated world, which for the unwary sounds like complete alphabet soup: get ready for new terminology such as MCTS and MCITP (with many variations).

The term MCTS stands for Microsoft Certified Technology Specialist, a new base level qualification, while the MCITP is the software giant's term for a new

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Rob Linsky,
Microsoft
Certification

breed it wants to see, Microsoft Certified IT Professional. Though the combinations can be complex, in effect Microsoft has said one size no longer fits all, spelling the end of generic qualification such as an MCSE. An MCTS, to have any value, has to be an MCTS in something – a specific bit of Microsoft technology, for instance a database – and only then can the IT practitioner progress to the highest level, architect.

We say ‘new,’ incidentally, but this is actually a process that started in 2005 with the new range of Microsoft software that included SQL Server 2005 and Visual Studio 2005.

‘People had a lot of faith in Microsoft certifications but the programme hadn’t evolved at the same pace as our technology,’ Rob Linsky, general manager for Microsoft Certification in the US, told IT Training. ‘We wanted something simple, more relevant to the needs of the market and which would give more value to hiring managers, more tied to specific technology and actual job roles. We call it the new generation of Microsoft certification.’

What does the marketplace think about the shake-up of the Microsoft education portfolio? On this question IT Training spoke to Richard Siddaway, head of the Microsoft practice at a UK software company called Centiq, who has a raft of MSFT qualifications (MCSE, MCDBA, NCS.D.NET, etc) but who has also passed three of the new exams (two for SQL Server 2005 and one for Windows Vista).

For Siddaway, something had to happen – partly as a consequence of Microsoft’s own dominance and success in the qualifications field.

‘The MCSE had become devalued in many people’s eyes,’ he points out, ‘because of a number of reasons: the rise of the “brain dump sites” has made it too easy to pass any of the common IT certification exams.

‘This has led to a number of candidates who can claim to have an MCSE but can’t configure an icon on the desktop, and I have met them.’

Similarly, ‘The boot camp phenomenon has also helped to devalue the MCSE in that the intensive coaching helps to get people through the exams that do not have the real world experience to back up the qualification.

‘At the same time, the rise of the home computer has convinced many that they know “all there is to know

about Windows” (as they can configure their own machine) – so the exams can’t be difficult, so certification must all be a waste of time. The term “engineer” is ‘over-used in IT and MCSE is held by people who do a wide variety of tasks.’

Siddaway therefore welcomes the changes. The new certifications are much narrower in scope, so it is easier to determine a candidate’s skill level – for example in an interview the questions to ascertain if someone holding a MCITP in database administration would be narrower in scope, but deeper, because the exams only pertain to SQL Server.

Furthermore, as Bill Walker, technical director of UK training specialists Xpertise, says: ‘The beauty of what Microsoft has achieved here is that qualifications are finally aligned to job roles and are not just generic across technology.’

The new certifications also take fewer exams, which should encourage more certification, believes Siddaway: ‘It’s a lot easier to convince someone to take three exams that directly relate to his job rather than seven, of which only three or four are directly relevant, and the time limits on the new certifications are linked to the product releases, ensuing that people claiming certification have to prove currency in the topics.’

Easily confused

So far, so good: in many ways this is an eminently rational restructuring. But you may or may not have noticed one slight issue. Even if the letters MCSE had lost some of their ‘magic’ in the marketplace, they still had value. What happens when they go away?

‘Where there might be a problem is that, even if MCSE is dying, there is no equivalent single generic umbrella qualification coming in to replace it,’ says Wells of Firebrand Training. ‘MCSE is a well-known term in the industry and at the

moment something like an MCTS doesn’t have the same clout.

Employers know – or think they know – what they are going to get from an MCSE that helps them gauge the conversation, it’s a benchmark that everyone can relate to. Microsoft must have debated this and decided it still needed to go ahead, but could it lead to a phase of confusion among employers?’

Centiq’s Siddaway agrees. ‘In that sense, yes, MCSE going away is a bad thing. MCSE was more or less understood, and job agencies and employers will no doubt be asking for MCSE in Windows 2008 when the product ships, thus provoking more cries of a skills shortage?’

‘I think there will be a lot of confusion around this over the next few years. Microsoft has spent a lot of time and effort trying to get the message across, but I keep meeting people who don’t understand what is happening. The agencies and employers will have to be much more specific about certifications they ask for in the future – which will be difficult unless they keep up to date with the changes.’

Will Hawkins of QA-IQ thinks the opposite. ‘This is actually much clearer for employers, as they can immediately see what an individual’s specialism is. The old system wasn’t really differentiated. Getting this base level qualification and then becoming more specialised in database, development or business intelligence makes sense. Microsoft had to change, and this is good news for employers who’ve been too often disappointed with what a paper MCSE can actually do.’

Walker of Xpertise also sees benefits in the new certification scheme: ‘The certifications that are replacing MCSE are actually a lot more beneficial for the candidates who go for them. There was a question mark over MCSE equalling “jack of all trades” which will go away for good now. That has to be good news for employers and professionals alike.’



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We put the issue over possible confusion to Lutz Ziob, general manager for Microsoft Learning in the US, and got the following response: 'What we are doing better supports and mirrors what industry and our partners want. There could be an element of truth in your suggestion about marketplace confusion – but that will quickly go away as this gains more momentum, we believe.'

IT professionals who haven't yet caught up with all that is changing in the Microsoft certification stack can use the imminent launch of Windows Server 2008 as a launching pad for a thorough re-evaluation of certification achievements and needs.

'This is an opportunity for people to get a head start,' reassures QA-IQ's Hawkins. 'The good news is if you already have a Microsoft certification it's not going to be tremendously different, so look out

for update courses to get started.'

It should also help weed out some of the older qualifications. 'Microsoft has set out how the revised certifications will work but there are some qualifications that will persist so long as older Microsoft technologies do,' believes Walker of Xpertise. 'But the release of Server 2008 this February will move a lot of the older stuff to the sidelines. Over the course of 2008 this will all fall into place.'

Changes for users

But there is another lesson here, one for IT trainers, who may already be up to speed with what is happening in the technical side of Microsoft certification. Yes, it's a case of 'just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water...' our friends in Redmond have decided to upgrade their desktop productivity products as much as they have been evolving

Cisco overhaul toughens up examinations

Paralleling Microsoft's modifications to its education portfolio, Cisco is overhauling its certification scheme. It includes changes to the Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA), the networking world's equivalent of the classic Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer (MCSE), and the certification process becoming much tougher.

Developments in networking have led to Cisco expanding its certification scheme in two dimensions: vertically and horizontally.

Vertically, the company has added another layer to its qualifications. As of July 2007 a new entry-level qualification was introduced, the Cisco Certified Entry Network Technician (CCENT) which is based on an introductory concepts exam accompanied by a more skills-focused test.

CCENT leads on to the

CCNA itself, which is not being replaced but overhauled. Beyond that lie two more layers: Cisco Certified Network Professionals (CCNPs) and Cisco Certified Network Experts (CCNE).

Horizontally, Cisco has, over the last couple of years, quietly been adding a set of technology-specific specialist qualifications in the new 'sexy' technologies it feels it needs to address beyond the old heartland topics of routing and switching: wireless, unified communications, rich media and (network) security. This process is far from over with more specialist certification due to come on stream.

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server and development technology – and that has led to a parallel change in qualifications on that side of the fence, too.

Why? Using Office has changed. The move from Office 2001 to 2003 was no big deal, but Office 2007 has a different interface style (for example the ribbon) and Gates & Co also felt, parallel to the technical track, that qualifications should reflect not generic Excel or PowerPoint skills but how they apply to actual job roles. So here we have the new Microsoft business certifications, two qualifications at two levels, MCAS (Microsoft Certified Applications Specialist) and MCAP (Microsoft Certified Applications Professional).

'This is a complete change,' confirms Sheena Whyatt, managing director of training firm Enlightened Training, which specialises in this area. 'The MCAP is job-role orientated, at the core and expert level, while the MCAS is more generic, i.e. you can be an MCAS Excel person. The exams are also more complex and are written to recognise business skills.'

Wyatt's warning to the IT training world is that, as a result, training a workforce in Office 2007 skills can be trickier than you might have thought.

'It's far more in-depth and much more study needed for the MCAS alone,' she says. 'You can't skim the material; you have to study the application and fully understand what it is doing.'

'The message for the training department is that Office 2007 requires a bit more attention than you might have thought – but is worth the investment and the certification process around it is definitely a value-add.'

In other words, Microsoft has embarked on a real shift in the IT certification market, with a firm emphasis on professionalisation at both the technical and user level. Are the days of paper MCSEs definitely over? And are you ready to cope with the new world?



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