Big iron seeks new blood

As the carthorses of the computing industry, mainframes have held their own in the computing industry for more than 40 years. Many of the existing workforce, however, will soon put down the reins, and the industry is looking to a newly launched certification to help attract a new generation into ‘big iron’.

Mainframes are the heartbeat of many leading edge industries, such as financial services. In fact, IBM says almost all the major banks in the UK use mainframes, and they are popular too with retail, government, and top blue chip companies, such as BA and BT.

‘What people tend to forget is the importance of mainframe systems – without them, for instance, you wouldn’t get paid or be able to use mobile phones,’ said Alan Whitfield of RSM Technology, a mainframe training provider.

Furthermore, mainframes, despite previous predcitions of their demise, are still going strong and benefiting from the incorporation of new developments, such as Linux and Websphere.

However, as the industry has aged – it’s now more than 40 years old – so has its workforce. Employers need to attract new blood into the industry, a move supported by IBM so that mainframe usage does not suffer due to a lack of qualified staff.

It was the mainframe customers who first came up with the idea for creating a certification scheme to provide a structured career path for their employees.

Pete Stevenson, chair of the GSE (UK) Training and Certification Working Group and independent consultant, was one of those who originally proposed the idea when he was working at JP Morgan as staff development manager. Having worked in mainframe storage, he saw a majore need for certification.

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Alan Whitfield, RSM Technology

‘There was no meaningful staff development programme in place for mainframes,’ he explained. ‘I spoke to RSM about our ideas for a certification scheme and we started to develop the idea. The Royal Bank of Scotland was also keen to introduce certification for storage technicians, which gave the initiative more impetus.’

The result of initial talks was the launch last year of the BCS Mainframe Technology Professional certification (BCS MTP).

‘Advantages for employers of this certification are that they can easily recognise what skills are held by their staff. This makes it easier for employers to identify what skills they have anywhere in the organisation, making it easier to allocate the correct resources to projects,’ said Stevenson.

‘Both employer and employee can build proper career paths, which had not existed in the past. There are compulsory and optional modules in the new certification scheme, it’s easy for an employer to see what staff are good at and where they need to concentrate their development efforts.’

Staff recruitment is one of the most important drivers for certification, according to Barrie Heptonstall, technical sales and services director, IBM Systems and Technology Group.

‘Certification will help companies to attract staff and reward existing staff,’ he said. ‘It gives the industry professional standards, and should help mainframe professionals to move about within different areas. Currently they could work, for example, as a database operator, or a systems programmer, and don’t tend to switch between roles.

‘Also, if you choose to specialise in Microsoft, for example, you got lots
of pieces of paper, but with mainframes you could have lots of experience but nothing on paper.’

Until now, people have typically been trained on the job or by going on individual courses run by vendors or IT training providers.

Some vendors offer examinations in their systems, but Heptonstall believes independent certification is essential for the industry. This has been met by BCS, as an independent examining body, partnering with RSM to deliver the exams.

‘There has been no worldwide certification previously with an independent stamp,’ said Heptonstall. ‘And endorsement from BCS, an industry body with a royal charter, gives it extra credibility.

‘I think BCS Mainframe Technology Professional should operate a bit like Linux – because everybody owns it, no-one in particular owns it – and that will be better for the industry as a whole. We can deliver content into it and help to roll it out to customers. However, we know that many of our customers use other suppliers’ equipment, and would like them also to be covered in the certification.’

The certification is split into three different paths – operations (day-to-day running), technical support (systems programmers), and software development. There are three levels for each path and each is examined via multiple choice questions, short written answers and interaction with a simulated mainframe.

Many of the level 1 and 2 exams are available already but more are being developed and will be available during early 2008.

‘In the future, third party software vendors (such as IBM or CA) will be able to write separate modules, so there will be even more modules to choose from,’ said Whitfield. ‘The operating system exam has been written to be IBM specific, but where possible alternate modules will be available.’

‘The BCS MTP website explains in meticulous detail what each level will test on,’ he said. ‘They are not typical certification exams because they are about applying knowledge – knowing what to do will not be enough – you’ll need to have done it.

Many organisations in the UK have already taken a corporate decision to go through the certification, according to Whitfield. A lot are in the financial services industry and IT services industry, he said. ‘For instance, when applying for government contracts, it demonstrates that the supplier has the skills.’

With IBM UK having pledged its support, GSE, the IBM mainframe user group, is working to get the seal of approval from IBM worldwide. Stevenson sees worldwide support as important to help standardise skills across the globe. BCS MTP is due to launch in America early this year and Japan, Australia, Brazil and Malaysia have also shown interest.

www.bcs-mtp.com