

Exam preparation can put your career at risk (Aug 08)

By Linda Musthaler , Network World , 08/26/2008

Would you compromise your personal integrity for \$80? How about risk your IT career for \$200? Of course not, you say. But you already have -- if you've ever used certification-examination "study materials" from TestKing, Pass4Sure or hundreds of test-preparation Web sites just like them.

Anyone who has ever prepared to take an IT certification test has come across these so-called "study aides" posted online. These sites advertise high-quality practice questions and answers that prepare you to take the real test. The problem is that more often than not, the "practice" materials are the real deal -- the actual questions and answers for tests offered by Microsoft, Cisco, IBM, HP, CompTIA and dozens of other certifying agencies.

Given that these agencies *never* provide such detailed preparatory materials online or otherwise, we know these materials are offered for sale or use illegally. In other words, they are stolen goods. And now that the companies that create and own the tests have a virtually foolproof way to know whether you've used illegal materials when you take an exam, getting caught cheating could wreck your career.

The vendors and third-party agencies that offer IT certifications are cracking down on cheaters to preserve the value in certification. They have to. Technical credentials are still a valuable measure of the knowledge and skills that individuals possess. If rampant cheating on certification exams went unchecked, employers would doubt the validity of the credentials listed on résumés and employment applications. Salaries would drop, and the IT profession as a whole would suffer.

Comparing certification-test cheating to the illegal drug trade, one IT vendor with a certification program told me it's almost impossible to shut down the purveyors of the illegal exam materials because they are mostly in countries that don't respect U.S. copyright laws for intellectual property. TestKing, for instance, is thought to be rooted in Pakistan. Because they can't eliminate the sources of the illegal materials (the "pushers"), the certifying agencies will try to eliminate the demand (the "users").

Every time an individual takes a certification exam online, there are digital "fingerprints" that identify how long that person took to answer each question, whether he went back and changed any answers, and so on. Using data-forensics techniques, this digital evidence is analyzed for every exam taken. With incredible accuracy, the forensics reveal patterns that identify cheaters. Even inadvertent cheaters -- those who didn't know they used illegal preparatory materials -- can be caught, but they are not distinguished from people who cheat intentionally. As a representative from Microsoft Learning recently said, cheating is cheating across the board.

Policies on exam security vary from one certifying agency to the next, but many vendors and third-party agencies are stiffening the penalties for policy violations. For instance, Microsoft recently announced it would impose a lifetime ban from its certification program for anyone caught cheating -- even if it was unintentional. So, buying and using a "study guide" from TestKing, taking an exam, and having the forensics identify you as a cheater could get you stripped of all your Microsoft certifications. If you work for a Microsoft reseller that is required to employ certified professionals to be an authorized Microsoft partner, your employer could choose to replace you.

The ramifications get even broader. The IT Certification Council wants to create a certification clearinghouse where all certifying agencies would report which credentials an individual holds. Current or prospective employers could verify a person's credentials through the clearinghouse, just as they can check a college transcript. Conceivably it could be possible for employers to see the revocation of certification because of a cheating incident -- and who wants to hire a known cheater?

The lesson in all of this is to prepare for certification exams legitimately. Use the study materials recommended by the owner of the exam. Never buy or use sample questions and answers from unauthorized sources including user forums or blogs frequented by other technical professionals.

If you do find questionable test materials posted online, let the certifying agency know. Microsoft has a tip line to report certification fraud: tctips@microsoft.com. For other agencies, write to or call the certification program or learning group. It's important to all of us that certification maintains its value. We all have a responsibility to stop fraud.

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