

# Study confirms widespread cheating on job exams (Jul 08)

## Secret investigation discovers 'proxy test takers' prevalent

By Kevin Baron and Alan Wirzbicki, Globe Correspondents | July 22, 2008

WASHINGTON - A secret international investigation into job certification test fraud conducted by a major US technology company has confirmed long-held suspicions that thousands of people worldwide are cheating on certification exams for coveted jobs.

Cisco Systems Inc., the Silicon Valley firm behind some of the world's biggest computer networks, and Pearson VUE, one of the world's largest test administrators, recently conducted a trial run of an anti-cheating system intended to identify and crack down on "proxy test takers," people who impersonate others to take exams for them.

Officials at Cisco and Pearson VUE told The Boston Globe this week that during an eight-month span ended in June 2008, they monitored hundreds of thousands of exams given in eight countries in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North America. Cisco said it had confirmed that one in 200 of those exams was taken by a proxy, and not the actual enrollee.

Randall T. Trask, a vice president at Pearson VUE which administers some of Cisco's tests, said he suspected the numbers were "the tip of the iceberg" because they only measured a limited number of one company's tests. Cisco's exams are given in 4,400 test centers in more than 160 countries, according to Pearson VUE's website.

In many white-collar fields, certification tests have taken on growing significance as a prerequisite for many well-paying jobs and proof that employees are maintaining their skills. In the highly competitive technology industry, surveys have shown that technicians with enough certifications can add up to \$35,000 to their annual salary.

Today, Cisco will disclose plans to launch the new test-security system in all of its worldwide testing locations, beginning Aug. 1. Company officials describe it as a combination of measures that Pearson VUE employs in its US testing centers.

The measures include new software that analyzes "data forensics," including tracking a test taker's performance to spot abnormalities, such as answering questions too quickly. Additionally, those taking tests will have their photos taken and digitally stored with their test scores in a database, allowing potential employers to match results with the photo.

Pearson VUE and Cisco officials declined to reveal more details, but added they will also deploy undercover test takers. Security officials at Cisco and Pearson VUE say the measures will not only allow them to catch individual cheaters but help them determine the scope of the problem.

"It's not just evaluating and being able to stop the people at that location. It was really being able to see more of the global patterns" of cheating, said Erik Ullanderson, head of exam security at Cisco. He said the improved analysis allows Cisco to pinpoint the individuals taking exams under false names around the world.

During the pilot program, test security officials identified high rates of proxy test taking at centers in China, India, Hong Kong, and Pakistan. The new system identified potential cheaters - including some who later were identified trying the same thing in neighboring countries, which Cisco said it was not aware was happening.

Out of 200,000 tests given in all eight countries, Cisco said it identified 1,400 possible cheaters and with follow-up investigations confirmed that approximately 1,000 were trying to take a certification exam for someone else.

Cisco and Pearson VUE told the Globe they would use the data to pursue charges against suspected cheaters. Although laws vary, the punishment for exam cheating can range from a lifetime ban from Cisco's certification program to criminal prosecution.

"The days of people being able to break the rules without consequences are long gone," said Trask.

For years, critics have accused technology firms offering certification exams of having lax security, especially in countries with high populations of technology workers and in developing countries. Moreover, proxy testing is not the only worry.

A Globe investigation last December identified a global network of black market websites known as "braindumps" that help millions of people cheat the old fashioned way - by sharing the questions and answers ahead of time through cheat sheets masked as "study guides." Security authorities told the Globe that the leading site, called [TestKing.com](http://TestKing.com), grosses an estimated \$10 million annually.

Don Sorensen, vice president of Caveon, a test security firm, said yesterday that a growing number of braindump sites include "gunmen" - test takers for hire. He called the rate of proxy cheating Cisco reported "pretty discouraging."

Pearson VUE's Trask said everyone has known proxy test taking has been occurring for years, but "where we're at right now isn't a result of anybody's negligence. It's a result of bad guys getting increasingly brazen, and of us having the technology and wherewithal to go after them."

Cisco said its new security system marks both a win against proxy test takers, and a major victory against certification exam cheating. Exam officials would not say how they plan to target braindump websites but hinted they are in the company's crosshairs.

"It's a whole suite of nefarious activities that we're tackling," said Fred Weiller, Cisco's director of marketing for global learning.

Cisco's exam security push comes just months after Pearson VUE signed exclusive rights to deliver its exams worldwide. Trask said the deal makes hunting cheaters easier because all global testing data now is stored in one place under a single forensic analysis system.

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