

When Tests Go Bad (Jun 08)

Cheating bred by 'brain dump' Web sites and lax security at testing centers—plus a glut of programs—have given IT certifications a black eye that industry groups are scrambling to fix. Meanwhile, hirers beware.

By Michelle V. Rafter

With a credit card and an Internet connection, anyone can buy answers to almost any IT certification exam there is.

In fact, copies of some new tests appear on so-called "brain dump" Web sites as soon as 48 hours after the exams are released, according to a 2007 survey by a national test publishers association.

The result: Cheating on IT certification exams is so easy and widespread that one testing security expert calls it "a plague."

"It skews everybody and every job candidate," says Don Sorensen, marketing vice president at Caveon, a Salt Lake City certification exam security and forensics company. "Those that have cheated have really messed it up for all of the honest people out there."

Individual companies such as Cisco Systems and Microsoft and computer and certification industry associations are teaming up to curb cheating and tighten security at physical and online certification testing centers.

Some of their efforts include suing brain dump Web sites, digitally photographing test takers so proxies can't fill in for them, and imposing lifetime bans on cheaters who get caught.

But until those changes take hold, IT managers and HR executives should bone up on what's happening so that when they interview job seekers, they're not relying solely on certifications to determine who gets hired, say vendors, testing experts and others.

Some HR managers maintain they haven't been affected because they're familiar with the situation and already give more weight to work experience and college degrees than to certifications when they evaluate candidates.

But at least one HR manager contacted for this report was caught off guard.

"I wasn't aware, perhaps naively, that it was so rampant," said Connie Shaw, HR manager at the EDEN division of Tyler Technologies in Renton, Washington.

Cheating could be the IT certification industry's biggest problem, but it's not the only one.

Burgeoning Internet, networking and telecommunications technologies have created an abundance of certifications—an overabundance, according to some sources.

Software programmers and network engineers have a veritable alphabet soup of IT certifications to choose from, 140 in all, according to a 2007 survey compiled by the Association of Test Publishers, an industry trade group.

Between them, Cisco Systems and Microsoft have issued more than 3.25 million certifications since the early 1990s. That's when IT vendors first began using certification tests to document that employees were proficient in using newly released software programs. The Computing Technology Industry Association, another IT trade group, has issued 1 million certifications in its lifetime, and vendors such as Novell run certification programs too.

With a glut of tests and ongoing security issues, some old-timers question whether IT certifications can ever be as meaningful as they once were. "Given this type of increase in supply, is it any wonder that when viewed in even the most simplistic, Econ 101 perspective, the value of certification has gone down?" writes IT author Emmett Dulaney in an April 2008 column on CertCities.com, an industry Web site.

Current problems haven't hampered the attractiveness of some highly esteemed certifications.

One is the Project Management Institute's Project Management Professional designation. Adding a PMP to your résumé requires a college degree; at least 4,500 hours and three years of real-world training; a 35-hour class; and passing the PMP test. Requirements for applicants without four-year degrees are even higher.

PMP holders are handsomely rewarded for their efforts, earning an average salary of \$101,695, according to a March 2008 survey of 7,193 IT industry employees by Global Knowledge Networks, an IT training company, and TechRepublic, an IT industry news Web site.

A PMP certification is "absolutely" critical for anyone managing major IT projects, says Jacqueline Kuhn, who previously ran back-office HR and IT systems at OfficeMax and is now a Chicago-based HR technology consultant.

"You need someone who understands all the dimensions involved in a \$2 million project so it doesn't end up being an \$8 million project," Kuhn says.

Catching the cheaters

While cheating to get a PMP is difficult if not impossible, that's hardly the case for other exams.

Brain dump Web sites such as Cheat Test, ExactQuestions and Exact-Exams claim to offer study guides, but in reality sell test questions or complete tests, according to test security experts and other sources.

Of 101 IT vendors and certification test centers surveyed in the Association of Test Publishers' 2007 report, a third said more than 60 percent of their tests had been stolen or compromised. Another 24 percent said between 46 percent and 60 percent of their exams had been stolen or breached. Some test givers said new tests could be found on brain dump Web sites

within a month of being published, and in some cases in as little as two days, according to the survey.

Why cheat?

Money.

Certifications add thousands of dollars to a network analyst's or system administrator's annual income. Network analysts with a college degree, training and certifications earn an average of \$74,285 a year, compared with \$66,000 without a certification and \$61,200 without training or certification, according to the Global Knowledge report. System administrators with a four-year degree, training and certifications average \$68,236 a year, compared with \$65,033 without certifications and \$63,812 without training or certifications, according to the report.

Cheating is a global problem, affecting test centers in the U.S. as well as countries with growing IT industries such as India and China, according to certification industry sources.

The IT industry is fighting back on multiple fronts. Cisco Systems cut back to one the number of companies it uses to administer certification exams, a move that Cisco officials believe gives them more control. The company has also imposed a lifetime ban on test takers who get caught cheating.

Cisco is starting to photograph test takers in order to stop them from using proxies. Already exam registrations have dropped in East Asian countries where photographs are taken, and have risen where they aren't, according to Fred Weiller, Cisco career training and certifications marketing director.

"It's apparent the deterrents are working," Weiller says.

In late 2007, Cisco and a dozen other IT vendors and computer trade groups formed the IT Certification Council and launched several industrywide projects to cut back on cheating. Among other things, the council wants to create a universal certification database and ID that employers could use to check whether individuals have the certifications they say they do.

The ITCC also wants to step up encryption and other technologies used to protect online tests, and go after brain dump Web sites.

Meanwhile, IT and certification vendor officials urge HR executives and IT hiring managers to be vigilant.

Maurice Smallwood, IT vice president at NetSuite, the Web-based software applications company in San Mateo, California, says that when it comes to hiring, he puts experience first, then a college degree, then credentials.

"People can be good test takers, but it doesn't mean they can do the work," he says. "The acid test is, can they answer a reasonable set of questions that relate to the field?"

NetSuite has an IT staff of about 10 Windows system administrators, half of whom hold Microsoft's MSCE certification, plus about a half-dozen Unix system administrators and a couple technicians, Smallwood says. The 700-person company supports employees who keep up their certifications and pays for classes on an individual basis, he says.

Smallwood is hiring a Windows system administrator now. His main criterion for evaluating candidates is whether they understand the field.

"All of these—degrees, certifications—are moot if the information can't be applied," he says.

Tyler Technology's EDEN division develops public-sector software for cities, such as programs residents use to pay utility bills. Connie Shaw is HR manager at the 120-person business, which employs developers and other IT staff to design and implement software products.

Several of EDEN's developers have Microsoft certifications, and the company is putting a few project managers through in-house training for the PMP certification, Shaw says. If she discovered a job candidate had faked an IT certification it would definitely factor into her hiring decision. "The question is, how would we find that out?" she asks.

Stopping web sites

As more business moves online, IT positions—and networking jobs in particular—are expected to remain some of the fastest-growing job categories inside and outside the U.S., according to industry sources. Cisco estimates that by 2013 the company will need triple the number of Cisco-certified technicians, or about 3 million, worldwide.

"You can see the market isn't saturated," says Weiller, the company's career training and certifications marketing director.

With demand—and salaries—so high, it remains to be seen whether attempts to shut down IT certification cheats will be successful. To understand how difficult that could be, consider what happened when Microsoft went after a well-known brain dump Web site called TestKing.

In August 2006, Microsoft sued TestKing for copyright infringement, alleging the company and 69 related sites operated by a British corporation called Certification Trendz illegally copied and sold copyrighted Microsoft certification exams. In June 2007, Microsoft and Certification Trendz settled out of court when the latter agreed not to distribute Microsoft exams or operate Web sites that did, and to display a disclaimer on the sites saying as much, according to news reports.

However, as of March, more than 50 Certification Trendz's Web sites were still selling Microsoft exams, according to an analysis by *Network World*, an IT industry magazine.

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