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The Importance Of Certification For Information Technology Professionals

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Abstract

In almost every Information Technology (IT) magazine, there are advertisements or articles from vendors emphasizing the importance of certification for their products. However, there is little or no evidence indicating the actual importance of certification to a career in Information Technology. This study seeks to determine which certifications, if any, are important. A survey was mailed to 550 members of the Association of Information Technology Professionals (AITP). These individuals indicated the importance of certification in various areas to their careers, to the careers of the IT employees they supervise, and to the careers of new IT graduates. Preliminary results will be available in June.

Introduction

Students majoring in Information Systems (IS) often want to know whether or not certification is important. Vendors seem to emphasize that individuals need to be certified on their products, but there is often confusion over who needs the certification. This study seeks to determine which certifications, if any, are important. The results will allow faculty to direct their students, and possibly their curriculum, accordingly.

The Microsoft™ certified professional program heralds its certification as an industry-wide standard for demonstrating to employers that certificate holders have the necessary skills to use Microsoft™ products (Anonymous, 1999). IBM™ requires their business partners to employ AS/400 certified individuals to retain their business partner status. The global IT certification training market is estimated to reach \$2.1 billion by 2001 (Patsuris, 1998). Anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that network certification results in higher paying jobs. However, empirical evidence of the importance of IT certification is lacking.

Relevant Literature

With today's marketplace competition, vendors and their associated employees are looking for ways in which to differentiate themselves from competitors. With certification companies ready, willing, and able to attest to the fact that a given individual can perform a specific subset of a vendor's application specific functions, the certification business is booming. The question has become not whether an individual is certified, but whether or not the certification possesses worth. Furthermore, questions have been raised as to whether much of

certification is a form of marketing employed by the companies selling products for which individuals and companies desperately seek certification. It is this question of certification validity that drives our study.

Many in the industry are skeptical of these so called certified professionals while at the same time requiring that their own employees be certified. For many companies certification has become requisite for business partnerships. While certification is a valid career move, one must consider the certification as well as the certification authority (the source). Certification seems to be alive and well at nearly every rung within the organizational hierarchy. For example, there are individuals seeking certification, companies seeking certification, and certification authorities seeking certification so that they can continue to certify individuals and organizations. Views on certification and its validity and importance are somewhat conflicting across organizations. Whereas some companies are quite skeptical about certification, they rely on it for means of efficiency as it narrows the number of applicants or the available pool of vendors from which to choose. From the comments made by facility managers (FMs), it appears that they not only recognize certification as something that is necessary, but also something that is going to continue to increase. "Of the 838 FMs surveyed, some 76% believe facilities management certification is important and 57% expect their training needs to increase in the next 3-5 years" (Anonymous, 1998).

When we discuss certification, several questions are raised by the inquisitive:

1. Are computer certifications overrated?
2. Has the value of a computer certification declined due to the big business of computer certifications, such as training, books, etc.?
3. Are certifications too expensive?
4. Do customers get their moneys worth when hiring certified individuals?
5. Do certifications only benefit the certifying authority? (Matthews, 1998)

Another view of certification is whether or not it is for support or a marketing tool for the vendors who have certification available for their products (i.e. CNE for Novell and MSCE for Microsoft). Many feel that certification is a means of marketing in order to promote vendor products and get industry recognition (Graziano, 1997). "Although many vendors--including Novell and

Microsoft--insist that their certification programs were not created to generate revenue, more than half of those companies Dataquest surveyed did consider certification a profit center. With conferred certificates expiring every 12 to 36 months, such programs can become a healthy business" (Graziano, 1997).

In the area of Value Added Resellers (VARs), we can see trends forming that are making certification a requisite for employment or service provision. "VARs are using the certification as a prerequisite for employment; vendors as a requirement for VARs servicing their products; and customers as a benchmark of service quality among providers (Torode, 1998)." Whether or not firms view certification as a means of quality assurance, it seems that they will continue to use certification for purposes of efficiency in the process of evaluating potential candidates to service their contracts.

IDC conducted interviews with 150 IS managers responsible for NT sites in 1998 to determine if companies that invest in Microsoft Professional Certification for their employees receive a return on their investment. The study concluded that companies benefited because of greater employee productivity, less server downtime, and less dependence on outside firms in spite of the training costs and salary premiums paid (Segal & Chen, 1998).

Another study conducted by IDC, and sponsored by several vendors with a stake in certification, surveyed 253 IS managers in companies of more than 100 employees. This study also found that the increase in employee productivity surpassed the costs associated with certification (IDC, 1996).

Hypotheses

Several hypotheses will be tested including the following:

H1: Certification will be perceived as being more important for new IS graduates than for current IS employees.

The rationale behind this hypothesis comes from the growing trend of certification as well as the increasing specialization within Information Technology. Employers should perceive individuals with certification to be better qualified than their counterparts. Certification may also tilt the scales for hiring an applicant when experience is lacking in all candidates.

H2: Specific vendor certifications will be perceived as being more important than general certifications.

This hypothesis also results from the specialization within Information Technology. Because there are so many specialized areas (i.e., database, networking, etc.),

individuals with vendor certifications in these areas should be perceived as better qualified than their competitors.

Methodology

The Association of Information Technology Professionals (AITP) seeks to provide superior leadership and education in IT by working with the industry to assist in the overall promotion and direction of Information Technology (IT Professionals, 1999). Members of AITP should know whether or not certification is important to individuals employed in the field. Therefore, a survey was sent to 550 members of the association.

A seven point Likert scale was used so respondents could indicate the importance of certification in their career, in the careers of the IT employees they supervise, and in the careers of new IT graduates. Eleven general areas of certification, including programming languages, database management, and local area networks, were included on the survey as well as specific certifications. Specific certifications were included for languages and operating systems as well as for the vendor specific certifications by Microsoft™, IBM™, Novell™, and Oracle™. Any certification left out of the list could be written in the area indicated for other certifications.

Demographic Results

Five hundred and fifty surveys were mailed to individuals on the AITP membership list. Twenty-three never reached the intended recipient (i.e. they were returned by the Post Office). Eighty-three responses were received and 76 of those were usable for a 13.63% response rate.

Demographic questions included the position of respondent, type of industry, and number of IS staff. Thirty-five of the respondents identified themselves as being IS managers. Twenty-five percent of the respondents work in the IT consulting industry and 14% are in education. Almost one-third of the respondents indicated an annual sales/budget of 50 to 499 million. Twenty-five are in firms employing more than 1000 people, and 24 work for firms with 100-499 employees. Twenty-eight percent have an IS staff of less than 10 while 25.3% have an IS staff of more than 100. The demographic data indicates a heterogeneous population responded to the survey.

Statistical analyses will be performed on the data from the returned surveys in order to determine if any IT professional certifications are statistically important. If so, it can also be determined if any particular demographic group considers these certifications more desirable than the others do.

Conclusions

Preliminary results are expected in June. The results will be interesting whether or not any certifications are important statistically. If certification is important, then students should be told about all the certifications available and be given information on obtaining certification. Curriculum could be changed to allow students to work towards obtaining certifications and practice certification exams could be given. If certification is not statistically significant, then students may be advised accordingly and assured that they do not need any IT certifications to get started in their IT career.

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