



Sorting Through Technology - Technology certifications and myth of the 'computer guy'

July 3, 2003

By JARED GORALNICK,

Special to the Daily Record

The road toward a career in technology is unlike most professional paths.

As such, when soliciting technology vendors or workers, employers have difficulty deciphering qualifications and often make poor hiring decisions.

In turn, selecting the wrong IT professionals frustrates management and creates dissatisfaction with the technology in their business, whether it be their Web site, their desktops or their technology staff.

With a greater understanding of the path toward technology, IT decisions can be much easier and their results much improved.

Rush to get certified

Technology qualifications are not as easy to understand as other professional certifications, in that there are few agreed upon standards that demonstrate a sufficient level of expertise.

There are no rules or regulations that define adequate experience and certifications alone do not qualify individuals.

Recently an associate of mine interviewed candidates who had undergone an MCSE (Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer) training program, and most of them could not point out simple pieces of hardware — their entire course of study was in textbooks.

Many are familiar with the course of study that doctors must undertake before diagnosing patients on their own.

It is a difficult and time-consuming path: four years of undergraduate study, four years of medical school, and at least four years of residency (depending on the area of practice). Of those 12 years that most doctors spend preparing for a life of working with patients, half of them are in a classroom.

Similar career stories are true for lawyers, professors and other fields requiring advanced degrees. The technology-service industry is far different.

This was partly caused by the surge in technology jobs during the dot-com boom, when everyone tried to become programmers or network engineers. With no clear path toward these jobs, certification programs became the rage: MCSE, MCP (Microsoft Certified Professional), CNA (Certified Novell Administrator), and A+ (entry-level computer technician) became buzzwords that everyone wanted on their resume.

Experts without mastery

Unfortunately these and other technical certifications rarely require years of study as generalists before becoming an expert in one field.

They do not produce masters who understand "the big picture," but technicians who are specialists in only one thing. However, it is critical to understand how the whole system works before recommending a solution.

Like medical patients, computers often present similar symptoms to a wide variety of problems.

There is no one cure to the common crash. Is there a virus? Is the network having trouble? Is the local hard disk failing? Is there an adequate continuous stream of power? Are there nearby devices causing interference? Is the software application buggy? Or did you spill coffee into your laptop keyboard?

The list goes on.

Often times these problems are complicated by a technician that goes outside of his/her scope of expertise to solve a problem. Some clients call me the "computer guy" and imagine I could solve any of their problems, but I am no technology panacea. No one is.

The best technicians stay up-to-date on many interrelated technology issues. They understand that the appropriate solution is usually one that already exists and that they may not be the person to deliver it.

A physician would not attempt a difficult heart surgery just because she had seen it done before, and a help desk intern should not set up a 50-person network just because she is

familiar with TCP/IP.

While life or death may not be at stake in the latter scenario, keeping a client online and satisfied should be more important than a support paycheck.

This is not to say that people who are extremely versed in a specific area of technology should not have jobs.

They should work in organizations where depth in certain areas can effectively complement a team of technology professionals.

On the other hand, non-technology companies should seek candidates with diverse on-the-job experience rather than specific certifications.

Discuss some of the most frequent technology problems that your company faces and pay close attention to how the candidates propose solutions: make sure that they recognize the context to these issues before diving in with a single approach.

Find out what they would do if there is a problem that is outside their scope of expertise: do they know when to call on another professional or how to research the issue? If you take these considerations into account, then your technology decision will result in much less frustration for both parties.

Technology today is comparable to medicine and law — it merits significant education and experience before one goes into practice.

While certification training is a start, experience that leads to mastery is necessary to truly succeed in the techno-arena.

So be on the look out for well-rounded folks who have experience and be careful when you're quoted certifications. It will be a long time before A+ or MCSE merit the same respect as MD or JD.

Jared Goralnick is president of Software Efficiency Training Consulting in College Park and may be reached on the Web at www.setconsulting.com or via e-mail at jared@setconsulting.com.
