

Are You Certifiable Yet?

By Richard Dolewski and Garth Tucker

Do your hands shake? Does it feel like a colony of butterflies have taken up residence in your belly? Welcome to the club. Taking examinations is a fear for many people, myself included. This article will help get you on the right path to successfully completing IBM certifications.

There are many ways to prepare for examinations. We've all gotten through a post secondary education, so more than likely you have your own steps to follow for preparing for tests. But keep in mind that IBM certifications are unlike any exams that you faced at university. They require "hands-on" experience as well as a healthy dose of IBM marketing knowledge. In university, we took notes from lectures and regurgitated it back to the professor and most of them really weren't interested in our theories -- they just wanted to hear that you learned what they lectured. In our careers, however, many of us don't enjoy the luxury of formalized training. We work to deliver what the business needs, and making time for classroom education is not always possible. So we learn by reading Redbooks, IBM InfoCenter, User Groups, exchanging ideas with colleagues and just plain doing it based on our prior experience.

The biggest challenge faced by our team with certifications has been the fact that you have to be so many things to pass them, from technical guru to marketing king or queen to a configuration expert. This can be a daunting task for us who support just one role within our work environment. You may be able to technically perform without a blink of an eye a RISC to RISC upgrade from a 720 to an 825, but you have no idea how someone determined that the customer required an 825 instead of an 810. How do we overcome this? A little later we will look at some tips for finding the information needed to help you succeed.

Why Get Certified?

So you can brag to your friends that you are an uber-geek? While that's a reasonable justification, there are more substantial reasons. IBM certification:

1. Shows a level of professionalism / expertise to your clients.
2. Ensures you are technically competent in the integration.
3. Let's your manager know that you're just as sharp as the next knife in the drawer.
4. Keeps you current on the new IBM hardware and software available.
5. IBM says we have to.
6. Supports your skill set to your employer that your resume professes you have.

All kidding aside, the IBM Certification process for iSeries, www-1.ibm.com/certify/certs/a4_index.shtml, is a very positive process that gives us a yardstick for our industry.

How Are Certification Tests Structured?

IBM certification tests typically consist of approximately 65 multiple-choice questions, and you have just over an hour to complete them. The required score for passing is generally around 65 percent and the questions are weighted.

For instance, in the 467 Technical Solutions Exam – Implementation, the test is broken out into the following sections:

1. Technical Consulting
2. Migration Planning
3. Planning Critical Tasks
4. Hardware and Software Implementation
5. Communications Setup
6. System Resource Configuration
7. Backup and Recovery
8. Implementing On-going Support
9. System Problem Determination

Each of these sections has a number of pertinent questions in the test and you won't always see all questions on a test, as there is a pool of questions that is used. It's unlikely that you will see the exact same test twice in a row.

To prepare for certification, start with the IBM Certification page (www-1.ibm.com/certify/certs/a4_index.shtml) and get a listing of the objectives for the test and see how your skill set matches up. If you are lacking required knowledge, you can start filling in the blanks from this outline.

Once you have boned up on the required skills, take an assessment test, <http://www.testrac.com/ibm/>. This is a very good indication of how you will fare on the real test and lets you see how the tests are structured. Each assessment test costs \$10, but the direction that it gives you in identifying your weaknesses is superb. It gives you a break-out of your percentage based on the various sections and you can work from there on the areas that need it. Keep in mind that while a lot of the questions may seem similar, these are not the actual test questions, so don't try and memorize. You may end up seeing questions that are very similar on the real test and answer them incorrectly based on what you saw in the assessment.

Choosing Which Exam Is Best for You

Chances are that if you are an RPG programmer, you aren't called upon daily to sell an 810. So taking test 159 probably isn't for you, but in many shops, the senior programmer is also the guy who looks after the box, so an Operations or Technical certification may be beneficial to you and your team.

What certifications do you require? This differs between business partners and customers in that partners are required to have certain certifications, while I'm pretty sure IBM will still let customers buy hardware without being certified. It

may be that your shop has made a strategic direction towards certifications and your remuneration is based on attaining them. If this is the case, you must work with your manager to determine what certifications best fit your skill set and what the company requires.

Where to Take Them?

Many IBM certifications will be offered at the upcoming COMMON conference in San Antonio. For a complete list, and information on discount pricing at the conference, visit COMMON's Web site at www.common.org.

Thompson Pro-Metric testing centers provide the IBM certification tests and you can visit them on the web at www.prometric.com to schedule a test online or locate a testing center near you. Also, some IBM courses include a test at the end of the course or a voucher for the cost of the test at Pro-Metric as part of the cost of the course.

Tips and Tricks

The IBM site is the best place to start as mentioned earlier, but go beyond that and look at Redbooks and industry magazines that have technical sections. Your colleagues can also provide you with some of the missing skills in your set. Ask them questions about topics you're not comfortable with.

Here are some hints for writing your certification test:


1. Always read the questions. Many times we skim over because we're in a hurry. Take the time to fully understand the question. If you need to, close your eyes and visualize yourself in front of a system doing what the question is asking.
2. Take the entire time allotted for the test. You may finish in half the time, but you can review your answers and re-read the questions just in case.
3. Eliminate any obvious wrong answers. Many times you can reduce the number of answers you have to choose from based on the fact that they have thrown in something that is purely a myth or just the solution just does not exist. Get rid of the chaff and you have a better shot at answering correctly.
4. Don't get spooked. There will likely be questions on the test where you have no clue what they are talking about. Relax and mark the question for review and go on to the next one. Go back to it after you feel comfortable that you have answered all the questions you know. If you don't make it the first time through, don't feel ashamed – it happens to the best of us. (Except my sister Stacey, who has never failed a test in her life.) Hold your head up and learn from your mistakes.
5. Look for the "IBM answer." Marketing material can provide many answers to the questions. This is not a slur on IBM, it's how the product is positioned, and so knowing this can help you pass.
6. Study groups. Get together with colleagues to review material and talk about their experiences with the test you are planning to write. This can prove invaluable.
7. Start prepping early. Studying for these tests will likely occur on your own time, so get going early and leave yourself enough time to cover all the bases.

Benefits of Certification

The biggest benefit to the certification process is that it makes you better at what you do. Learning new hardware and software will help your day-to-day work in that you will likely learn either how to do something or how to do it better.

Passing a certification exam proves that you are what you say you are. You must have hands-on experience to answer many of the questions, and being able to hang the certificate on the wall shows you know what you're doing. You have credentials that are recognized throughout our industry.

Plus, there are many employers who base your remuneration or raises on the certifications that you hold or achieve. For employers, it can provide an advantage in a tight market in that your employees have a recognized skill. You can make hiring decisions or promotions based on what a prospective employee brings to the table knowing that if they are IBM certified they possess a high level of skill.

Now that you have a game plan to follow, start getting ready and working toward that IBM certification and as my high school chemistry teacher, Mr. Miller, was fond of saying, "Luck should have nothing to do with it Mr. Tucker." (He was also fond of saying, "That will cost you another period in detention Mr. Tucker," but that's another story.) 

About the Authors



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