Storage Networking Certifications - What You Should Know (Apr 08)

Storage certifications can advance your career, but you may need to prioritize

By Don Reisinger and Mary Jander, April 18, 2008

Professional certification is integral to career development for most storage professionals these days. Whether it's a round of training from your company's key storage vendor, or a supplier-agnostic course from an organization like the Storage Networking Industry Association (SNIA), employers are increasingly attracted to this kind of paper proof of storage skills.

In response, a number of organizations (including storage suppliers) have instituted certification programs for IT professionals. This article explains the basic benefits, outlines a few examples of popular certification programs, and offers suggestions for program planning.

Storage Certifications 101

Storage certifications are in no way monolithic. Professionals can find what they're looking for from a variety of different sources. Vendor-specific certification programs from companies like EMC and NetApp offer proof of expertise in designing, administrating, implementing, and supporting these suppliers' specific data storage solutions.

Some of the larger vendors also offer certification that encompasses multiple products, though this is a fairly new trend. Indeed, certification itself is a new endeavor in many cases. "For years, EMC didn't focus on storage certificates in favor of courses," said Tom Clancy, EMC's VP of education services. "But as the market grew more and more and EMC's technology grew, we realized that we needed to create a framework."

Storage managers looking for certifications that are not tied to one company's products can look to professional organizations like the SNIA, whose certification program is focused on generalized skills, rather than on specific product expertise.

The choice need not be either/or vendor- versus SNIA-style certification. One can always opt for both. But for storage workers with time and resource constraints, it may be important to prioritize. "If storage professionals are trying to be certified because they are working on a specific project, or they are focused mostly on what is going on inside their current organization, then maybe the vendor-specific certification program is the right step for them," says Vincent Franceschini, SNIA's chairman of the board. "But just because SNIA's program is more industry-focused, it should be noted that this and vendor-specific certifications work in concert with each other and are very complimentary, making a dual certification very beneficial to the end user."

The significance of certification

Is certification really worth the effort? As storage certifications become more ubiquitous in the industry, companies are starting to take notice. Many vendors have implemented new policies requiring certifications before they hire storage professionals for engineering or marketing positions. And as storage becomes a more vital part of any IT environment, employers are using certifications as guidelines in the screening process.

As NetApp's senior manager of assessments and certification, Annina Puccio, points out: "Storage certification is extremely important. Independent studies have shown that certifications improve career opportunities and provide job advancement. In fact, certification leads to more on-the-job responsibilities, and candidates who get certified are more likely to stay on the job in their chosen field, which leads to greater job satisfaction."

Sounds great. But NetApp clearly has a vested interest. However, independent studies show that certification can lead to job advancement. One study conducted by *Certification Magazine* in late 2007 found that storage professionals with certifications saw a substantial average salary bump. According to the respondents, average salaries jumped about 8 percent after certification between 2006 and 2007. Storage managers showed an average salary for 2006 of $68,820; in 2007, those that were certified saw their average salary jump to $74,730.

While certification has its benefits, not all certifications are created equal. In fact, some vendors like EMC say they have found that some certificates are more coveted by employers than others. Still, each certification decision should be taken individually, since companies differ in the kind of core competencies they seek in employees.

EMC's Clancy says there are nonetheless some perennial favorites: "Even though it depends on the customer and what they have deployed, we receive a number of requests [for training and certification in] storage area networks, backup and recovery, storage recovery, and network-attached storage. It seems that companies are looking for certification in these areas much more than others."

Vendor-specific programs

By way of example, both EMC and NetApp offer certification programs typical of other large storage suppliers. Here are details on both companies' offerings, provided strictly as a sampling of the kind of programs available from big suppliers.

NetApp

NetApp offers three certificate programs: NetApp Certified Data Management Administrator Certification (NCDA), NetApp Certified Solutions Architect Certification (NCSA), and NetApp Certified Implementation Engineer Certification (NCIE).

Each certification treats common areas of expertise, including SAN, backup and recovery, business continuity, and storage security. In order to obtain each certification, professionals need to pass exams in the major areas covered by that certification. The distinction between certifications is one of difficulty. They are stacked, much like a karate belt system.

Once someone passes the NCDA certification tests, for instance, he or she can obtain the NCSA and NCIE certifications (in that order) by passing more advanced exams.

Proctored exams are given at sites hosted by Prometric, and used by a range of companies. Each exam can cost $150 to $200, depending on the testing location. NetApp certificates last two years and must be recertified at the end of that period.

NetApp, like most big storage vendors that offer certification, has a range of courses that can help with test preparation. These courses are offered at NetApp facilities, online, or via a NetApp rep at your site. Fees vary with each option.

EMC

EMC's certification program is slightly different than NetApp's. According to the company, it has two main tracks for professionals to follow – a certification program that makes them experts on EMC solutions, and a neutral program called "The Storage Technologist's" track, for which 85 percent of the content is not related to EMC products or services.

EMC certificates are broken into three levels: associate, specialist, and expert. The foundation level is a 40-hour course, but more advanced professionals can test out of this level and move to the specialist level, which takes about two weeks to complete. The specialist level covers SAN and NAS in general and EMC solutions in particular. Finally, the expert level takes two weeks to complete and requires some background in Microsoft products.

Tests are typically provided in online courses available from EMC (online or at your place or theirs) or from a range of independent certification companies like Prometric.

Vendor-neutral certification: *SNIA*
The SNIA's certification programs are much different from those offered by individual vendors like EMC or NetApp. Instead of focusing on a particular company's solutions, SNIA attempts to provide storage professionals with certifications that can work in tandem with those that may be required from vendors.

"SNIA tries to focus on the common areas in the storage environment and performs a job task analysis to see what an entry-level professional in a storage networking environment needs to know... not just vendor-specific programs, but options for solutions in that field so they're not bound to a certain set of equipment," says Rick Bauer, SNIA's technology and education director.

To meet this charter, SNIA has tried to focus on a number of areas. A basic certification covers storage fundamentals and the overall taxonomy of the industry. A more advanced certification is designed for storage managers who have more experience.

Bauer says the heftier certification covers topics such as backup, recovery, management, and various kinds of interconnects. "It is focused on real-world environments and solving real-world problems," he explains.

SNIA's most advanced program is called Networking Design and Assessment, which prepares people with experience to design and plan major storage environments. It qualifies a storage pro as a SNIA-Certified Storage Networking Expert (SCSN-E) who can be charged with the task of storage management and design.

SNIA also offers storage professional, storage architect, and storage engineer certifications, but none are as rigorous as the organization's SCSN-E certification.

According to Rick Bauer, success isn't easy. "Most [certifications] are not going to be easy to pass and they are very rigorous. The foundation level has a 75 percent pass rate and becomes much more difficult, [requiring] outside experience to pass the levels. In essence, SNIA tests those topics that transcend the vendor-specific programs and perform the tasks that professionals would typically find in the field."

SNIA courses are offered at the group's [technology center in Colorado Springs, Colo.](), in Hands-On Labs during tradeshows, in podcasts, and online. Prices are typically over $2,000 per course. SNIA tests are held at Prometric sites and usually cost $200.

Summary and suggestions
Storage certifications can be one of the more important elements in developing a successful career. And although there is no right answer to finding the perfect certification program, there are a range of options from which to choose.

What are some considerations in planning for certification? Here is a brief checklist:

- *Do you really need the certification?* Experts say it's important to be sure the time and effort invested in a certification program will actually help you on the job. Check your company's policy on promotions: Will this really help you get that new title and raise?
- *Will the training help you long term?* Before embarking on a course of study and testing that involves specific vendors, make sure your powers-that-be aren't planning a supplier change that could render your certification moot.
- *Can you afford this?* Check out financing options for your certification. Does your company underwrite employee certifications? Can you get a better deal as part of a group? Will it pay to

take that group to the SNIA or vendor training headquarters, or will costs be saved by getting someone from those organizations to come to you? Maybe online is the best path to certification. Consider the various permutations of training that will best fit your requirements and budget.

- *Do you have the time required to pass the test?* Certification courses and tests can mean lots of extra time spent after hours and on weekends. Are you prepared for that? Will the end result justify the sacrifices you'll have to make in personal time and effort?

These are just a few suggestions on certification planning. There is more information available from individual organizations and companies. Here is a sampling of URLs that may help in certification planning:

Table 1: Training Sites for Selected Storage Suppliers and SNIA

Organization	URL
Compellent	http://www.compellent.com/Services-and-Support/Training.aspx
Dell/Equallogic	http://www.learndell.com/Dell/
EMC	http://www.emc.com/support-training/training/certification-programs.htm
HDS	http://www.hds.com/services/education/certification/
HP	http://h15076.www1.hp.com/education/curr-storsan.htm
IBM	https://www-304.ibm.com/jct03001c/services/learning/ites.wss/us/en?pageType=page&c=a0000048
Isilon	http://www.isilon.com/partners/?page=isilon_institute
NetApp	http://www.netapp.com/us/services/university/certification.html
ONStor	http://www.onstor.com/onstor_university.php
SNIA	http://www.snia.org/education/certification/
Sun	http://www.sun.com/training/catalog/storage/index.xml
Xiotech	http://www.xiotech.com/Support-Center_Training.aspx