When a story like this ran in 2003, it prompted more responses and controversy than we imagined. Although we try to be clear that the order of appearance in any given list indicates nothing about relative ranking or merit, that aspect of things provokes comment, as does the inclusion of some little-known credentials or the omission of better-known ones.

But given that there are more than 850 certifications and more than 200 certification programs in today’s IT certification landscape, we hope to help our readers distinguish good ones from mediocre or bad ones, winners from losers and up-and-comers from programs in their declining phase. So remember, you can go out and analyze the marketplace for yourself and plow through the numerous interest, salary and popularity surveys to try to figure out this stuff for yourself. While you’re at it, it’s also important to pay attention to what’s showing up in classified job ads and online postings to determine where the real action is.

As in the previous survey, we tried to develop a rough consensus about what’s hot and where the action appears to be in today’s highly fragmented IT job market. We can’t dispute that these lists draw heavily on the author’s knowledge, experience and observations, thus they must also reflect his preferences (and possibly even biases.) As in the previous collection of lists, each is labeled by category, along with a short discussion of what characteristics made credentials most suited for inclusion.

**Inclusion and Order of Appearance**
When applying criteria to the broad spectrum of IT certifications available, we want to be sure to explain how the selection process worked once we narrowed in on our list of contenders in any given category. Wherever we could, we were sure to factor in rankings and ratings regarding the appeal, popularity, employment potential and pay associated with specific credentials, along with information about the size and composition of the professionals who hold such credentials.

Thus, we’d also argue the presence or absence of some program in a category is significant; we attach no particular importance to the order in which items appear in these lists. In fact, we present the lists in alphabetical order in this version just to emphasize the arbitrary nature of an item’s place in any given list.

Readers with strong opinions about what’s missing and what should be included, or what’s included and should have been left out, are invited to send an e-mail to editor@certmag.com.

**Best Hands-On Programs**
Some certifications don’t just subject individuals to a battery of multiple-choice exams; they actually require test-takers to roll up their sleeves, walk into a test lab and tackle some carefully
staged situations to see what they know, what they can do and how they perform when faced with real-world situations. These kinds of exams might be called laboratory exams, performance-based testing or even practicums. But whatever the name, such programs involve on-the-spot analysis and problem-solving skills while subjecting candidates to always clever and sometimes fiendish system, network and hardware situations. Just for grins, we include one program that involves no such staging but nevertheless requires substantial hands-on skills and experience to handle.

1. Certified Professional Information Technology Consultant (CPITC): This certification comes from the Professional Standards Institute, an organization that seeks to provide performance-based credentials to all kinds of professionals. The CPITC covers a wide spectrum of IT topics that uses comprehensive documentation and testing materials carefully crafted to assess real-world skills and knowledge. For more information, see www.professionalstandardsinstitute.com/cpitc.php.

2. Cisco Career Certifications (Associate, Professional and Specialist): Although the various Cisco certifications that rank below the CCIE don’t include lab exams, many of them use simulations to include hands-on problem solving and to probe situational skills. For more information, see www.cisco.com/go/certification.

3. Cisco Certified Internet-work Expert (CCIE): With more than 13,000 CCIEs certified worldwide, this top-notch certification is built around a grueling, one-day laboratory exam that many experts rate as the most difficult of all IT cert exams around. Many CCIE candidates take this $1,250 lab exam two or three times before they pass. This probably explains why the CCIE continues to hold so much enduring value and status, and it explains why the CCIE appears at or near the top of so many lists of leading IT certifications. For more information, see www.cisco.com/go/ccie.

4. Novell Certified Linux Engineer (CLE): Novell calls the CLE exam a practicum, which requires logging into a carefully constructed (virtual) set of networking components SUSE Enterprise Linux servers, services and directories. Using normal tools and techniques to see what’s going on, candidates must analyze, design, configure, troubleshoot and repair the various components they encounter during the exam. Successful exam takers label this exam as both demanding and intense, but they also say it reflects the true skill and knowledge of its takers. For more information, see www.novell.com/training/certinfo/cle.

5. Novell Certified Linux Professional (CLP): Like the CLE exam, the CLP exam also is a practicum that requires logging into a test network to test exam takers’ abilities to install, configure, troubleshoot and manage Linux network environments. Those who’ve tackled this test describe the exam as wide-ranging and difficult but also a good measure of real-world skills and knowledge. For more information, see www.novell.com/training/certinfo/clp.

6. Oracle Database 10g Administrator Certified Master (OCM): This credential requires a grueling two-day practicum exam administered at Oracle University locations. This exam has proven to be demanding, comprehensive and difficult, and it is heavy on real-world questions and scenarios. For more information, see http://education.oracle.com/pls/web_prod-plq-dad/db_pages.getpage?page_id=80.

7. Oracle Database 10g Administrator Certified Professional (OCP): Since the introduction of the Oracle9i DBA program, Oracle requires candidates to complete an instructor-led, hands-on course that puts students to work dealing with real-world systems, problems and situations on a daily basis in addition to a standard multiple-choice exam. For more information, see www.oracle.com/global/us/education/certification/dba10g_onecoursereq.html.
8. Red Hat Certified Engineer (RHCE): The RHCE exams take a full day, including six hours of performance-based exams. In the exam laboratory, candidates must install, configure and troubleshoot Red Hat servers and related network protocols and services in a simulated enterprise environment. For more information, see www.redhat.com/training/rhce/courses.

9. Red Hat Certified Technician (RHCT): Although the RHCT sets its limits somewhat beneath those for the RHCE, it’s still a demanding, hands-on, three-hour exam that includes one hour of troubleshooting and system maintenance coverage, along with two hours on installation and configuration. For more information, see www.redhat.com/tra

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