Although the job economy has been rocky for the last few years, we may be seeing a light at the end of the tunnel. IT professionals wanting to get on the fast track to jobs need to get in shape now—polishing up skills, getting the training they deserve, and seeing where the openings are. Let’s take a look at three areas of IT where opportunities exist for qualified professionals—security, Windows and open source.

SECURITY SKILLS

You only have to open the paper to know that security is a major issue. It’s also a sensitive subject for companies. Employers want to make sure they have staff that can solve their problems, predict what will happen next, manage long-term projects, and be trusted with the tools, resources and data of an organization.

Challenger, Gray & Christmas, the outplacement company, named IT security specialist the hottest job for 2004. The CISSP and SSCP are cornerstones of security skills and certification, offering the expertise and experience organizations need to build a solid technology defense. Most Chief Security Officers have the CISSP (Certified Information Systems Security Professional), but research firm the Gartner Group predicts that companies will increasingly require other staff to be qualified by information security certifications.

The Information Systems Security Certifications Consortium (ISC)² is a good place to start, as the major security association worldwide that helps companies recognize organizations and individuals that are knowledgeable in security through the CISSP designation.

Other course work to consider include Microsoft’s MCSE: Security, as well as vendor-neutral certifications including TruSecure’s ISCA and CompTIA Security+ foundation programs. You’ll also find an increasing number of subject-specific options, such as computer forensics, ethical hacking and wireless security, which can offer the way into larger enterprises or government organizations that require particular skills sets.

WINDOWS WANTED

When The Training Camp polled over 500 IT professionals on what skills they felt were in demand within their organizations, security came back as the main answer from 18%. Over a quarter of respondents to the survey said Windows Server Administration, while Cisco and other networking skills were third.

It’s not surprising to see the demand, as system engineers face a number of challenges and pressures from across the enterprise, from reducing the total cost of ownership of network systems, to enhancing the return on investment of IT expenditures. Skills training and certification can provide information technology professionals with the knowledge and skills necessary to install, configure, support, secure and troubleshoot Windows-based networks.

Qualifications depend on what system your organization is running. But for the latest, you could look at the Windows XP MCP to learn how to plan, implement, manage and support information systems that incorporate Microsoft Windows XP Professional.

OPEN SOURCE OPENINGS

A third area to focus on is open source. Organizations from government and education to manufacturing now scrutinize the potential cost savings and efficiencies that a move to Linux could bring. IT administrators with a Linux certification will have a better chance of the new jobs, promotions or pay rises.
Compared to a year ago, there’s a 30-50% growth in demand for Linux certification. However, there are a few options to consider. The vendor-neutral LPI certification from the Linux Professional Institute provides a good overview of the basics, and prepares you to then work with any of the different distributions, whether from Red Hat, SuSE Linux, SCO or others. The LPI exam is offered on two levels, a junior level (LPIC1) and an intermediate level (LPIC2), and a third (LPIC3) is under development.

Vendor-neutral flexibility can be crucial if you are responsible for evaluating the migration to Linux. It is also important for your career if you plan to change jobs in the future. If, however, your company has already invested in a particular system, it is important to have specific knowledge and hands-on experience of that distribution to progress.

For example, vendor Red Hat offers two levels of certification for engineers proficient on its own version of Linux. Red Hat Certified Engineer (RHCE), Red Hat’s advanced certification, confirms that an administrator can configure and administer servers, secure a box and deliver other services. Red Hat Certified Technician (RHCT) is an entry-level certification.

THE MAGIC MIX

The mix of IT and management skills is going to be important to prospective employers as IT budgets start to increase and a large proportion of investment goes into creating a more integrated IT infrastructure. Given the often mission-critical nature of this work, it is perhaps no surprise employers are increasingly demanding that IT staff have sound commercial, as well as technical, credentials.

So we’ve seen another common trend in combination certifications, as network security specialists add CISSP to their MCSE, for example.

Similarly, a Windows systems admin with Linux qualifications gets a strong foot up on the career ladder. One common case we have been seeing is the “recovering MCSE” who is moving from a Microsoft environment and applying for a job that mandates Unix or Linux. This person suddenly finds that they are responsible for new areas, with Linux servers doing production work.

Having multiple skills is also important. Some companies may have budget for a single position only, and you can offer both skills at the one price. Administrators who need to service a heterogeneous environment will also need a mix of skills.

THE NEED FOR SPEED

The other thing to bear in mind is the speed of change. Technology moves fast. So do jobs.

As the speed of technology development accelerates, so too does the rate at which IT environments change and external threats proliferate. Knowing how to protect a corporate network, for example, is worth a lot more to a business than just your job.

Look at the damage Blaster did to corporate networks worldwide. Collectively, different versions of the “Blaster” virus-like worm caused between $5 and $10 million worth of damage to Microsoft alone. However, Blaster was an insignificant event for corporations with carefully implemented, proactive security strategies. But creating comprehensive management policies requires the right skills and experience. Security certification aids prevention and strengthens an enterprise’s defenses by teaching how to envision, plan and implement the necessary procedures before security attacks occur.

You take a two-year course part-time, online, at home on weekends, and you’ll be unlikely to get the killer job that demands immediate execution of the skills you’ve learned. You will probably have forgotten what you learned at the beginning of the course.

Many companies and individuals opt for e-learning because it appears to be the cheapest option, not because it necessarily works. Consider the boot camp approach—accelerated learning in a zero-distraction environment, where you learn using a variety of methods and mechanisms, applying knowledge every day, working towards a clear objective to test and certify at the same time. Five to ten days later, you can take the most up-to-date skills back to a working environment, and prove to your organization the value they add—to the job and the business.

WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO YOU?

The thing to remember is that despite the hard job market, despite the scares about offshore outsourcing, there is still a skills shortage in the IT industry in the US. There are opportunities to excel, with the right experience, training and certification. Decide what is most important to you—a job that brings with it free gym membership and travel insurance, or the opportunity to manage projects, develop skills, further a career, and achieve job satisfaction within a challenging environment.

We found that this then brings its own rewards. Our survey revealed that 87 percent of students were promoted after participating in a training course, and 82 percent stayed with their current company. In addition, 57 percent had their training paid for by an employer as a benefit.

There is a certain fear within companies that they invest in training staff, only to see them leave for jobs at competitor organizations or come back and demand higher wages. Ultimately, however, the employees are paying for their training by bringing the skills back to their companies.

In the end, skills development and training should deliver ROI, for IT professionals and employers, adding value to an individual’s credentials, their job and the business. Getting experience, and having the right qualifications and skills can open many doors and puts you on the fast track to career progression and job satisfaction.

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