



CERTIFICATION AND SUPPORT SALARIES

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66 Mt. Auburn Street
Watertown, Mass. 02472-3929
Telephone 617/924-3944, ext. 14
Fax 617/924-7288

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Certification and Support Salaries

Certification programs, we're often told, are one of the best ways for support employees to get on a financial fast track. Salary surveys regularly show that technicians who pass certification exams earn substantially higher pay—typically 25% more than their non-certified counterparts. For example, a recent survey by *Computer Reseller News* concluded that “the median compensation for a Cisco Certified Internetworking Expert was 75% more than the median salary for a noncertified technician [and] to be Sun-certified for Java boosted a technician’s salary by 37%.”

These are dazzling numbers for a profession that’s always been notorious for skimpy salaries. Sadly, however, the survey numbers don’t tell the whole truth.

What salary surveys generally fail to answer is a fundamental question of cause and effect: Do certified support reps earn more *because* they earn diplomas—or do the exams naturally attract smarter, more knowledgeable employees who would ordinarily command top salaries even without certification?

To shed some light on this question, the Association of Support Professionals recently collected data from 198 software companies whose support groups range in size from thousands of employees to some who have just a handful of staffers. We asked what value the companies placed on certification, and how they rewarded employees who passed certification exams. And we asked which vendor programs were most valuable to their particular support group.

The answers we found certainly won’t make certification evangelists happy: Only a small percentage of companies tie their hiring, promotion, or pay raises to any vendor certification program. And even when certification is a factor in setting compensation levels, raises tend to be fairly modest—typically no more than a 5%-7% increase over the employee’s pre-certification paycheck. Pretty clearly, the payoff for weeks of hard studying is usually a lot less than the salary surveys suggest.

In some ways, that’s a depressing conclusion. Although certification programs do tend to be profit centers for vendors and are often used to lock customers into specific products and platforms, there should be no question that certification has real value for the software industry as a whole. Without a formal testing process, there’s no easy way for a support manager to know if a technician really understands the inner workings of complex server environments, operating systems, or networks. Ignorance in these areas can quickly produce expensive escalations and ticked-off customers.

But if certification has so much value, why not reward technicians who pass the exams? We’ve heard several reasons:

- **Most support groups are more concerned with supporting their own products.** While it may be useful to handle infrastructure questions about Windows or Netware, support managers typically feel that their highest priority is to make sure technicians have in-depth knowledge about the software the company actually sells. “My feeling is that employees should be rewarded for providing value to [our company],” says the head of a 56-person support group. “The linkage between certification and delivering more value is weak at best.”
- **Certification doesn’t always measure the right skills:** “You can certify anyone, but that won’t guarantee that an individual can solve problems,” notes a manager in a 275-person

support organization. “Simple troubleshooting skills and experience far surpass any technical certification program I’ve seen to date.” Says another manager: “We need a certain number of certified individuals to qualify as a business partner with IBM and Microsoft, but we don’t find the items that are tested particularly relevant to ‘real life’ issues that crop up with our customers.”

- **Certification can encourage employee turnover.** By emphasizing generic, highly portable knowledge, certification may actually make senior employees high-profile targets for recruiters. (Ironically, newly-certified employees who didn’t get the big raises they expected are probably most likely to jump ship.) In its annual salary survey, *Microsoft Certified Professional Magazine* concluded that “apparently, in a red-hot job market, employers are reluctant to pay for skills that they think may increase an employee’s worth or attractiveness elsewhere.”

Whatever the reason, though, it’s clear that the vast majority of support managers remain skeptical about the value of certification *to their own companies*. Until that barrier is overcome, the pot of gold at the end of the certification rainbow will be just a promise.



Here’s a closer look at what our survey data revealed:

■ **Does certification help with career advancement?** We asked two questions—whether certification is “usually required as a condition of employment” and whether certification is “usually required for promotion or career development.” The data suggests that larger companies put somewhat more emphasis on certification than small firms, especially for promotion, but overall it seems that certification plays a relatively small role in support hiring and promotion:

| Is certification required for hiring or promotion? | Hiring | Promotion |
|--|--------|-----------|
| 1-9 support employees | 8.5% | 17.0% |
| 10-29 employees | 12.9% | 19.4% |
| 30+ employees | 12.9% | 23.5% |
| Total sample | 11.6% | 21.2% |

Comments:

- “Employees who pass any type of certification are one step ahead in the promotion process. However, certification will not necessarily grant them a promotion.”
- “[Certification] at times can be used to help an employee gain a promotion that would otherwise not be available.”
- “Certification is sometimes required for employment, but not strictly. Raises upon certification are not usual.”
- “We believe that it’s good to attend the classes and learn the material, but the actual certificate does not interest us.”
- “Once certification is complete, the staff member is encouraged to apply for more advanced opportunities in the department.”
- “Employees who pass certification exams are generally better troubleshooters. Although

passing an exam doesn't lead to an immediate promotion, a small raise is factored in during a promotion or salary review."

■ **Do companies reward certification with raises?** We asked our respondents if they have a "formal company policy" about raises for certification, or do they give raises "at manager's discretion." In both cases, we also asked what percentage raise is typical. Only eight companies (4%) report that they have a formal corporate policy about raises for certification; the median raise for this group is 7%. A substantially larger group treat raises more informally; 42 respondents (21.2%) say giving a raise for certification is at the manager's discretion and is usually worth around 5% (median). However, the largest group of respondents (28.8%) say explicitly that there's "usually no raise or other reward for certification."

Even if they don't offer raises, many support groups do seem willing to provide some extra compensation for certification. Some companies, for instance, pay a one-time bonus to employees who pass certification exams—typically between \$250 and \$1,000. Another common incentive is for the company to pay for the cost of the exam (which can be substantial). In fact, reimbursing employees for exams is a standard practice even among the smallest support groups:

| Does the company pay for certification exams? | Yes |
|---|-------|
| 1-9 support employees | 53.2% |
| 10-29 employees | 61.3% |
| 30+ employees | 64.7% |
| Total sample | 60.1% |

Comments:

- "Possible raise depending on the level of certification."
- "We offer a \$500 salary increase for every certification exam passed from a qualifying list. Those completing the six-exam set for the MCSE also qualify for an additional \$2,000 salary increase."
- "Company pays 100% [of exam costs] plus books and fees up front, no limit. A person could spend \$15,000 a year and the company would pay for it."
- "Our agreement is to pay for the exam the first time they take it. If they fail, then they have to pay for additional exams."
- "May impact percentage [salary] increase but increases are more based on overall merit than a specific percentage for passing an exam."
- "We announce it in our company newsletter and reward them a bit more at review time, provided they've used this training/certification."
- "We pay all certification costs, including test fees, and pay a bonus to the employee upon certification. Almost all newly-certified employees will then receive a salary increase to reflect market value."
- "The raise is based on whatever they would reasonably expect to make if they went elsewhere."
- "Lunch with manager and director."

■ **Which certification exams are most valuable?** There's a good deal of competition among vendors to attract support for their individual certification programs, and lately the field has become even more crowded by the emergence of third-party certification plans from groups like CompTIA and the Help Desk Institute. Not surprisingly, the various Microsoft certification plans—MCP, MCSE, MCSA, MCT, etc.—hold a commanding lead as the “most important” programs among respondents who mentioned specific programs:

Which vendor or third-party certification exams are most important for your tech support organization?

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|
| “None” | 72 mentions |
| Microsoft | 94 mentions |
| Cisco | 25 mentions |
| Oracle | 16 mentions |
| CompTIA | 15 mentions |
| Novell | 13 mentions |
| Sun | 9 mentions |
| Hewlett Packard | 6 mentions |
| Compaq | 4 mentions |
| IBM | 4 mentions |
| Citrix | 3 mentions |
| Dell | 3 mentions |
| Help Desk 2000 | 3 mentions |
| Others (one or two mentions each) | 21 mentions |

■ **Survey methodology:** Data for this survey was collected by e-mail from managers of software support organizations, primarily members of the Association of Support Professionals. (To avoid “ballot box stuffing,” the survey questionnaire was not posted on the Web.) Respondents were asked to indicate the “total number of employees, including managers, in your tech support organization.” Median support organization size was 20 people; the largest group in our sample had a headcount of 7,000, while two respondents run single-person departments.

It's worth noting that by taking the time to answer survey questions, our respondents probably demonstrate an above-average interest in certification; thus, it's likely that we over-represent the number of companies that use certification exams for hiring or promotion—even though the survey shows that such companies are already in the minority.

