

An Overview of the Hitachi Data Systems Certification Program

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Now entering its third year of operation, the Hitachi Data Systems Certified Professional Program is designed to validate the skills and knowledge of its customers, personnel and partners in storage architecture, implementation and administration of the company's products and technology.

IT professionals seek to enhance their skills, differentiate themselves and grow their careers. With the demands placed on IT to support data growth, business continuity and compliance, storage is an area in which IT professionals with the right credentials can be successful.

"It is easy for IT credentials to become too theoretical," said Nick Howe, vice president of Hitachi Data Systems Academy. "Our goal is that HDS certifications are relevant and directly applicable to real-world jobs in the storage industry. In terms of value to participants, we're looking to add additional benefits like online communities and access to technology sandboxes for those with advanced HDS certification credentials."

The Hitachi Data Systems Certification program was rolled out in phases, first reaching a wide audience with foundation-level exams, then developing advanced, role-based exams. After two years, the HDS Academy has put together a robust program with finely tuned certification tracks that target the key roles in storage technology.

There are five certification tracks in place: foundations (HDS Certified Professional), implementation, storage manager, architecture and integration. They are complemented by a sales qualification program.

Hitachi Data Systems is leveraging industry-standard credentials (SNIA), global proctored testing, hands-on performance-based testing and Internet proctored and non-proctored testing.

Participation and Growth

According to Howe, one of the key indicators of these certification programs' success is that they went from 90 partner companies participating in the first year to almost 300 in the second year. The breakdown of participation in Hitachi Data Systems credentials is: North America at 55 percent; Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA) at 35 percent;

and Asia-Pacific (APAC) at 15 percent, with the APAC region experiencing more percentage growth this past year.

One goal the program established early on was to exceed 1,000 Hitachi Data Systems certification credentials earned by the two-year anniversary of the program launch, and that has been easily surpassed. The HDS program expects to double the participation during the next year as well. Moving participants from the foundation level to the more advanced level is the next program initiative.

Keeping the program streamlined and making it easy to understand are key guiding principles in the structure of the program. Customer service, FAQ files and an up-to-date Web site are essentials for any program. Keeping the quality of exams high and making sure they are relevant to the business will keep the program in demand.

Best practices are put in place to reduce the impact of cheating. Updating the exam items frequently is just one way to keep the playing field level. Other best practices include test-item construction — all test writers are given instruction before they write any questions.

Hitachi Data Systems management supports the program by encouraging the participation of subject matter experts from every part of the company. Varied backgrounds and skill sets help the exams stay relevant.

The program also is interested in having HDS partners participate in future exam development efforts. The exams themselves are evaluated on a regular basis and updated accordingly. The foundation exams are updated most frequently, while the advanced, role-based exams have a longer shelf life.

Integration with Channel Partner services programs, along with establishing value of the HDS certification program in the marketplace, have been key factors in partner participation.

More than 600 sales qualification credentials have been awarded since the launch of this portion of the program in September 2007. Most of the participation for this credential comes from North America, but APAC participation has picked up in the past year.

Sales qualification numbers already have exceeded expectations.

Road Shows

Hitachi Data Systems has created the HDS certification test-prep road show. This program was designed for those already familiar with HDS products and technology and who need some refresher training before testing. An on-site testing center accompanies the training, and counseling and chalk talk sessions are provided, with students breaking out in study groups after the initial training session. This gives the students a greater opportunity to achieve HDS certification.

Since everyday work is full of distractions, a day that provides focus on certification is a great help to the students. The program initially focused on the foundation level, but next year there are plans to offer the more advanced areas for test prep. Again, this will be targeted to those who have experience; those who are new to storage and HDS products and technology will need to take further training classes.

Road shows also play a role in recertification, as the participants have found this format to be time efficient and effective. But the benefits go two ways. From Hitachi Data Systems' perspective, it is an outstanding opportunity to hear from the participants directly. This helps determine what is working and what is not, allowing the program to more easily identify trends and areas for improvement.

Exams, New Credentials and Recertification

Hitachi Data Systems certification program rounded out its offerings in the past year with advanced exams put in place for the storage manager and implementer. Implementer specialist exams were put in place for even more advanced knowledge and skill-level validation. Business continuity and storage management are two key business needs for partners and customers of HDS, and the program reflects these.

New exams are planned in the areas of virtualization and performance, but keeping exams current, rather

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than expanding and adding more exams into the mix, is a principal program strategy.

The architect track and the storage manager track of the program have been modified by adding an expert level. The expert level is a combination of a Hitachi Data Systems' certification and a vendor neutral credential. By recognizing vendor neutral credentials, the program identifies areas that could help expand participants' knowledge bases and, in doing so, help their careers.

Now that the program has entered its third year, recertification rules have been established for 2008. The rules for recertification will be evaluated each year.

For 2008 recertification, the requirement for 2006 credentialed participants to obtain the equivalent 2008 credential via recertification is passing one of the foundations exams. For example, if you obtained the HDS Implementer credential in 2006, you will only need to pass the foundations exam to gain the 2008 HDS Implementer credential.

The principal reason for this is the skills required in the advanced exams have not changed, but the base products have, and the foundation exams focus on those base products and technology. The credentials are tied to partner programs that require recertification every two years. Attending training classes are part of the plan for future recertification

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efforts. All credentials starting in 2006 have been stamped by the year.

Sales qualification requires the passing of the sales foundations online exam yearly. Products, solutions and initiatives change rapidly, and constant updates are needed. By the end of a year, the course and exam have undergone significant changes. So each yearly credential truly demarcates an area of knowledge.

The Web-based test makes it easy for sales professionals to access the test and validate their knowledge. While there is online training in place, many times the HDS Channel Partner teams will conduct a study session with their partners. This helps forge a tighter relationship between the partners, allowing them to gain valuable knowledge and information to help with sales productivity.

The current practice is to allow each partner to take the online sales test for free the first time. Any retakes require a test fee.

Benefits to Participants

Certification provides professionals working with storage products sold by Hitachi Data Systems technology credentials validating their level of expertise and establishes their companies as leaders in the storage industry. Participants can:

- Validate skills and knowledge.
- Gain peer recognition.
- Increase their companies' value.
- Target and build upon the skills of industry professionals.
- Gain more business due to validated expertise.

Hitachi Data Systems is a supplier of storage hardware, software and services. A wholly owned subsidiary of Japanese electronics company Hitachi Ltd., Hitachi Data Systems leverages global research and development resources to provide storage solutions that help customers align their IT infrastructure with their business objectives, maximize their return on investment and minimize their risk. ☺

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ture could also help manage that for our customers as well. We don't have what I would call a formal career path because we're a small company. But the people who manage our internal system are our experts, and basically, they can go a whole bunch of different ways."

So Bamboo's relatively small size is what allows its IT professionals to move into those different paths. The company's size also allows for a lack of official IT protocols. Being a smaller company allows it to be much more lenient than a larger one.

An Apt Name

During the hiring process, Bamboo Solutions looks for candidates who are like bamboo itself — flexible and easily adapted to any purpose. Hiring individuals for rigidly set roles and functions wouldn't be right for the company. Hiring people who know a little about a wide range of topics instead of specialists with multiple certifications in just one subject is a tradeoff that it's more than willing to make. Having said that, Tanner also sees the importance of being able to make a snap judgment on an individual's ability to be proficient at the job. Certification can facilitate this process.

"Certification is the way of coming to a conclusion about someone's competency a lot faster," Tanner said. "By and large, you don't find that exact right person with glowing recommendations, but if they have certifications, that's a way of saying, 'Hey, this person gets it. They've done it,' and it gives you, the employer, a certain level of confidence."

But the confidence that certifications initially provide in the interview may be short-lived in the context of that person's overall impact as an employee. Since Bamboo offers specific Web solutions via SharePoint, someone with administrative experience in that would be a premium over just a certification on the same subject without any experience. According to Tanner, recommendations from previous jobs carry more weight than anything. If someone has shown a history of problem solving within a certain system, that may be the most valuable trait of all. ☺

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