

Are IT Certifications and Qualifications Really That Important?

Shôn Ellerton, September 24, 2024

In this piece, I explain why IT Certifications and qualifications are nowhere as important as having the core principles and knowledge in place.



Why do I think placing high importance on qualifications and certifications in IT questionable?

I'll try to explain my reasoning for this.

Let me start in saying that I have zero qualifications in IT. I have a degree in civil engineering, a PRINCE2 certificate, and a few technical certificates in the world of mobile telecommunications, and that's about it.

OK. I lie. I do have one Cisco Wireless certification but that was more than twenty years ago!

And yet, I've had an excellent track record in my career as an engineer and an IT specialist, especially in the world of data management. There have been a couple of managers who have presented themselves as obstacles but this is purely because they perceive me as a threat to their own insecurities, but by and large, I'd say that I have had an illustrious career in the world of IT and telecommunications.

So, this is where I have a beef with the whole paradigm thinking of one must having certifications and qualifications in order to be able to be a selling feature in the IT job market.

It all starts with the core principles and knowledge of the underlying substance of how IT works and not simply obtaining a piece of paper, or some sort of electronic badge, that you scored eighty percent out of a multiple choice questionnaire after forking out a couple hundred of bucks to the software vendor. In the IT world, so many are fixated on certifications from a seemingly wide variety of vendors, of which there are so many, no one could possibly have done all the exams. It certainly is a big money-making machine for the vendors and that is all too evident in the way they push businesses to get their employees trained up in their product line.

If you are a graphics designer artist, you know how to deal with the core principles of how to put together a great graphics design. If you are a website designer, you know how to put together the fundamentals of how a good website works. If you are a programmer, you know how to manipulate logic and understand how to code and how to code efficiently. If you are a data engineer, you know the principles of how data is organised and how to move data from one place to another.

The principles count, not what specific vendor's certifications you have.

Those coming purely from an IT background could present a counterargument or two; however, I will present my case with respect to how an engineer is placed in the career workforce.

I came from a civil engineering background, and to be able to land a job, one must possess the principles and knowledge required as trained as a civil engineer. For example, how bending moments and shear forces work, how phreatic surfaces work with the flow of water in soil, how biological oxygen decomposition works in water quality treatment, distinguishing laminar flow with supercritical flow in the motion of fluids, and so on.

When I first entered my career as a civil engineer, there were certain pieces of software which we used to assist us in designing and calculating the stress limits our structures would be put under. The software was there to help us, but not to replace our judgment in whether the structure would work or not. Engineers are trained in their core principles of how the structure will work and will have been taught not to rely on software alone without having an overall *feel* of whether the structure is right or not. For example, a fledgling civil engineer relying on the numbers of a finite element structural analysis package being correct only to find

that there was something fundamentally wrong with the overall design when the wrong parameters were entered into the program.

It is exactly the same thing with the IT world. The proliferation of low-code solutions and reliance on trendy popular platforms like Snowflake, Databricks, and dbt, for example, leads recruiters into the rabbit-hole of seeking candidates who have specific certifications with a particular product.

Now, if I put myself in the position as a recruiter for someone as a data engineer, I can assure you that I will buck the mindset of the majority of those recruiters focussing on specific technologies. I want candidates who know the *principles* of how data works. I want *smart* and *adaptable* people who know the core principles and knowledge required to perform their role regardless if they know the specific product or not. I would much rather have them than someone who managed to scrape through a multiple choice exam after running through multiple mock exams just for the sake of passing.

Unfortunately, we have a lazy recruiter culture. A culture that relies on boxes being checked rather than understanding the individual. I have not personally done this, but I wonder how many candidates looking for jobs, out of desperation, have stated on their CVs that they have skills in a specific product they know nothing about. From experience, I probably could have done this myself on those occasions in which I had been asked if I had experience on a particular technology which I had not.

IT is no different from any other profession with respect to the importance of understanding the cores and principles coupled with experience. Moreover, the importance of gaining qualifications and certifications in IT may be deemed *less* than many other professions. Prior to the 1970s, there weren't many degrees in the world of computer science and certainly none before the 60s. However, IT was learnt through applied and practical experience from those professions in which the use of computers would be beneficial. For example, for calculating complex formulae and running iterative statistical models.

Ultimately, the best people to understand IT are those which have the ability to be adaptable, know the core principles, understand how logic works, and possess the ability to understand the rudiments of the business for which the IT work is needed for.

I'm not saying that IT certificates and qualifications are worthless, but they should not be positioned in terms of importance over proven experience. Especially for those which have worked in the industry for more than ten years. Experienced IT professionals often look for *solutions* to a problem and tend to learn any new tool on the job as necessity requires.

There's absolutely no harm in becoming certified in a product, but it does not necessarily mean that you're going to be the best person for the job. I've not done any Microsoft training, and yet, I've become an expert in the world of Microsoft SQL database design. Recently, I was involved in a project migrating SAP data from IBM databases to another data platform. I had zero experience with IBM databases and very little experience with SAP. The case of necessity being the mother of invention applies beautifully here.

It's also worth mentioning that there are simply too many IT products out there, each with their own set of certifications and qualifications. No one can possibly learn them all.

Lastly, we need smart people to recruit effective people to meet the requirements of a given IT role and not purely robots who tick off certification boxes based on the candidate's CV.