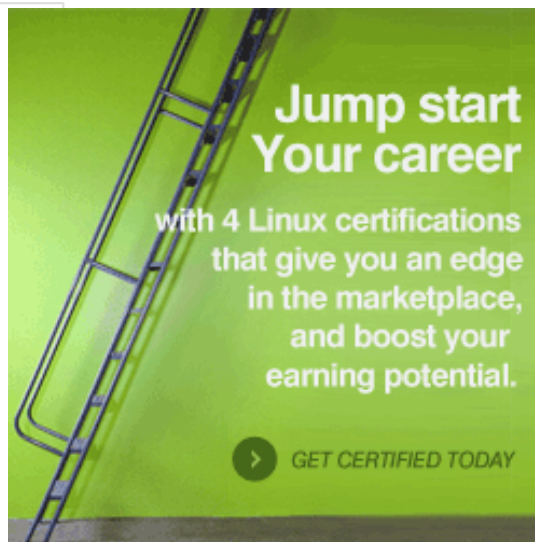


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Management: Using Events to Support Certification

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In the world of certification, events present a wonderful opportunity for program managers to cultivate their credential offerings. When a number of certification holders and candidates are gathered in one place, it allows you not only to promote your program to a large audience, but also to receive comments, suggestions and criticism that may help you develop new ideas and approaches to your certification.

Software provider Microsoft holds its own events to support its many credentials as well as sponsors and participates in forums held by other organizations. For example, Microsoft recently took part in the 2005 RSA security conference, which featured a keynote address by Chairman Bill Gates that allowed the company to promote its certifications around information security. In order to determine which events to participate in, Microsoft looks at who the audiences will be, the content of the programs and activities, and whether those align with Microsoft Learning's objectives.

"The biggest opportunity we see with events is it's obviously a great gathering point of our highly loyal audience, who have invested significant time and money in their skills," said Al Valvano, manager of the business and product strategy group for certification and assessment operations at Microsoft Learning. "They are an important, influential community of Microsoft professionals. As an opportunity to give something back to them, it's fabulous. It's a great way to share back additional resources or hook them up with their peers or provide special kinds of access to them."

Microsoft often provides certification training and testing at event sites, and many attendees opt to study and affirm their skills and knowledge among like-minded peers. "It's a great opportunity for people to take time out of their busy work

schedules to accomplish some of their professional and personal goals," Valvano said. "What we find is a lot of our people take that opportunity to sit in exams, upgrade their certification skills or attend a training session.

"It's also great from an efficiency standpoint," he added. "We can do lots of really great stuff all at once for a fairly broad audience. As an opportunity to drive that kind of engagement, it's great. We typically almost always have testing centers and activities that we sponsor or participate in, and we're generally certifying a fair number of people at those events. We typically will have a promotion or a cost break for attendees, so it's win-win for everyone."

Many companies, such as IBM, invite subject-matter experts to workshops to brainstorm on essential tasks in a given job role and develop exam content around their conclusions. "This is the process we use to develop all of our certification exams," said Susan Farago, manager of the professional certification program for IBM's Tivoli software. "It's tried and true. A lot of companies that have technical certification go through this rather robust process, where they have some kind of job task analysis, which leads them to item writing and some type of technical review process and scoring process. It's certainly not unique to IBM, although IBM might add its own flavor to it.

"All of the workshops are based on the idea that subject-matter experts come together to collaborate on whatever the scope of the workshop happens to be," she explained. "The subject-matter experts that participate in these workshops have to have experience in the given product. These aren't training classes—they come with no knowledge and leave with knowledge of the product. They're very active workshops. We expect a lot of participation, and people should come prepared to participate, not just prepared to absorb."

Events can benefit both the certification participants, who are exposed to credential training and tests in an environment conducive to learning, and the program managers and developers, who can use them to come up with new ideas around course content, development and delivery. "Events are one way we're trying to inject value back into the community of certified professionals and reinforce the value that we feel those people bring to Microsoft," Valvano said. "It's a great opportunity for us to have dialogue and engagement and get their continued feedback about the program and what's working. It's great for us to give something back where we can."

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