

Certification Killed the IT Professional

By Andrew H. Maxim

Ever since the song “Video Killed the Radio Star” was released by The Buggles in 1980 on the album *The Age of Plastic* the music industry has almost reverently held a yearly television show that argues the point made in the song. For those of you who are not familiar with the lyrics, the song depicts how the music industry has changed from melodies and lyrics that strike a cord in us to, basically, what it has become today; an industry more devoted to image than music.

I’m not entirely certain if that was the ultimate intent of the songs production, but like epics written over a thousand years ago the current interpretation is all that matters, whether the authors say otherwise or not. It’s an interpretation I fully agree with, certainly in today’s image-savvy world such greats as Bob Dylan, Janus Joplin, Aerosmith and even Elvis Presley would have had a near impossible time starting out simply because they do not fit the carefully molded image.

So what does any of this have to do with the IT industry? Simply put, what the video did to the music industry, certifications have done to the IT industry. Sound far-fetched? Read on and all will be made clear.

Historical IT

It should first be agreed upon that the IT industry, as we know it today, began with the 8088 and 8086-based computers. Yes, arguments can be made for our beginnings to start back thousands of years to a man counting his fingers for the first time, all the way up to the invention of the voice recognition computers of the future. The reasons we are choosing to start with this period are simple.

First, the vast majority of modern computers and software are based off the fundamentals of these early computer systems. Second, it was at this stage that the computer first really started to take off, due primarily to the sale of the personal computer. More sales = more money = more competition = new technology. The most important reason for using this particular point as our staging area is that this is when I started my professional career.

During this era of the industry computer technology was first starting to take shape, GUI was something that the decision makers thought we weren’t ready for, color screens were still for games not business, and certifications really didn’t exist. Certainly there were a few out there, mostly computer manufacturers sending you a booklet with a test at the back that you sent in to receive your 8 ½ X 11 parchment, but nothing really like we have today. It wasn’t until I took my first networking test that a certification meant something to me. Unfortunately, it all went down hill from there.

The Partnership

The problem with the IT field first started to take shape with the creation of partnerships between the manufacturers and the service providers. The idea was a good one overall; a computer service company proves to the solution manufacturer that they have the knowledge and expertise to install their product, they give them a little money and a partnership of sorts is formed. With this partnership system in place companies looking to install a new system are ensured the provider they choose is knowledgeable with the system, the system manufacturer knows the provider has met some minimum requirements and the service provider gets a fancy logo to put on their store front thus attracting more business. A win, win, win situation; or so it seemed.

At the center of these “strategic alliances”, “partnerships” and “solution providers” lay the needed minimum requirements. To meet these requirements a service provider almost certainly has to fork over a little cash, but primarily the company has to list a minimum number of employees who held certifications in the product line. And thus our downfall began.

Every company wanted to be the first on their block to hoist each of the new flags saying “Hey! Come buy from us! See this manufacturer trusts us, and so should you!” As more and more companies sought the coveted flags, there grew a demand for certified professionals. It was because of this that a simple certification began to become worth more than a technical degree, worth more than a college degree and even worth more than experience. Information Technology became the field to be in.

Lemmings

In a time when other industries were entering a slump, the IT field was on a steady incline. The only thing needed for a company to compete was the precious partnership with the manufacturers. And the only thing needed for a person to break into the field was the needed certification. The demand for certified professionals was on the rise, and it seemed each of these professionals could write their own ticket into a field that would only be growing as each year passed.

Ten years ago if I had told anyone that they could start a career making more than a second year lawyer by training for six weeks and passing a test (as opposed to seven years and passing a test) they would have laughed me out of town. Something like that is entirely too good to be true. Only it was true and people began to realize that.

Certification training companies began popping up overnight promising the rewards of this new career. It was a slow trickle at first, the too good to be true rule still in peoples minds, but as each friend of a friend found hire making these outrageous fortunes the dam shattered and droves of certified professionals entered the market, each writing their own ticket to paradise. The mass migration into the Information Technologies industry was born, paper certifications leading the way past the doors of Human Resources, past the soft chair in an air conditioned cubicle, and straight to the icy ocean cliffs. Things really were too good to be true.

The Resume

Companies eventually realized the error of their ways; a certification was not enough to show the expertise needed in the IT Industry. It was still a near requirement, but something more was needed: experience. Once again, a good solution was born. If a job applicant did not have both the required certification and needed experience they were turned away. There were only two problems with this solution; the first came about because the well-oiled revolving door of the training companies were still pushing out certified professionals.

The experience requirement was a problem that lasted only a short while for these newly certified persons; the answer a simple one: fluff. A person who loaded a software package on a few people's desktops at work was now a Desktop Support Specialist. If a person had sat at a computer that just happened to share a spreadsheet, they were suddenly a Network or Database Administrator. The gateway was once again opened. Human Resources were told to hire candidates that met X, Y and Z requirements, and they did.

In order to compete with the newly certified, existing IT professionals had to expand on their resumes. The logic was simple, if installing a software product made someone a Desktop Support Specialist, then certainly there were some areas that could be expanded upon with a more experienced resume. "Fluffing" a resume became such common practice that it was expected, and Human Resources was told to look for not only X, Y and Z but also A, B and C; knowing full well that at least part of the resume was fluff. If the applicant could bend the truth, the company could bend the requirements. Asking for two years experience on a product that was one year old was all too common.

The Interview

It became apparent to some companies that Human Resources could not properly handle the sorting of job applicants for a field they knew nothing about. By way of solution, technical interviews were made into a standard hiring practice. The HR departments weed through the fluff-filled resumes and pick out the applicants that meet the minimum requirements. Those resumes are in turn handed over to a technical manager or department head that again weeds out a few of the obviously under-qualified candidates. A senior IT professional then interviews the candidates that are left and provides feedback on technical knowledge to HR and the IT manager.

This would seem like an ideal hiring environment for the company, but one problem still remains. As I mentioned earlier, requiring experience along with the certification had two problems, the first being "fluff". The second problem is all those IT professionals that came before. They are still out there, people who got in by waving a certificate in the air and not knowing a thing. If they are still in the industry then either they have actually learned how to support a computer system or they have learned to hide their lack of skill.

A problem with technical interviews can arise both when the interviewer lacks a true IT skill set and, unfortunately, when they have the expertise. Since the recent fall of the Dot Com industry, IT professionals have become increasingly more insecure. As a general rule most of us have

always been a little insecure due to working in an environment that changes every day. It is this insecurity that poses the largest problem during the technical interview.

The senior IT member who performs the interview is given a very difficult task, on the one hand they must find a person who will perform the job well enough to not make them look bad for giving their recommendation. On the other hand they do not want someone who will grossly outshine them or, at the far end of the spectrum, reveal their incompetence. This makes going into a technical interview a difficult chore at best. You have no way of knowing who will be sitting across the desk, whether they are secure and are grilling you because they want someone competent, or if they want to make certain you will not outshine them.

The Solution

Companies have tried various solutions to meet the needs of an ever-changing world of Information Technology. Some have gone back to the days of requiring a college degree while others have discarded the need for a certification entirely and seek only on-the-job experience. There is no easy solution to the mess certifications have gotten us into, but there is a good starting point.

Technical Interviews need to be left to the IT managers (and above), people who do not need to fear replacement by the person they hire. In turn the Information Technology managers need to gain more knowledge of the job their employees are performing to accurately determine competency level and not just judge by “years on the job.” Employees and job candidates need to stay up to date with technology, to know every detail of our job and to fully research the jobs we are going after and not just submit a resume via a headhunter.

The field of business we are in is nothing like any before. Information Technologies cannot be looked at under a standard business model, but instead needs to have its own set of guidelines and rules to work from. Until the industry figures out that it is different and needs to think differently, certifications will continue to kill the IT profession and we all will be slowly marching towards those icy cliffs overlooking an ocean of silicone and fiber.