A Global Knowledge Special Report

15 Most Popular IT and Business Certifications for 2014
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Introduction

We learn a lot from our annual IT Skills and Salary Survey—the top-paying certifications, current in-demand skills, and the impact of training on salaries, for example. We also learn which certifications are most popular among today’s IT and business professionals.

In this report, I’ve reviewed the 15 most popular certifications according to our more than 12,000 North American respondents. For each certification, you’ll find a brief description, the average salary, and some insight into why it is popular.

Our survey covered a lot of ground (literally), so remember that there will be variations based on where you work, your years of experience, and the type of company you work for (government, nonprofit, etc.).

This year, we had a tie for third place, which means I’ve listed two number threes. Don’t panic when you see the last number in my list is 14; you were most definitely not shorted a certification.

1. ITIL v3 Foundation

Held by 1,375 respondents, ITIL® v3 Foundation certification brings in an average annual salary of $97,682.

Created by England’s government in the 1980s to standardize IT management, ITIL is a set of best practices for aligning the services IT provides with the needs of the organization. It is broad based, covering everything from availability and capacity management to change and incident management, in addition to application and IT operations management.

Over the last 30 years, ITIL has become the most widely used framework for IT management in the world. The entry-level ITIL Foundation certification provides a comprehensive understanding of the IT lifecycle and the concepts and terminology surrounding it. That’s part of why it’s so popular.

IT project management is a very broad discipline, and as IT has gotten involved in more areas of corporations, governments, etc., the need for IT and the business to work together has become very important. Also increasing in importance is the need to plan IT project updates, releases, etc., so as not to disrupt the business.

2. CompTIA A+

Coming in a close second with 1,356 respondents, CompTIA A+ certification brings in an average salary of $73,956.

The vendor-neutral A+ certification is the standard for entry-level computer technicians. It has been available since 1993, with more than 800,000 people earning this certification over the last two decades. This is reason enough for its popularity.
For many years, A+ certification didn’t expire, so as people grew in their IT careers, though they gained additional certifications and areas of expertise, they still held the A+ they started with, meaning more and more certified people every year. This changed January 1, 2011, with everyone certified on or after that date required to recertify every three years.

Recertification is accomplished by passing the current version of the A+ exam—or a more advanced certification, such as Server+—or by demonstrating that you’re keeping your A+ skills up to date by attending relevant industry conferences, taking training or related college courses, or utilizing the skills in a work-related project.

Even with the new recertification requirements, A+ is still the entry-level certification for most people in IT, no matter how they specialize later in their careers.

**3A. CCNA R&S: Cisco Certified Network Associate Routing and Switching**

With an average salary of $81,308, CCNA R&S certification tied for number 3 with 969 respondents.

The CCNA R&S was formerly known simply as CCNA certification, with routing and switching implied, but as Cisco broadened into more areas, they added other types of CCNAs, including Data Center, Security, Service Provider, Service Provider Operations, Video, Voice, and Wireless.

Before Cisco created the entry-level Cisco Certified Entry Networking Technician (CCENT) certification, CCNA R&S was their entry-level certification. Now CCNA is the next step up. Those with CCNA R&S certification can install, configure, use, and troubleshoot medium-sized networks, including the routers and switches necessary to connect them.

CCNA certification has been around since 1998, with approximately 100,000 people earning the certification every year. Similarly to the A+ certification, this certification is often seen as a stepping stone to higher certifications (along with greater pay and responsibility) in the networking world. Today, many networking engineers start with the Network+ certification described later in this report.

**3B. MCSE: Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer / Microsoft Certified Solutions Expert**

This certification tied for number 3, with 588 respondents who didn’t list a related product version and 381 respondents who listed 2003 as their MCSE version. We’ve combined them here, as presumably some who didn’t list a version were at least 2003, bringing the total number of MCSEs to 969 and their average salaries of $95,505 (unnamed version) and $94,922 (2003) to a weighted average of $95,276.

The Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer certification is no longer attainable and was replaced by the Microsoft Certified Solutions Expert. The Engineer certification was valid for Windows NT 3.51 through Windows 2003, and the new Expert certification is for Windows 2012, though there is an upgrade path if you are currently MCSA or MCITP on Windows 2008. There is no direct upgrade path from the old MCSE to the new MCSE.

Though the MCSE changed over the years, it was primarily designed for system administrators for Windows, SQL, Exchange, etc. The new MCSE is available for various disciplines that all start with Windows 2012 knowledge and then layer on a specialty area, including Server Infrastructure, Desktop Infrastructure, SharePoint, communications (Lync), Messaging (Exchange), Business Intelligence and Data Platform (various facets of SQL), and Private Cloud (System Center). In addition, the old MCSE never expired, while the new MCSE requires recertification after three years.

This certification is popular because it has been around for many years, and it demonstrates a fairly broad knowledge of Microsoft technologies, even if some are from a decade ago.
4. CompTIA Network+
This certification ranked number 4 with 953 respondents and an average salary of $74,644.

Introduced in 1999, the Network+ certification is designed to be the next step after earning A+ and validates basic understanding of vendor-neutral networking standards and protocols and network hardware and software and a conceptual understanding of the OSI reference model, LANs, and WANs. It is typically seen as the precursor to vendor certifications, such as those from Citrix or Microsoft.

For many years, Network+ didn’t expire, so no matter how much people grew in their IT careers, they still held Network+. As with the A+ certification, this changed January 1, 2011, with everyone certified on or after that date required to recertify every three years. Also, similar to A+ certification, recertification is accomplished by passing the current version of the Network+ exam or a more advanced certification exam, such as Security+, or by demonstrating that you’re keeping your Network+ skills up to date by attending relevant industry conferences, taking training or related college courses, or utilizing the skills in a work-related project.

5. MCP: Microsoft Certified Professional
With 912 respondents, MCP certification if the fifth most popular and has an average salary of $84,123.

The MCP credential is granted when you pass your first Microsoft exam, so all higher certifications include MCP. That means while there are a lot of MCP-certified respondents, there are also many areas that they can be certified in and many salary levels. Since MCP applies to any Microsoft certification, from Office Specialist to Hyper-V or Exchange Administrator, there are more than two million MCPs worldwide.

MCP’s popularity is because it has been around for a long time, lasts forever, and is foundational to any other Microsoft certification.

6. CompTIA Security+
Ranked number 6 with 705 respondents, another CompTIA certification, Security+, brings in an average salary of $84,420.

Security+ certification was introduced in 2002 to address the need for IT professionals to have greater knowledge of security issues, including risk identification and analysis, disaster recovery, threat analysis, and other business-related challenges, as well as technical topics, such as identity management and its relationship to access control, cryptography, and data, application, and host security issues.

As with the other CompTIA certifications mentioned, for many years Security+ didn’t expire. This changed January 1, 2011, with recertification required every three years. Security+ recertification is accomplished by passing the current version of the Security+ exam or a more advanced certification exam, such as CompTIA Advanced Security Practitioner (CASP), or by demonstrating that you’re keeping your Security+ skills up to date by attending relevant industry conferences, taking training or related college courses, or utilizing the skills in a work-related project.

7. PMP®: Project Management Professional
With 625 respondents, PMP certification ranked number 7. Its average salary of $108,525 makes this the highest-paying certification on this list.

The PMP certification was created and is administered by the Project Management Institute (PMI®), and it is the most recognized project management certification available. There are more than half a million active PMPs in 193 countries worldwide. The PMP exam tests five areas relating to the lifecycle of a project: initiating, planning,
executing, monitoring and controlling, and closing. The PMP certification is for running any kind of project, and it is not specialized into sub types, such as manufacturing, construction, or IT. To become certified, individuals must have 35 hours of PMP-related training along with 7,500 hours of project management experience (if they have less than a bachelor’s degree) or 4,500 hours of project management experience with a bachelor’s or higher. PMP certification requires years of planning and effort.

This certification is popular because project management is needed in many fields, including IT, and it has been around since 1984—longer than all other certifications on this list. Earning this certification can be a great way to move from a technical track into a management track and usually brings more money as well.

8. MCSA: Microsoft Certified Systems Administrator
MCSA is the eighth most popular certification, with 305 respondents who didn’t list a related product version and 271 respondents who listed 2008 as their MCSA version. We’ve combined them here, as presumably some who didn’t list a version were at least 2008, bringing the total number of MCSAs to 576 and their average salary of $87,852 (unnamed version) and $85,350 (2008) to a weighted average of $86,675.

Designed to certify a candidate’s ability to handle basic system administration duties around Windows Server, this version of the MCSA was a stepping stone to the old MCSE certification (See 3B.). It was replaced with the MCITP, which has since been replaced with a new MCSA, Microsoft Certified Solutions Associate. The new MCSA is available for server operating systems (Windows 2008 and 2012), desktop operating systems (Windows 7 and 8), databases (SQL 2008 and 2012), and Office 365.

The early version of MCSA is popular because it does not expire and designates basic and broad knowledge of Microsoft technologies.

9. CCA: Citrix Certified Administrator for Citrix XenApp
Ranking ninth with 408 respondents, CCA for Citrix XenApp brings in an average salary of $89,767.

The CCA for Citrix XenApp exam comes in several versions relating to Citrix XenApp 5 or 6 and is designed to validate the ability to install, support, administer, and troubleshoot a Citrix XenApp environment running on Windows (2003 or later, depending on the certification earned).

Citrix XenApp allows an application to run on a central server and display on a remote device (laptop, tablet, etc.). Though it has had various names, XenApp has been around for many years and was an early, simple way to run an application remotely over a low bandwidth connection. As bandwidth has increased around the world, other solutions such as Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) have become available, cutting into the market share of XenApp. It is still a popular certification and platform—as evidenced by its showing in this list—as people want centralized application control, centralized data storage, and good performance over a wide variety of connection types and devices.

10. VCP-DCV: VMware Certified Professional – Data Center Virtualization
Coming in at number 10 with 344 respondents, VCP-DCV certification brings in an average salary of $94,515.

The VCP-DCV was originally simply the VCP, but as virtualization evolved, specialization became necessary, so VMware created several types of VCPs. VCP designations do not expire, but they do include a vSphere version designation, such as VCP5-DCV. The VCP-DCV validates the ability to install, configure, manage, and scale out VMware vSphere environments. You can follow VCP certifications with VMware Certified Advanced Professional (VCAP) certification in either administration (VCAP-DCA) or design (VCAP-DCD) as well as the top-tier VMware Certified Design Expert (VCDX).
Virtualization is a growing field, and the need for administrators and architects is growing almost daily. The VCP-DCV exam was launched in 2003, and there are more than 100,000 VCPs. Helping its popularity is the demand for those with expertise in the world’s most popular virtualization platform.

11. MCITP: Microsoft Certified IT Professional
MCITP certification ranked number 11 with 301 respondents and brings in an average salary of $87,378.

MCITP is available in many types—11 in all, including Office 365, Windows Client, Windows Server, SQL, Exchange, and SharePoint). This particular response did not designate type.

This certification is popular, because it can be earned by so many different types of administrators and has been around for several years.

Though the MCITP is a current certification in most cases, most of the exams will be retired by July 31, 2014, as Microsoft Certified Solutions Expert (MCSE) certifications replace MCITPs. There is no real point in earning this certification unless you have almost completed the requirements. Even then, consider taking the upgrade exams to the new MCSE.

12. CCNP: Cisco Certified Network Professional
Coming in at number 12 with 294 respondents, CCNP certification brings in an average salary of $90,833.

CCNP certification is a level above CCNA and two levels above the CCENT (See 13.). It is available in several specialties, including routing and switching, security, voice, and wireless. CCNP certification designates an advanced level of knowledge common among senior networking professionals. Achieving it requires passing several exams, showing a breadth and depth of understanding in the individual’s chosen area.

CCNP certification is popular because Cisco is a popular networking platform, and it is a great way to differentiate yourself beyond a CCNA. It can be a great way to move up the ladder on the technical track and, with appropriate other training and skills, may be a tipping point to switching over to a management track (or at least more of a management role), which would also yield a better paycheck.

13. CCENT: Cisco Certified Entry Networking Technician
CCENT certification ranked number 13 with 292 respondents and brings in an average salary of $71,482, the lowest on this list.

The entry-level CCENT is designed to provide the fundamental knowledge needed to begin a career in networking and is a stepping stone to earning a CCNA R&S. CCENT is valid for three years and designates the ability to install, manage, and troubleshoot simple networks, such as at a branch office, including basic security configuration. CCENTs also have a basic understand of both wireless and wired networks, LAN and WAN technologies, and the basics of routing and switching.

CCENT certification is popular because it is foundational for any higher certifications from Cisco, and earning a higher-level certification will automatically renew the CCENT for another three years. Many people aspire to a career in networking, and Cisco is one of the largest players in networking, which leads to many CCENT-certified individuals.
14. MCTS: Windows 7, Configuration (Microsoft Certified Technology Specialist)

Our final certification in the list had 251 respondents and brings in an average salary of $78,992.

MCTS certification is designed to validate the ability to complete the following Windows 7 tasks:

- Install, including upgrades, migrations, and large scale deployments
- Set up and configure related hardware devices, including networking
- Back up and restore the operating system and data
- Configure security and remote access

Though MCTS: Windows 7, Configuration is a current certification and does not currently have an exam expiration date, it has been replaced by the newer Microsoft Certified Solutions Associate. The exam required to earn this certification (70-680) is the same exam that now gives you the MCSA.

This certification is popular because Windows 7 is a popular operating system and, with Windows XP set to go EOL in April 2014, many organizations are scrambling to upgrade all of their Windows XP systems to Windows 7 or later. With the huge user interface changes in Windows 8 and later, many companies have decided to stay with Windows 7 for now.

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About the Author

John Hales, VCP, VCP-DT, VCAP-DCA, VCI, is a VMware instructor at Global Knowledge, teaching most of the vSphere classes that Global Knowledge offers, including the View classes. John is also the author of many books, including involved technical books from Sybex, exam preparation books, and many quick reference guides from BarCharts, in addition to custom courseware for individual customers. His latest book on vSphere is entitled Administering vSphere 5: Planning, Implementing and Troubleshooting. John has various certifications, including the VMware VCA-DCV, VCA-DT, VCA-Cloud, VCP, VCP-DT, VCAP-DCA, VCI, and VCI Level 2; the Microsoft MCSE, MCDBA, MOUS, and MCT; the EMC Storage Administrator (EMCSA); and the CompTIA A+, Network+, and CTT+. John lives with his wife and children in Sunrise, FL.