

Column: From Editor
Figures: NONE
File for Companion Disk: None

Certification: Should you care?

Whil Hentzen

Here's a trick question: If you were interviewing candidates for a development job, and you had to choose between someone with 15 years of experience and absolutely no credentials, and a 25 year old with a year of experience and six certifications, who would you hire?

Witness these messages I've received over the past couple of months.

"I wonder what the VFP 6 exam will be like. I laughed out loud when the Visual FoxPro 3.0 exam came out – only two questions out of a hundred or more had 'visuals' along with the question – and they both showed screen shots of the Menu Builder – the one part of **Visual** FoxPro that (a) hadn't changed a bit from 2.x to 3.0 and (b) was probably the least 'visual' tool in all of VFP. What were the test designers thinking of?"

"I took the VB 5.0 exam on a lark last year when my free coupons ran out. Didn't study at all. Passed 5 of the 8 sections with 100%, never heard of a dynaset, and just missed passing.

"I had a voucher for a free exam that expired shortly, and since the VFP test wasn't out yet, I decided to take the VB test. Of course, I waited until the weekend before (the test was Monday), and you know the rest. Well, except the result of the test. I scored 850+ out of 1000, where 714 is required to pass. So I went from a regular guy who's never developed a VB application to a MS Certified VB6 Developer who's never developed a VB application.

Obviously, there's a danger with certifications. First of all, of course, is that certification only measures what's on the test – and, thus, your ability to take a test. You all know some people who weren't all that smart, but got through school because they were really good at taking tests. And there were of course those for which the opposite applied. <s>

Second, a test doesn't necessarily measure what the tool is actually used for in the real world, just what the developer of the test thinks should be on the test. Microsoft has often tilted their tests toward their view of what they want their tool to be used for – never mind the current work-a-day world where you have to deliver apps for customers.

Third, it doesn't consider what you know about developing applications. I've found it ironic to have the titles for the various certifications include the word "Developer" – because a developer's skill set must include a wide range of abilities that don't have anything to do with syntax and hands-on-keyboarding. You could ace every test offered by Microsoft and Oracle combined, and still not be able to normalize your way out of a paper bag or write a specification longer than a half of a sheet of paper.

It's much like learning to drive a nail with a hammer, and slicing up some wood with a saw. Just because you're certified with a hammer and saw doesn't mean you're qualified to build a house, does it? But it *does* mean that you can distinguish between the two, and you have a basic idea of what each is used for.

So, if you're a developer, understand what you're going to get out of becoming certified. You'll get a foundation of knowledge and some understand of the breadth of the product – as Microsoft's test creators view it – but it doesn't mean you're an expert. View certification, as one of my friends put it, "as a driver's learning permit. You've learned enough the read the manuals, and have some idea of what Microsoft thinks their tool is used for, but now you need to go learn how to really use it.

If you're a development firm, certification is a marketing tool you can use with potential customers. You can explain that your developers have a consistent footing in terms of foundation knowledge, instead of happenstance knowledge picked up randomly here and there. It means that your firm cares enough about the education of their developers that you were willing to foot the bill for the certifications, whatever that means in your particular situation – whether you paid for exams, gave employees time off, or whatever. And it means that you've got a never-ending supply of CDs, newsletters, magazines, and other information from Microsoft - so you're well informed and are staying on the leading edge of the learning curve.

If you're an employer or hiring a development firm, the next developer or shop that comes in with a bunch of certifications is worth looking at, because it means they had enough initiative to get certified, but it doesn't mean you can turn off your judgment meter. You still need to evaluate the developer as you

would any other potential candidate. Use certification credentials as a tie-breaker between two otherwise equal candidates.

And the answer to my trick question? “You don’t have enough information to make a decision.” You can’t let a resume do your thinking for you, and you need to understand what certification means, and doesn’t mean.