Certified for Success

Do certifications spell success in the ICT sector, or are employers looking for more? And which mix of certifications offers the best chance for success? By Piers Ford

Qualifications are central to the network professional's life. Achieving the highest standards in industry certification and keeping them topped up is a proven way to boost value and earning potential in a market where skills are often at a premium – particularly at the high end.

To a great extent, desirable qualifications in the Middle East are dominated and driven by vendors, who will usually only deal with partners who commit to their education programmes. At the same time, IT companies are increasingly required to show that their staff have the skills to deliver services in order to become accredited suppliers.

So here, as in the rest of the world, if you are a Cisco Certified Network Professional (CCNP), a Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer (MCSE) or a Juniper Networks Certified Internet Associate (JNCIA), you have a fast track to the shortlist when it comes to applying for your next job or promotion.

"CCNP and MCSE qualifications are regarded as highly valuable in the Middle East as they are from global companies which are recognised anywhere and have the same processes worldwide," says Charlie Sell, technology manager at specialist recruiter Arrows Group.

"Qualifications like A+ or Network+ [the Computing Technology Industry Association's comprehensive, vendor-neutral certificates] are more Western-centric so not as relevant to the Middle Eastern market.

"This area of the world is heavily contract-based as there is so much work that needs to be completed quickly, so many contractors are brought in from the West to set up large networks and infrastructure. This means that they need strong knowledge of the processes, and qualifications prove that: hiring people with these qualifications allows companies to 'hire blind' – without meeting the candidates – as the qualification shows that they'll be competent."

Alex Shelton, head of telecoms

recruitment, Middle East, at UAE consultancy SNS, agrees that CCNP is the hottest networking qualification in the region.

"In networking more than in any other area of ICT, qualifications are essential, a benchmark of how good a candidate is, and employers are very specific about the qualifications they want," Shelton says.

"For example, if they are looking for someone with CCNP, then they will only consider candidates who have that certification on their CV. No-one else will do. However, employers also realise the importance of experience: a qualification in isolation is not enough."

This point certainly rings true with one anonymous, jaundiced senior IT consultant, who says that whenever anyone gets too enthusiastic or insistent about qualifications, he tells them to look down on the streets of Dubai. Thousands of people clearly have a driving qualification – otherwise they wouldn't be on the road. But how many of them actually have the skills to drive? When it comes to networking, he says he always looks at the experience rather than the qualification, because it's so much harder to replicate than a certificate; a seasoned IT manager will always do due diligence on candidates' claimed qualifications.

"In a region where technical skills in the IT sector are hard to find, I believe a number of fundamental soft skills are often highly-valued – sometimes, more so than with a candidate who may have a list of technical experience that matches what the company asks for in its job description, but does not have the capacity to 'think outside the box'," says Khaled Hawas, head of technology service and delivery at outsourcing company eHosting DataFort.

"For candidates who are already equipped with
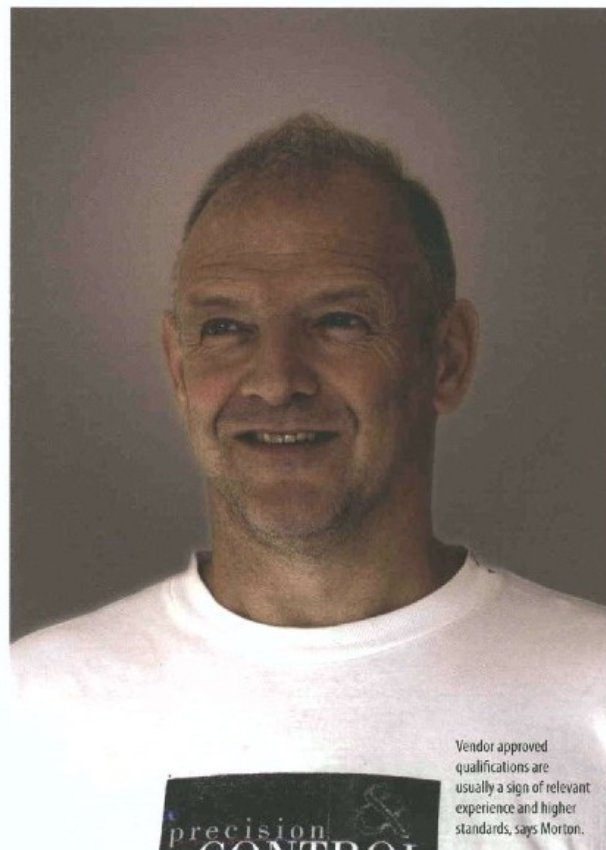
technical qualifications and are geared to move their way up the organisation's ladder, it is important that they have the ability to apply technological experience and knowledge into a business application."

Hawas agrees with the strong reputation of Cisco and Microsoft's certifications, but says more generic qualifications are also highly relevant. Employers are looking for candidates who are able to wear the hats of the IT nerd and the business-savvy entrepreneur, he says.

"To put it into practice, they need to understand how networks are configured, how computers can be debugged, and how servers can be synced up with new

mobile technology on the one hand, while being able to provide sound advice to their team on new application trends with the other," he says.

Hawas says there are four ideal qualifications that will prepare candidate for this brave new world: CCIE (Cisco Certified Internetwork Expert, the vendor's highest level of certification); MCITP (Microsoft Certified IT Professional, which offers complete expertise in the Windows environment); a professional Project Management certification, which will allow them to perform risk management and focus on customer satisfaction as much as technical expertise; and VCP (VMware Certified Professional), which offers lab

Vendor approved qualifications are usually a sign of relevant experience and higher standards, says Morton.

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Experience counts, but most employers have specific certification requests for networking vacancies, says Shelton.

recruiting internationally."

Not surprisingly, the local market in qualifications is booming. Rob Morton, manager of support services at solutions provider Axenttech, says it's crucial for candidates to choose their training centre carefully, and for employers to check out where a qualification has actually come from. He's been working in the region for more than 20 years and has seen the certification landscape alter considerably during that time.

"You could easily think that one from a particular college or country was better than another, so you have to do your research," he says.

"Like all companies, we need a variety of skill levels, and the qualifications I seek tend to be more vendor-orientated, although we talk a lot more about PM now, and a certification in that area is usually the result of thousands of hours of experience – it puts a high stress on real life experience. Qualification is often a condition of doing business with vendors in any case. I need to assess the candidate's ability to do the job and we're unlikely to get into trouble if they have a vendor certification.

"That said, there are a lot of courses out here, and I only use those that are mentioned or approved by the product vendors themselves. Using local training facilities is the only cost-effective option."

Morton says it's important for employers to encourage staff to continue working for qualifications. It goes hand-in-hand with any training programme, he suggests. And recruitment experts agree that employers in the region should be working on this, despite local conditions which can favour a transient work force.

"If a candidate has the right

attitude and capacity to develop themselves in a technological environment that is constantly evolving, technical skills can always be acquired through training courses that organisations offer, should they value the professional growth of their staff," says Hawas at eHosting DataFort.

He suggests that training should be incorporated into every organisation's annual budget, so that employees can deliver projects more efficiently and successfully.

"Putting a permanent employee through a course to get a qualification is a great attraction tool and way to take on people at a junior level, and build a skilled workforce," says Charlie Sell at Arrows Group.

"But it isn't common due to the large amount of contracting and the need for people to hit the ground running to get the work completed fast. However, this is something that employers in the Middle East should be considering in their long-term plans."

It is also something that should be regularly assessed to make sure that staff are earning qualifications that have a positive impact on the business's progress as well as improving the employee's skills set. Job candidates with the highest CCIE or JNCIE (Juniper Networks Certified Internet Expert) qualifications are very rare, according to SNS's Shelton.

"Generally speaking, professionals will look to diversify and gain new qualifications fairly early on in their career," he says. "The higher the qualification you hold, the more difficult it is to change. The better employers in the region are fully supportive of helping their staff expand their skills and will often cover the costs of the examinations.

"As for assessing the value of putting an employee through a suitable qualification course, employers need to look at whether the employee is using their newly acquired qualification to deliver on a project. I would advise assigning a more senior member of staff to monitor their progress."

experience in preparation for a future likely to be strongly focused on virtualisation.

"Having a balance of both experience and technical expertise would make the ideal candidate since, without a basic understanding of technology,

candidates can then apply to real-life scenarios."

This need for combined experience and certification is one of the main reasons for the networking skills shortage in the Gulf, according to some experts.

"Generally, companies in

> There are four ideal qualifications that will prepare candidates: CCIE, MCITP, a professional project management certification and VCP for virtualisation

it would be difficult to grasp concepts of how things work together," he says.

"This would hinder their ability to architect solutions or trouble-shoot. Similarly, if they don't have industry experience, it could be a challenge to look at the bigger picture and see how their knowledge can ensure that technology is adding value to the business's profitability. The formula is to have theory that

the Middle East look to recruit mid-level positions from within the region," says Shelton at SNS. "The issue with this is that often, candidates have the right qualification but not necessarily sufficient experience in applying that qualification in a real world environment. And if they can't find the person they are looking for within the region, organisations here will tend to keep the job open rather than cover the costs of