

# Time Tips: How to Fit Certification into Your Schedule

MATT MCGRATH

**"To achieve great things, two things are needed: a plan and not quite enough time."**

— Leonard Bernstein, Conductor

In my career as an education consultant, I have witnessed thousands of candidates attempt to obtain dozens of IT certifications. Some were successful, others were not.

I have seen a former salesman pass five difficult Microsoft exams in one week. I also have witnessed an experienced hardware engineer take four years to pass his A+ Hardware Exam.

What separates these two individual experiences has little to do with aptitude, training or real-world skills. It has everything to do with how they managed their time.

Despite the relatively good economic times the IT sector has enjoyed recently, ever-increasing workloads and never-ending project deadlines have made it tempting to put certification on the back burner. Don't. Although times are good now, we all remember the dot-com collapse just six short years ago.

In times of economic upheaval, it is those who possess the most up-to-date skills and certifications who will be able to withstand change and experience continued career growth and advancement.

Finding the time to fit certification into your schedule involves changing your priorities, making a plan and then sticking to it. The following are some time management tips that will help streamline your efforts, getting you certified in the least amount of time possible.

## **Eliminate "Time Wasters" at the Office**

Time management guru Brian Tracy estimates 80 percent of the value of what each of us does each day is contained in only 20 percent of what we actually do — most people person spend 80 percent of their workday on trivial tasks that really do not contribute to their vital role within the company.

Examples are reading nonessential e-mails, making nonwork-related phone calls, meetings that stray off-topic and chitchat. Keep a time log at work and record everything you do throughout an average workday. You will be amazed how much time is wasted, time that could be spent studying for your certification exam.

Here are some ways to deal with the four biggest office time wasters:

- **E-mail:** Dedicate 30 minutes each day (the end of the business day works best) for responding to nonessential e-mails — those that do not pertain to your core business function. Even better, come in on Saturday for an hour to respond to such e-mails or don't respond at all.
- **Meetings:** If you can get away with it, don't go. But if you must, keep the meeting on target. If it starts to drift aimlessly, excuse yourself by saying you must tend to a client, go to the bathroom, etc. Almost 100 percent of the time, nobody will even notice you are gone.





- **Uninvited visits from co-workers:** If the guy in the next cube stops by to gossip about celebrities, simply stand up and explain that you were just leaving. The guy will probably drift on to the next cube to waste someone else's time.
- **Unsolicited phone calls:** Similar to the previous time waster, tell the caller that you have an important call on hold. If your office phone has caller ID, even better. If the call is nonbusiness-related, simply do not answer the phone.

### Eliminate "Time Wasters" at Home

In an ideal working environment, your company should not mind if you study for certification exams at the office — assuming your work is done. But even though updating your skills ultimately benefits the company, some organizations don't see it this way and will frown on you using company time to study. If this is the case, you will need to study for certification exams outside the office. Finding the time after work at home will require you eliminate or at least scale down on the following time wasters:

- **Watching television:** The average TV in the United States is left on for seven hours a day. Limit yourself to just one show a week.
- **Talking on the phone:** Refer to rules on unsolicited phone calls above.
- **Video games:** A recent study by the Consumer Electronics Association found adults actually spend more time than teens playing video games (one-third of adult gamers spend 10 or more hours per week playing video games, compared with just 11 percent of teen gamers).
- **Lounging:** Although there is something to be said for relaxation, some of us take this to an extreme — from the second we get home from work till the time we go to bed, we lounge in a recliner. Meanwhile, technology is passing us by. If you must lounge, at least turn off the TV and read a study guide instead.

### Study in Blocks of Time

OK, you have freed up some time by eliminating a few of the time wasters described above. If you plan on getting certified in a reasonable time frame (before the technology becomes outdated), it is

essential to study during those blocks of time. There can be no interruptions.

Find a quiet place that is free from all outside distractions such as the library, a lab at a college or a training center. Make sure all the tools you will need (e.g., pen, paper, a computer, practice tests and study guides) are easily accessible. Turn off your cell phone. Make it a goal to study for two to three uninterrupted hours per day or evening.

### Set a Certification Deadline

Parkinson's Law tells us that your work always will expand to fill the time allotted to it. The reverse also holds true — your work will contract to be completed in the allotted time. Tell yourself that you will have your Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA) certification within two months and then actually write down everything you will need to do to accomplish this.

A good rule of thumb: For each hour you spend learning, you will need to spend an additional two hours studying for the certification exam.

Using CCNA as an example, you might want to spend 32 hours learning by taking an instructor-led class or studying online. You will want to spend another 70 hours or so studying notes from class, taking practice tests and using study guides before taking the exam.

It seems like a lot, but if you spend two weeks at night in a CCNA class, from 6 to 10 p.m., Monday through Thursday, that will get you your 32 hours of learning. Once the class is over, find another 18 hours a week to study, and after only 45 days, you will be ready for the exam. It's really not as difficult as it seems if you set a deadline, make a plan and stick to it.

### Enroll in a Boot Camp

If you have many years of experience in your IT field, and your company will allow you a couple of weeks off, the fastest way for you to achieve your certification goal is to enroll in a certification boot camp.

As the name implies, boot camps are short, accelerated certification programs that are designed for those IT professionals with substantial experience in their IT field. Certification candidates become immersed in the technology for one to three weeks on average. For example, a typical Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer (MCSE) boot camp will last



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two weeks. Through a variety of teaching methods, students will learn, study and actually take the certification exams during the boot camp.

The advantages of a boot camp are obvious: They are short and have high exam-pass rates. In fact, many such training companies guarantee you will pass the exams.

The downside of boot camps is that they are not for the faint of heart — you will live and breathe the technology for long hours each day. They are also expensive, ranging from \$5,000 to \$20,000.

Additionally, you should be prepared to travel, as boot camps are becoming rarer, and your city might not have one. Most boot camps include food but do not provide airfare and lodging.

#### Get on the "Fast Track"

"Fast tracks" are kinder, gentler versions of boot camps. They take longer but still get you certified in a reasonable time frame. Typically, you do not need years of experience to enroll in a fast track. In fact, many such programs are designed for career changers — those who have limited or no technical skills and desire to obtain an entry-level IT job.

A fast track consists of a series of instructor-led or lab-based courses that teach certification candidates

the real-world skills to perform the job, as well as prepare them for their certification exams.

For example, whereas an MCSE boot camp might last only 14 days, a network administration fast track might last six months. There might be nine classes, each lasting a week (or about 40 hours).

Students are typically given one or two weeks off in between classes to give them time to study, take practice tests and take the exam from the previous class.

Fast tracks also can be pricey, but they typically give you everything that is actually necessary to achieve your certification objective, including:

- Classes
- Books
- Certification exam vouchers
- Study guides
- Practice tests
- Software



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As with boot camps, fast tracks usually guarantee you will pass your certification exams. Because fast tracks tend to cater to those new to the IT marketplace, they usually offer placement and career service assistance, as well.

#### **Invest in the Right Practice Tests**

Whatever method of study you employ to prepare for certification, I have found the No. 1 time saver and predictor of whether a certification candidate will pass the exams is finding a good-quality practice test.

Certification exams are tricky and often ask questions that are barely relevant to the real world. A good practice test will prepare you for those types of questions.

Practice tests can be found in abundance online, and some are free. The following are qualities you should look for in a practice test:

- **Testing conditions similar to the real exam:** If the real test is three hours long, the practice test should be too.
- **Questions similar to the real exam:** Not the same questions (this would be cheating). But I have seen some practice tests in which the questions were not at all similar to the questions on the real exam — it was like studying for a totally different exam.
- **Correct answers:** Many practice test vendors waste your time by making you look up the correct answers to questions that you missed. This can potentially take hours.

- **Explanation of why questions were missed:** This also saves you valuable study time.

- **Identification of weak areas:** Many practice tests grade the test but do not identify the areas you need to work on before taking it again. Find one that breaks down your results and identifies your strengths and weaknesses.

Don't waste a lot of time searching for the best practice tests — simply find co-workers or buddies who already possess the certification you are going for and ask which practice tests they would recommend. If you don't know anybody who has that certification, go to an online forum, such as CertMag's.

Make it a goal this year to get certified. Start by making a plan and setting a deadline. Choose a study method that sets aside blocks of time, free from interruptions and distractions.

If you can get time off of work and can afford it, consider a boot camp or fast track. And if you choose to self-study, make sure to choose study tools that will streamline your study process in the smallest amount of time, such as good practice tests.

Most important, do not wait — the time never is going to be just right. As Walt Disney said, "The way to get started is to stop talking and begin doing." 📌

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Matt McGrath is a senior education consultant with Centriq Foss Training Center, which is based in Kansas City, Mo. He can be reached at [mmcgrath@certmag.com](mailto:mmcgrath@certmag.com).