

Navigating the changes to the A+ certification requirements

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Abstract

CompTIA has made a significant change to the way it tests for its A+ certification. Instead of testing on software and hardware separately, CompTIA has combined these two areas into one test called "Essentials." Certification candidates then choose from one of three area specific tests: 220-602 (IT technician), 220-603 (remote support technician), or 220-604 (depot technician). We will discuss the changes to the structure and content of these tests.

Certifications

There are so many certifications floating around the technical world these days that it is hard to tell what all of the acronyms mean. A quick search of the internet turns up an alphabet soup of certifications to put behind your name. Each year brings a new list of the top ten certifications. In 2006 the top ten certifications, according to certification.about.com were the following:

1. Cisco CCNP
2. Cisco CCNA
3. Cisco CCIE
4. CompTIA Network+ & Microsoft MCSA
5. CompTIA A+ & Microsoft MCSE
6. Microsoft MCSD
7. CISSP
8. Microsoft MCP
9. PMP & Microsoft MCDBA
10. Cisco CCDA

You can see that Cisco, Microsoft and CompTIA lead the pack and have, in some combination, for the past few years. CompTIA's A+ certification has been on the list for years and is considered by many to be the most valuable entry level certification.

CompTIA A+

In the past, CompTIA had required an applicant to complete two tests, one focused on hardware and one on software. The last time the tests were updated was in 2003 when they changed the focus away from the Windows 9X family to the Windows NT family of operating systems. The 2003 version of the exam will be available until June 30, 2007.

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In October of 2006, CompTIA made another update to the test by combining the basic software and hardware components together to form one test call Essentials. A second, required test is more specialized. Candidates have the choice of taking #220-602 IT Technician, #220-603 Remote Support or #220-604 Depot Technician. “The changes to CompTIA A+ reflect the evolution of skills and job responsibilities for computer science and support personnel,” www.comptia.org. The resulting tests are the subject of this paper.

CompTIA A+ Essentials (#220-601)

The essentials test is taken by everyone. It is a combination of the old software and hardware tests. All of the tests include subject matter in the following 8 domains:

- Domain 1: Personal Computer Components
- Domain 2: Laptops and Portable Devices
- Domain 3: Operating Systems (Windows 200, XP Professional, Home and Media Center)
- Domain 4: Printers and Scanners
- Domain 5: Networks
- Domain 6: Security
- Domain 7: Safety and Environmental Issues
- Domain 8: Professionalism and Communication

The last domain has been added as an acknowledgement that many of the holders of the certificate are working in user support areas and have a good deal of contact with the public. The objectives of Domain 8 are:

- 8.1 Use good communications skills, including listening and tact/discretion, when communicating with customers and colleagues.
- 8.2 Use job-related professional behavior including privacy, confidentiality and respect for the customer and customers’ property (e.g., telephone, computer)

CompTIA has made a conscious effort to put a greater emphasis on soft skills and security and safety issues in the essentials portion of the exam. Applicants have 90 minutes to complete the 100 questions that make up the essentials test. A score of 675 is required to pass the exam.

IT Technician (#220-602)

According to the CompTIA , the 220-602 exam is targeted for individuals who work or intend to work in a mobile or corporate technical environment with a high level of face-to-face client interaction. www.comptia.org Job titles associated with this exam include service technician, IT technician, computer technician, field pc technician and it administrator. Candidates are tested in all seven domains. Examples of the objectives for this exam are as follows:

- Domain 1: Install, configure, optimize and upgrade personal computer components
- Domain 2: Identify fundamental principles of using laptops and portable devices
- Domain 3: Identify the fundamental principles of operating systems
- Domain 4: Identify tools and diagnostic procedures to troubleshoot printers and scanners
- Domain 5: Install, configure, optimize and upgrade networks

Domain 6: Perform preventative maintenance for security

Domain 7: Use job-related professional behavior ... and respect for customer.

There are 90 questions on this test. A score of 700 is required to pass each of the three non-essentials tests.

Remote Support (#220-603)

The 220-603 exam is *targeted for individuals who work or intend to work in a remote-based work environment where client interaction, client training, operating system and connectivity issues are emphasized.* www.comptia.org Jobs associated with this exam include remote support technician, service desk technician, help desk technician and call center technician. There are six domains areas for this exam. Objectives for this exam include:

Domain 1: Perform preventative maintenance on personal computer components

Domain 2: Install, configure, optimize and upgrade operating systems

Domain 3: Identify the fundamental principles of printers and scanners

Domain 4: Identify the fundamental principles of networks

Domain 5: Install, configure, optimize and upgrade security

Domain 6: Use job-related professional behavior ... and respect for customer.

Depot Technician (#220-604)

The 220-604 exam is *targeted for individuals who work or intend to work in settings with limited customer interaction where hardware related activities are emphasized.* www.comptia.org Job titles associated with this exam are depot repair technician and bench technician. This test emphasizes computer repair and troubleshooting. Candidates are tested in 5 domain areas: Personal Computer Components, Laptops and Portable Devices, Printers and Scanners, Security, and Safety and Environmental Issues. Objectives include:

Domain 1: Install, configure, optimize and upgrade personal computer components

Domain 2: Install, configure, optimize and upgrade laptops and portable devices

Domain 3: Identify the fundamental principles of printers and scanners

Domain 4: Install hardware security

Domain 5: Identify potential hazards and proper safety procedures

Salaries

The *certification.about.com* site lists average salaries based on primary certifications. The following is a list of the 2006 top ten certifications and the salaries associated with them.

Cisco - CCNP: Salary: \$61,487

Cisco - CCNA: Salary: \$47,173

Cisco - CCIE: Salary: \$91,454

CompTIA - Network+: Salary: \$35,930 **Microsoft - MCSA:** Salary: \$34,428

CompTIA - A+: Salary: \$30,982 **Microsoft - MCSE:** Salary: \$72,955

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Microsoft - MCSD: Salary: \$66,398

CISSP: Salary: \$76,955

Microsoft - MCP: Salary: \$70,546

PMP: Salary: \$87,161

Cisco - CCDA: Salary: \$171,666

As you can see, there is good reason to acquire certification.

Acronyms

CompTIA has a six-page list of acronyms that appear in the exams covering the 2006 objectives. They encourage applicants to review the list and have a working knowledge of the list. There are some 300 acronyms ranging from AC to ZIP. Visit CompTIA's site at <http://certification.comptia.org/resources/objectives/comptiaackronyms.pdf> for the full experience.

Practice Tests

There are a large variety of sites that have practice tests and study guides to use for certification tests. A search for A+ practice tests gives pages and pages of sites advertising free demo tests. Most of these sites have some free study material, but want to sell you material that is *guaranteed* to get you a passing grade. We've gathered materials from several sites to use for our A+ student study groups. Below is a sample of questions we use in our group.

1. In Device Manager, the following symbol indicates that automatic settings were not used and resources have been manually assigned:
 - a. exclamation point
 - b. blue I **
 - c. green question mark
 - d. red X
2. The following is a method to keep your computer secure:
 - a. when traveling, turn your personal firewall off
 - b. don't use AV software
 - c. keep windows updates current **
 - d. set Microsoft internet explorer for minimal security
3. To control power using the BIOS, use the following menu from the CMOS setup:
 - a. DPMS
 - b. ACPI
 - c. APM
 - d. Power **
4. What is the maximum throughput speed for an 802.11b network:
 - a. up to 1 MBPS
 - b. up to 5 MBPS

- c. up to 7 MBPS
 - d. up to 11 MBPS **
5. In the following mode, the CPU processes 32 bits of data at one time:
- a. real mode
 - b. long mode
 - c. protected mode **
 - d. extended mode
6. The following recovery console command creates and deletes partitions on the hard drive:
- a. diskpart **
 - b. expand
 - c. fixboot
 - d. fixmbr

In conclusion, the changes made to the A+ certification will allow candidates to be more precise in the skills they need to master for the job they have or would like to apply for. As skill sets become more specialized, employers will be better able to gauge the expertise a potential employee has by the certificates they have acquired. This, in turn, will make a better fit of employee into position.

References

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