



Taking Learning and Skills Management into the Future

Microsoft Certification Evolves to Help Companies Generate Higher Returns on Skills and Technology

Microsoft Certified Partners for Learning Solutions (CPLS) build their companies on Microsoft Certification as they enable individual professionals and organizations to gain the best returns on their investments in skills and technologies. The experience of partners and customers confirms that certification continues to grow in value and that Microsoft is elevating certification and training standards across the industry by evolving its own certification program.

Two Microsoft CPLS and Microsoft Gold Certified Partners featured in this article, NetCom Information Technologies and SQLSoft+, have offered Microsoft training and certification for many years. Both companies have thrived through economically challenging times and continued to support the professional and business communities with high-quality learning experiences. As Microsoft continues to evolve its certification program, both NetCom and SQLSoft+ experience growing demand for Microsoft Certification, because individuals and companies realize the practical benefits of certification in terms of organizational productivity and professional resourcefulness.

NetCom: Generating Fast Growth from the Certification Business

Headquartered across from the Empire State Building in New York City, [NetCom Information Technologies](#) has been profitable for all 11 years it's been in business. Close to 110 employees work at the headquarters and in the company's 21 training locations, including both company-owned and shared locations, across the United States. This Microsoft CPLS and Microsoft Gold Certified Partner has served more than 90 percent of the Fortune 500 companies, developed relationships with more than 22,000 business customers, and supported approximately 50,000 individual professionals with training and certification. Although NetCom provides training and certification in support of almost 20 different technology providers, Microsoft technology training accounts for almost 40 percent of the company's revenue.

In 2007, NetCom received an innovation award from Microsoft. The company had created and put to practice an enterprise resource planning and customer relationship management (CRM) system tailored to the business needs of a training and certification provider. The system connects company operations, including sales, marketing, planning, and financials, in a streamlined workflow that makes it easier to control and direct the business. The system integrates with Microsoft SQL Server 2008 for advanced reporting and data analysis and with Microsoft Dynamics GP for financial management.



Microsoft Certification is a key component of NetCom's business model. The company delivers three types of training: On-site classes that leave it open to students where and when they want to take a certification exam; boot camps that offer intense training and exam preparation and end with the certification exam; and corporate training designed for, and closely tied to, an organization's evolving business needs. Russell Sarder, CEO and Chairman of NetCom, says, "In the five years since the inception of our boot camp offerings, demand has strongly increased. Today, a third of our revenue comes from boot camps and is on track to double during the next few years."

Sarder notes that feedback from the sales team regarding Microsoft Certification indicates growing interest. "We used to have to invest a stronger effort to promote certification, but recently, many individuals know they want it and that's how they start the conversation with us," he says. He believes there are several reasons for this trend. Human resources managers often tell NetCom that they search for certification credentials when they review resumes on online job boards; without the proper certification, a candidate's visibility is minimal. Also, Microsoft Certification clearly validates a person's claim to a certain level of expertise that might otherwise be doubtful, especially when new technologies are involved.

NetCom draws a straight line between certification and productivity in the workplace. "Based on our own and our clients' experience, certification boosts productivity. Certified professionals tend to make proactive use of their proven abilities," comments Sarder. "They also operate from a different mindset, taking ownership of their responsibilities in a more direct way."

In NetCom's experience, the changes that Microsoft has made to the certification program in recent years, such as the introduction of Microsoft Certified IT Professional certifications, have made

certification more practical and meaningful for professionals and their employers. Sarder also points out that the exams themselves have become more stringent and closely replicate real-life work situations that candidates would face, which means they validate actual, practical experience as opposed to theoretical learning. As Sarder explains, "Microsoft is listening to the partner and customer community and always enhancing certification to make it more valuable. That also raises the quality bar for certification across the industry, which in turn boosts interest in certification."

When NetCom representatives discuss Microsoft Certification with individuals, they sometimes point out that, given frequent technology innovations, most course content becomes obsolete in approximately two years. If students graduate from a university's computer science program, much of what they learned when they started may be outdated. Certification, which is closely tied to products and technologies, is a more effective way to demonstrate skills to an employer. The company's approach finds wide acceptance; NetCom facilitates Microsoft Certification for close to 2,500 persons every month. Just under 40 percent of NetCom's students achieve certification, many of them through the highly intense boot camp experience of several days with almost round-the-clock learning followed by the certification exam. Almost 40 percent of the NetCom boot camp certification graduates return for additional certifications, compared to approximately 30 percent of the professionals who obtain certification through the more traditional classroom courses and may take the exams weeks after the training. "Once individuals and their employers understand the practical value of Microsoft Certification, they want to ensure that it remains current with technological change," says Sarder.

Approximately 80 percent of NetCom's business comes from corporate clients and the rest comes from individuals who pay their own way. For professionals who want to gain more

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skills or obtain technical certification but are not able to make the investment, NetCom offers the [Sarder Scholarship Program](#). Every month, the company awards one person U.S.\$2,500 to be applied toward training and certification. Close to 1,000 people applied for scholarship funding during the last year, with most of them aiming for certification in such areas as Microsoft SQL Server, Microsoft SharePoint Server, Windows Server 2008, and the Microsoft .NET Framework.

NetCom is poised to realize further growth with Microsoft Certification programs. "Our client advisory board views Microsoft Certification very positively," adds Sarder. "The contributors understand how it translates into workplace productivity and appreciate that Microsoft has driven the entire industry to a more elevated standard of professional accreditation."

SQLSoft+: Extending the Value of Certification as Business Models and Technologies Change

Founded in 1988 and headquartered in Bellevue, Washington, [SQLSoft+](#) has evolved from a consulting company focused on Microsoft SQL Server to one of the leading providers of IT training, consulting, and skills management. With three training locations, the company mostly serves business clients in Washington, Oregon, Alaska, California, Hawaii, and Idaho.

SQLSoft+ generates new business through outbound marketing and sales initiatives, including monthly events. A large share of the company's business comes from repeat customers, who in many cases have relied on SQLSoft+ to help address their training and skills management needs for 20 or more years. The company, a CPLS and Microsoft Gold Certified Partner, is also a Microsoft vendor that provides training content and channel enablement materials to many Microsoft business groups. Steve Brugger, President and CEO of SQLSoft+, helped set directions for the Microsoft Learning Competency in three terms on the CPLS

advisory council. Many years ago, he also obtained certification as a Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer (MCSE) with the low Microsoft Certified Professional (MCP) number 127. By the time Microsoft revamped the certification program, MCP numbers were up in the tens of millions.

In the SQLSoft+ experience, the request for certification most often comes from individuals, less so their employers. The company tracks professionals through their careers with a CRM system, ensuring that they remain updated with regard to Microsoft Certification and new technologies. As Brugger explains, "Many customer businesses have a certain mindset regarding certification. They often need to see how it enables individuals and IT departments before they understand how valuable it can be."

Brugger points out that large enterprises often have more resources to commit to training and certification, or sometimes design their own certification programs. Smaller companies don't have the same means, and third-party training and certification are essential business enablers for them. "Human resources professionals in smaller companies may not always understand the technologies, but they understand that certification is meaningful, because they themselves may have certifications of their own in a different discipline," says Brugger. "Microsoft Certification becomes a critical distinction for potential employees reaching out to a new organization."

SQLSoft+ maintains Prometric testing centers on-site to help professionals make a smooth transition from the study courses to the certification exams. The company offers a portal, where people can list their certifications and review their own accomplishments compared to what other professionals in their industry have to offer. "Many of the smaller companies are looking for qualifications when they hire new people, but they are much less interested in keeping their current team



members' skills current and certified," comments Brugger. "We are often answering questions from business customers about Microsoft Certification and helping them understand how it translates into practical advantages for the organization."

Although research and anecdotal evidence shows that employees with certification stay longer in their jobs than those who are not certified, SQLSoft+ occasionally hears from employers who are concerned that certified employees may leave or demand higher salaries that the company might not be able to afford. As Brugger sees it, the evolution of the Microsoft Certification program is playing a major role in demonstrating and delivering the value of certification to more companies and more people within these organizations. "With Microsoft Office 2010, for example, skills and tasks that have traditionally been in the IT group are moving to larger populations of technology users," he explains. "As professionals in lines of business outside of the IT group build workflows or perform other assignments that they would, in the past, have relied on the IT group for, businesses are becoming increasingly interested in certification to help these employees be effective."

Brugger feels that Microsoft CPLS organizations have an opportunity to grow their business by bundling Microsoft Certification

offerings together with skills enablement and certification in such areas as project management or regulatory compliance to help businesses generate more value from their investments in people and technologies. Doing so might also help partners maintain a competitive advantage in competing with many other learning solutions providers, who can offer their services through the cloud and reach much larger numbers of professionals and companies than they could in the past. "Microsoft CPLS partners should also think about helping companies address their training, certification, and skills management needs at the executive level, in line with an organization's objectives," Brugger adds. "It's an area where many organizations are in need of support and welcome assistance."

Over time, SQLSoft+ may look to minimize the substantial costs of administering testing centers and providing certification exams, but Microsoft Certification will remain integral to the company's business model. Says Brugger, "Microsoft has nurtured certification to generate more tangible advantages in the way people thrive and companies succeed. My experience working with Microsoft Learning makes me confident that Microsoft Certification will continue to evolve and deepen to maintain alignment with the rapidly evolving roles we find in today's IT organizations."

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For more information about Microsoft Certification, go to www.microsoft.com/learning/en/us/certification/cert-overview.aspx or contact Amber Reed at amreed@microsoft.com.