

# Help Desk and Technical Support Certifications

By Ed Tittel

**THERE'S** a well-known dichotomy at work in the IT certification world when it comes to technical certification, and both help desk and tech support topics are no exception. This dichotomy breaks related certification credentials up into two major categories—namely, vendor-neutral credentials that usually concentrate on basic theory, principles, and best practices, and vendor-specific or—focused credentials that concentrate on specific tools, technologies or platforms. In this survey of available help desk and technical support credentials, the credentials we identified fall directly into one or the other of these two categories.

But there's another, less well understood dynamic at work in the certification world as well. This one divides up credentials on the basis of training, and hinges on whether or not the organization that sponsors the certification also offers (and even in some cases, requires candidates to attend) training on the subject matter that backs the certification up. Let's call this distinction training-motivated (for organizations that could seek to generate additional revenue from training potential certification candidates) versus training-neutral (for organizations that don't offer training to certification candidates, even though they may recommend partners or other providers who do provide such training).

Our survey turned up numerous credentials, as illustrated in FIGURE 1. For completeness, we've included links to the sponsor page for

FIGURE 1: HELP DESK & TECH SUPPORT CERTIFICATIONS

| Acronym | Name   | Sponsor       | Vstatus | Tstatus |
|---------|--|---------------|---------|---------|
| ACHDS   | Apple Certified Help Desk Specialist           | Apple         | VS      | TM      |
| None-1  | Technical Help Desk                            | Brainbench    | VN      | TN      |
| None-2  | Technical Help Desk MS                         | Brainbench    | VS      | TN      |
| CFST    | Certified Field Support Technician             | STI Knowledge | VN      | TM      |
| CHDD    | Certified Help Desk Director                   | STI Knowledge | VN      | TM      |
| CHDM    | Certified Help Desk Manager                    | STI Knowledge | VN      | TM      |
| CHDP    | Certified Help Desk Professional               | STI Knowledge | VN      | TM      |
| CSP I   | Certified Support Professional I               | SSPA          | VN      | TN      |
| CSP II  | Certified Support Professional II              | SSPA          | VN      | TN      |
| CSP-S   | Certified Support Professional Supervisor      | SSPA          | VN      | TN      |
| CSP-M   | Certified Support Professional Manager         | SSPA          | VN      | TN      |
| CSS     | Customer Support Specialist                    | HDI           | VN      | TM      |
| FCHDT   | Field Certified Help Desk Technician           | FCPA          | VN      | TN      |
| HDA     | Help Desk Analyst                              | HDI           | VN      | TM      |
| HDM     | Help Desk Manager                              | HDI           | VN      | TM      |
| HDSA    | Help Desk Senior Analyst                       | HDI           | VN      | TM      |
| MCDST   | Microsoft Certified Desktop Support Technician | Microsoft     | VS      | TM      |
| SCLP    | Support Center Leadership Program              | HDI           | VN      | TM      |

each program mentioned, as well as labeling offerings as vendor-neutral or specific (VN/VS, under the heading of Vstatus), as well as training-neutral or motivated (TN/TM, under the heading of Tstatus). As a quick inspection will reveal, it's full of interesting and potentially valuable offerings.

## MEET THE SPONSORS

The organizations behind these credentials number fewer than the credentials themselves, so we'll introduce or describe those players, then review each organization's offerings separately. To make it easy to find your way through this coverage, we describe sponsors in

alphabetical order, then describe their offerings in sections that follow in that order as well:

- ▼ **Apple Computer:** For the past few years, Apple has offered a variety of technical certifications, including the Apple Certified Help Desk Specialist credential. This certification targets those organizations where users need assistance in working with the Macintosh operating system, Apple computers, and related hardware and software.
- ▼ **Brainbench:** This is a testing company that offers competency testing to companies and organizations seeking to ascertain employees' or potential hires'

technical skills and knowledge. Among the many hundreds of topics, platforms, and technical specialties they test on, two items fall under the heading of help desk.

- ▼ FCPA stands for Field Certified Professional Association, a vendor-independent, market-neutral organization that develops and promotes hands-on skills oriented testing and certification. FCPA offers several exams in its FCHDT track, and covers PC Technician, Server Technician, and Network Technician job roles. The company does not offer training or testing itself, but does maintain sponsor and partner relationships with other companies and organizations, many of which do offer such training and/or testing.
- ▼ HDI stands for Help Desk Institute, a membership association for the service and support industry that offers numerous help desk and customer support credentials. The organization offers a broad range of help desk certifications that include two levels of help desk and management level credentials (four in all), as well as a customer support credential. The organization seeks to meet member needs as its primary target, and is referenced or recommended in other certification programs, including CompTIA A+ and Microsoft's MCDST (also covered in this article). HDI offers training for its credentials, but also maintains partner relationships to accredit authorized training partners that can deliver its curriculum as well.
- ▼ In February 2004, Microsoft launched its MCDST certification, a credential that targets desktop support skills and knowledge focused on the company's Windows XP operating system. Microsoft offers e-learning and classroom training on the MCDST curriculum, as do authorized training centers as well as other third parties. Self-study materials for these exams are also widely available.
- ▼ STI Knowledge: A training and certification company that specializes in call center, technical support, and help desk related courses and credentials, among other topics. The organization's relevant offerings cover a spectrum of help desk positions from entry-level to management, as well as the field support technician's role.
- ▼ SSPA stands for Service and Support Professionals Association, an industry organization that focuses on support centers with an emphasis on customer relations. Whereas help desk operations are internally focused, support operations that serve as the focus of the SSPA's certifications typically focus on external customers, which may mean individual end-users or consumers of products and technologies, or companies and organizations that adopt products and technologies. Though the SSPA offers no training on its credentials itself, it does maintain partnerships to make sure that such training is available for those who participate in its certification programs. These include two levels of support professionals, plus two management level support roles as well.

The eighteen credentials mentioned in FIGURE 1 represent a substantial collection of credentials that help desk or technical support professionals can consider to help boost technical skills and knowledge, usually with at least some emphasis on soft skills including problem solving, positive communications, and active listening, among others. In the sections that follow, you'll find more details about the individual offerings from each of the program sponsors just introduced.

## APPLE COMPUTER

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As with other Apple certification credentials, the ACHDS focuses on specific versions of Mac OS X and Mac OS X Server. To earn this credential, candidates need pass only a single \$150 exam: 9L0-400 Mac OS X Help Desk Essentials v10.3 Exam. Thomson Prometric offer this exam; a skills assessment guide that includes exam objectives and requirements is available on the Apple Web site; the company also offers training to help candidates prepare for this exam. Obviously, this credential will be useful only to those help desk professionals who must support users of Mac OS X v10.3.

## BRAINBENCH

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Many IT certification experts and watchers recommend Brainbench credentials as a good way to warm up for specific topics, tools, and technologies. The company's help desk related offerings are a good example. Each of the two help desk related exams (one general, one Microsoft-focused) cost \$49 and are available directly from Brainbench itself, along with detailed exam objectives and descriptive information. Both exams provide reasonable and broad coverage of help desk technical topics and soft skills and may prove useful to interested professionals seeking to assess skills and knowledge prior to tackling more substantial credentials. That said, most individuals won't get much mileage from these two offerings on the job unless current or prospective employers know about or use these exams as assessment tools themselves. It's not reasonable to expect that passing either or both of these exams will lead to employment or promotion.

## FIELD CERTIFICATION PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION

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The FCPA is an interesting organization in that it seeks to create and promote exams that focus on hands-on skills and knowledge, thereby ascertaining candidates' abilities to handle the job roles tested in the exams. To that end, the Field Certified Help Desk Technician credential incorporates three 4-hour exams under its umbrella, where each exam costs no more than \$595 (discounts are available to member organizations and for students and teachers). The topics covered include PC Technician, Server Technician, and Network Technician; exam objectives, testing center locations, and additional information are available on the FCPA Web site. Name recognition and demand for these credentials remain somewhat uncertain, however, we can find no mention of the FCHDT credential by name or acronym at any major job listing or resume posting Web site, nor in any searchable collection of job postings available online.

## HELP DESK INSTITUTE

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As a membership association, the HDI bases its activities and offerings on member input. Since its 7,500-plus members include 90% of the fortune 500, and there are over 50 association chapters active in the U.S. alone, the HDI offers a pretty comprehensive set of offerings, and good support for career development for service and support professionals. Their certifications are part of their course offerings (exams typically occur on the last day of training for a specific credential), though e-learning alternatives are available. Courses start at \$995 and up in the classroom, and \$495 and up online (though only a subset of

certs—namely CSS, HDA, and HDM—are covered; discounts for member organizations and occasional promotional pricing are available. The strong association of training and testing, and the relatively high cost of credentials make the various HDI offerings, which include customer service, two levels of help desk professionals, and both help desk and support center management credentials, most likely to be of interest to those who work for member organizations, or for those who work for companies who will sponsor their participation in this program. Given costs of leaving work for two days or longer, travel and lodging expenses, as well as course fees, these offerings may otherwise be too expensive for individuals to shoulder on their own. That said, HDI has certified many thousands of individuals, and its credentials are both well-known and well-recognized in the IT industry.

## MICROSOFT

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The two exams for the MCDST cost \$125 each, and while courses (usually at \$995 and up) or e-learning (at \$349 from Microsoft itself; prices vary from other providers) are available, there's a long tradition of self-study for Microsoft exams and certifications that's not as readily available for the other credentials covered in this survey. Including the costs of practice exams (\$70 and up), study guides and other prep materials (\$80 and up), it's hard to spend more than \$400 per exam on self-study on Microsoft exams. That said, this curriculum applies only to those who support users of Microsoft's Windows XP operating system and related software applications. But it is a relatively easy and affordable way for individuals who don't have or can't get employer support to break into the technical support field, albeit in a specific niche.

## STI KNOWLEDGE

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STI is very much like HDI in that courses and exams are interlocked, but also in the kinds of customers it serves (though STI claims to serve 75 percent of the Fortune 100). Classroom training courses run two to three days, at costs from about \$550 to \$930 per day (prices increase with the seniority of the credential covered). Online courses are also available, at costs from \$495 to \$1,495. The STI Knowledge program encompasses field support, help desk professionals, and two levels of help desk management positions or job roles. Again, as with the HDI offerings, costs and time commitments involved may make it difficult for individuals to shoulder them without employer support, but the HDI's credentials are likewise well-known and well-recognized in the IT industry.

## SERVICE AND SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS ASSOCIATION

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The SSPA's biggest claims to industry leadership are twofold: first, they've certified more than 10,000 individuals across all credentials; and second, they don't couple their certification exams to their own training offerings as do HDI and STI knowledge. Also, the organization's SkillTrack program (its name for its assessment, training, certification, and benchmarking offerings in the general area of service and support) shows deeper roots in academia than the other programs just mentioned. It includes training options in the classroom and online, as well as "train the trainer" courses to make sure that organizations can field their own courses on SSPA SkillTrack subjects, either as public

offerings or for in-house consumption. Because some community colleges and other low-cost training providers do support the SkillTrack curriculum, costs for related training can be as low as under \$500 for classroom training, less for online equivalents. Exams may be bundled with courses, but individuals can also contact the SSPA for pricing on exams directly from the organization (pricing starts at \$120 and up, depending on topic, contact Kirk Wilson or John South at 858-674-5491 for more information).

## SUMMING UP: TO CERTIFY OR NOT TO CERTIFY

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The value and virtue of certification rests primarily on the competencies it warrants, and the skills and knowledge for which it tests. Those IT professionals who are prepared to talk about why their certifications have value, especially in terms of what they know and can do as a result of earning them, will be best-positioned to exploit that value in seeking promotions or jobs. Those who may not be as comfortable representing themselves in such fashion should probably pursue those vendor-specific credentials that make sense for their present or targeted work environments.

As far as vendor-neutral certifications in this space go, you may find that your employer has already chosen the program in which you'll participate. But should you find yourself needing to pursue such credentials on your own, name recognition and market presence argues that HDI, STI Knowledge, and SSPA offerings should be among your top choices. That said, total costs, certified population size, and wide availability of training and separate exams put the SSPA on top.

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*NaSPA member Ed Tittel is the creator of the Exam Cram series of certification preparation books, and the technology editor for Certification magazine. He's been tracking the IT certification market closely for nearly 10 years.*