Microsoft Support Credential on the Rise

By Ed Tittel

ALMOST TWO YEARS AFTER THE MICROSOFT CERTIFIED DESKTOP SUPPORT Technician (MCDST) credential was introduced, its numbers are finally beginning to show some appreciable movement. This credential focuses on Windows XP in a business environment, and takes a deep hard look not just at the operating system itself, but also at typical applications and hardware that often make a home in this modern desktop operating environment.

According to Al Valvano, Lead Product Manager at Microsoft Learning, by June of 2005 monthly run rates (numbers of credentials earned) had topped an average of 1,000 per month. Although this pales by comparison with the 3,000 and higher monthly rates for MCSA and MCSE, it's finally on track to gain some name recognition in help desk and technical support circles. Valvano also states that the MCDST is its fastest growing credential, even though it has a long way to go to catch up with stalwarts such as Windows 2000 MCSE (272,000-plus as of June, 2005) and MCDBA (132,000-plus as of the same date).

Evidence from the aftermarket, however, also agrees with Microsoft's upbeat assessment. Sources inside Prometric and VUE indicate that seats sold for MCDST exams 70-271 and 70-272 have jumped considerably since May of 2005. Practice exam and study guide materials publishers (such as the *Exam Cram 2* series at Pearson Education, for which I am series editor) also report a noticeable uptick in interest and sales for MCDST titles.

This movement is very much in keeping with Microsoft's growing emphasis on specific job roles and skills in its certification programs. Some might even argue that the MCDST really represents the first such credentials that Microsoft has made available to IT and other technical professionals, given its debut in 2003. The recent release of new versions of SQL Server, Visual Studio .NET, and the .NET Framework 2.0 during the week of November 7, 2005, also witnessed strong evidence of a new direction in Microsoft certifications. In fact, there's a whole new series of technology specialist, professional, and architect level credentials for subjects related to SQL Server 2005, .NET for Windows applications, .NET for Web applications, and Windows infrastructure topics spread across those three new levels. Most Microsoft watchers expect this same trend to be further elaborated when Windows Vista ships for the desktop in 2006 and for servers in 2007.

In fact, given the MCDST's focus on Microsoft's high-end professional desktop operating system, it's not unreasonable to expect a new set of exams for the desktop version of Windows Vista to emerge in the second half of 2006. Just as the two current exams for the Windows XP credential cover the operating system and related applications, it's predictable that this same structure will apply to Vista as well.

The two exams currently required for MCDST are as follows:

▼ 70-271: Supporting Users and Troubleshooting a Microsoft Windows XP Operating System. This exam covers topics related to installing and upgrading Windows XP directly and unattended, as well as managing and troubleshooting access to resources such as local and shared files and folders, network print devices, and offline files. It also deals with configuring and troubleshooting hardware devices and drivers, including storage devices, displays, ACPI (Advanced Configuration and Power Interface), as well as I/O devices of all kinds. Configuring and troubleshooting desktop and user environments are also on the bill, including managing user environments, dealing with languages and locations, security settings and policy, user and group accounts, system performance issues, and more. Finally, the network also receives considerable attention, including working with TCP/IP protocols, services, tools, and utilities, as well as name resolution, remote connections, Internet Explorer and more.

▼ 70-272: Supporting Users and Troubleshooting Applications on a Microsoft Windows XP Operating System picks up where its predecessor leaves off. It covers key Office and built-in Windows components, including Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook (and Outlook Express), plus Internet Explorer and other application tuning and configuration matters. It also tackles usability issues for key applications, with an emphasis on configuration and interpreting error messages. Application customization also comes in for considerable coverage, including working with end-users, customizing toolbars, configuring profiling tools, and more for Office components, as well as Internet Explorer and Outlook Express. Connectivity and application security are also important focuses, where identifying and troubleshooting key connectivity services and capabilities (such as name resolution, routing, networking adapter configuration, and other networking issues) are stressed, as well as security permissions, incidents, and related application security settings and controls.

Each of these two exams costs $125 in the U.S. at VUE or Prometric testing centers. Each is also well-supported with official Microsoft and third-party training classes in the classroom and online, as well as a wide variety of practice exams, study guides, online forums, and more. Anybody interested in pursuing this credential will not lack resources or information to help them prepare for and pass these exams.

While these exams put considerable emphasis on working with the Windows XP operating system, and supporting users whose desktops

run this software and related applications, they do remain fairly Microsoft centric (as you'd expect them to). This explains why many certification and help desk/tech support experts—including yours truly—not only recommend pursuing the MCDST for those seeking help desk or technical support positions. Most of us also recommend that interested professionals and entry level personnel also pursue and earn basic PC hardware and networking credentials as well. These would include basic CompTIA certifications like the A+ PC Hardware Technician and the CompTIA Network+ credential as well.

The kinds of learning and skills that earning supplementary certifications like the A+ and Network+ will not only make it easier to prepare for and pass the two MCDST exams, They will also make things easier for their holders on the job, once they find themselves occupying help desk or technical support positions working with users who have Windows XP on their desktops. That's because those desktops are invariably networked PCs, and knowing about the underlying hardware and the networks that interconnect them is incredibly valuable to people who work with users day in and day out. 🖳

NaSPA member Ed Tittel is a long-time Microsoft certification follower. He developed (and still edits) the Exam Cram 2 series for Pearson education, serves as Technology Editor for Certification Magazine, and writes regularly on Windows topics for TechTarget.com, TechBuilder.org, and other Web sites. He's also contributed to over 100 computer books, many of them on Windows and IT certification topics.