

most significant bits

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News and Information for High-Tech Professionals



WHAT DOES DELIVERY MEAN?

by Matt Wickey

In the world of software development, what does it mean to deliver a system? If an application is deployed and executes flawlessly but doesn't meet customer needs, has it delivered successfully? How many projects and products have failed in real world terms because they didn't meet customer requirements? Likewise how many systems that really nailed the requirements failed on delivery because quality was poor? Or what about the system that perfectly meets requirements and has high quality but completes months late and over budget? Do these examples represent successful delivery?

Often times software professionals confuse system delivery with project management. That is easy to do because the topics are related. One definition of a project is "an activity of fixed duration that will produce a specific product or result." So, if you can successfully execute a project, you should be able to deliver a system, right? Of course there is the issue of those pesky requirements—if you don't capture them correctly how can you know you're really delivering the right thing? Some methodologies (can you say Waterfall?) dictate that all your requirements are gathered at the beginning of the project, and everyone agrees on them. That works well as long as the captured requirements are comprehensive and correct and nothing changes along the way. But there is always the possibility that something went a little (or a lot) haywire in the requirements gathering, and you won't know until the project ends. For long projects this can represent a risk that is not only significant but can remain buried until it's too late to change.

Other methodologies use development iterations to provide regular review of the "end" product. If a review uncovers something the customer doesn't like, it can easily be adjusted in the next iteration. This allows changes to be made along the way. It is a great way of ensuring the customer is engaged throughout the project and that the final product conforms to the fickle finger of shifting customer wants.

But is this successful delivery? We know that iterative methodologies (Scrum being the primary example) don't provide hard and fast

commitments for timing or content. The customer has to take it on faith that the review process will allow the right features to be built in as the project progresses. That's fine and dandy, but it ignores an integral part of system delivery—the necessity for accurate estimates. Most customers want to know in advance what features their application will have, how long it will take and how much it will cost. In fact, most would say a successful delivery must live up to the initial estimates. By that definition, any methodology that allows for loose estimates cannot deliver successfully.

At Stout we know that successful delivery is critical to our business. It is very important that we all agree on what successful system delivery looks like—what are the criteria that define it. That is why we spend countless hours (okay, not really countless, but significant) sharpening our concept of delivery and establishing criteria that will guide our work and help us measure success. At present, our list of necessary (but perhaps not sufficient) attributes for a successful delivery methodology include

- Light weight—any artifacts included must be absolutely necessary and add value.
- Flexible—to as great an extent possible it must call out suggested, rather than mandated artifacts.
- Scalable—it must be applicable to project teams from one member to many; for projects from small to large in effort.
- Iterative—it must include an iterative flavor because those methodologies have proven most effective for situations where value must be provided sooner rather than later.
- Ensure high quality—it must include significant measure to improve code quality as well as quality of user interfaces, documentation and integration into customer environments.

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NOTICES

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GET CERTIFIED & GET NOTICED: MS CERTIFICATIONS

By K. Alan Robbins

WARNING: *The following article crosses the threshold of common English into geek speak. This article was written by, and for, software engineers.*



If you're a technology professional working with Microsoft products, should you obtain Microsoft Certification?

The answer is an unequivocal yes, even if your current position is secure and you have no intention of looking for a new one anytime soon. This article will dispel some common certification myths, explain why certifications matter, and give you valuable tips about what to study and what the process is like.

One of a manager's most difficult tasks is recruiting and hiring. In a recession, the number of resumes received for an open position increases substantially, and it is difficult to distinguish the A-Players from the other candidates just by looking at a resume. For a standard job announcement, you're likely to see three times the number of C-Players, twice the number of B-Players, and the same number of A-Players as usual. The noise level dramatically increases. Amongst all those resumes, how do you get noticed?

A-Players are much more likely to be certified than B or C players. It is as simple as that. A-Players sharpen their skills outside of work. They read tech blogs, subscribe to tech magazines, and are passionate about their craft. B and C players show up for a job and do what is asked of them.

Does being certified mean you are a better developer? No. Does being certified mean you are guaranteed of getting a job? Of course not. What it does is demonstrate a level of commitment, and that makes it much more likely that your

resume will be picked out of the stack.

Passing a single exam qualifies you to be a "Microsoft Certified Technology Specialist." This is the place to start. Pick a product that you are already familiar with, do your homework, pass one test, and you stand out. Pass several related exams and you become a "Microsoft Certified Professional." Above that, there are Certified Master and Certified Architect programs that require more and more of the candidate to demonstrate his or her competence. Numerous studies have shown that the top level certifications are worth as much in terms of lifetime compensation as an MBA from an accredited university. There are fewer than 100 Microsoft Certified Architects on the planet. It is a safe bet they are not unemployed.

A-Players sharpen their skills outside of work. They read tech blogs, subscribe to tech magazines, and are passionate about their craft. B and C players show up for a job and do what is asked of them.

PREPARING FOR EXAMS

The best way to start this journey is with the book from Microsoft press for the exam you are interested in taking. These books are more expensive than the others, and they are worth every penny. The practice exams included with these books are closest to the actual exam. You cannot pass certification tests by simply reading the books and drilling on the practice exams. You must use the product, as there will be questions on the exam you cannot answer unless you have spent time with the product. For instance, you'll need to know keyboard shortcuts, to be able to hand execute code, and to know what all the different tool windows contain.

The first exam is the worst, another reason to select a product you use every day and are competent with. There will be product features in the study guide you haven't

touched upon; focus on those areas. Go take the test. You have to score 70% or better to pass. No employer is going to ask you what score you got, or how many times you took the test! Gathering up the courage to take that first test is the hardest part.

So called Exam Crams and lists of questions to memorize are not the most effective approach. If you start your certification journey by trying to memorize the answers to 500 questions, you'll get discouraged very quickly. Many if not all of the questions on the exam have one answer that is completely wrong, two answers that are partially correct, and one right answer. If your brain is crammed full of practice questions, you won't take the time to carefully read each question. Study the material, work with the product, and when you think you are ready, take the practice exam. But do not start your journey by taking the practice test over and over.

TAKING EXAMS

The tests are administered by Prometrics testing centers. You schedule your exam through the Web site. Once you arrive, you show your ID, empty your pockets into a little locker, pay your \$125 testing fee, and are ushered into a room where others are testing. You get one piece of paper and headphones to eliminate any distractions. The whole experience is stressful. You'll likely be nervous, and the test is timed—all good reasons to over study for the first exam.

The best test taking strategy is elimination. Answer all the questions you are absolutely certain of, and then work your way through the ones you are less certain of or that require effort to calculate the answer. There will be at least three or four questions that will take several minutes to figure out the answer to. There will be many questions that can only be described as "trick" questions.

Once the time is up, or you are finished, you leave the testing room, and immediately learn if you passed or not. Whether

you passed or failed, you'll know which test areas you did well in and which areas you didn't do so well—but you never know which questions you missed. If you take the same exam twice, you'll get different questions.

The second and subsequent exams are much easier. You know what to expect, you know how to study, and most importantly you will be much more relaxed and at ease come test day.

Earning a Microsoft Certification shows your peers and employer your commitment to advancing your skills, your readiness to move into a more advanced role, and your passion. It shows a prospective employer that you are an A-Player.

K. Alan Robbins is a Solutions Architect with Stout Systems. Alan has more than twenty-five years' experience selling, designing, developing, and managing the development of midsized to enterprise class software applications and Web sites. Email alanrobbins@stoutsystems.com.



MICROSOFT CERTIFIED IT PROFESSIONAL (MCITP)

Distinguish yourself from the crowd as an IT professional with proven skills and ability to be effective with a comprehensive set of Microsoft technologies.

MICROSOFT CERTIFIED TECHNOLOGY SPECIALIST (MCTS)

Highlight your specific skills with developer and IT professional technologies. Areas of focus include managing Windows Server 2008, Microsoft SQL Server 2008, BizTalk Server 2006 and more.

MICROSOFT CERTIFIED DATABASE ADMINISTRATOR (MCDBA)

Stand out with this certification showing your skills in successful design, implementation and administration of Microsoft SQL Server 2000 databases.

MICROSOFT CERTIFIED DESKTOP SUPPORT TECHNICIAN (MCDST)

Prove your ability to support and troubleshoot desktop environments running Windows XP.

MICROSOFT CERTIFIED SYSTEMS ADMINISTRATOR (MCSA)

Advance your career with the skills necessary to support and troubleshoot Windows operating system environments. The MCSA: Messaging credentials certifies you as system administrator that is able to implement, manage and maintain Microsoft Exchange Server messaging infrastructures. Additionally, system administrators with the MCSA: Security credential gives you the skills to implement and maintain secure computing environments.

MICROSOFT CERTIFIED SYSTEMS ENGINEER (MCSE)

Become an expert the infrastructure for business solutions by designing and implementing various versions of Windows server including Windows 2000 Server. The MCSE: Messaging and MCSE: Security credentials identify those engineers capable of handling Microsoft Exchange Server and creating and managing secure Windows operating system environments.

For further information refer to <http://microsoft.com/learning>.

- Meet customer needs—it must include (in a flexible manner) enough artifacts and process as is necessary to fully capture and implement customer requirements.
- Containable—It must support the ability to establish high level, long term project timing and cost estimates.
- Provide accurate estimates—As experience grows, Stout project managers must be able to use the methodology, tools and processes to provide accurate longer term cost and time estimates with expected accuracy.
- Transparent—Stout project managers must be able to track projects, determine status at any time and accurately report to customer, Stout management and other stakeholders.

As you can see this is not so much a complete methodology as it is a means of gauging our success. At Stout we pride ourselves on remaining agnostic in terms of technology or methods. We seek to maximize our human capital to solve customer problems. The criteria above represent our shared vision of what successful system delivery looks like.

Matt Wickey is a Technical Consultant with Stout Systems. Matt has over 20 years' experience in software development, business analysis and project management. Email mattwickey@stoutsystems.com.

STOUT SPONSORS MIDWEST TECHNOLOGY LEADERS SYMPOSIUM

The Midwest Technology Leaders Symposium brings together some of the top Information Executives in the Great Lakes region for a full day of panel discussions, roundtables, keynote presentations and an evening of networking. The content of the conference is focused on critical technology issues that affect the IT industry in this region and how they impact companies and individuals now and in the future.

Stout Systems was a proud sponsor and participant in this event—now in its second year—facilitating a roundtable discussion titled Culture Enables the Technology.

Overall, the 2009 symposium was a great success with high marks given by the region's high profile technology movers and shakers.

See www.MidwestTechnologyLeaders.com for more information.

TECHTOWN ACKNOWLEDGES STOUT SYSTEMS PRESIDENT

John W. Stout, founder and president of Stout Systems, was recently acknowledged for

his contributions to Detroit's business and entrepreneurial community, receiving official certification as a TechTown Mentor. John was recognized for successfully mentoring several companies in areas such as IT strategies, networking and business plans.



The TechTown Mentor program pairs companies that reside in its downtown Detroit facility with successful business professionals who in turn provide business advice to assist the companies with their growth and success. Approximately twenty other local professionals were also recognized as TechTown Mentors for their contributions to this growing entrepreneurial community.



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