You Think Your Employee is Certified, But Are They Really?
Introduction:

As a manager, are you looking to hire certified IT professionals to perform a specific job? As a reseller, are you certifying your staff to meet vendor reseller requirements to better serve your customer base? If so, you should be aware and informed of the current conditions of test taking in the IT industry. In past years, the IT Certification Council (ITCC) has identified various ways for candidates to achieve certification by unscrupulous means—in other words, by cheating. A 2013 survey by the IT Certification Council (ITCC, 2014) found that 38% of surveyed exam candidates did not consider preparation using “unauthorized questions and answers from the actual test” to be considered cheating. The result is that certificants holding certifications may not have the skills they claim and are putting you, the employer, at risk.

IT companies are now making significant strides with new test security initiatives to identify individuals whom are involved in Non-Independent Test Taking (NITT). NITT is when a test taker receives assistance, either from other individuals or physical materials that are not acceptable and available to all test takers. In this situation, the responses provided by the test taker during the exam are not necessarily their own. The test results become meaningless if they do not assess the knowledge and skills of the individual person who registered to take the test. When a test is not taken independently the test results have no value. The certification testing industry now has the ability to identify and take action against individuals who are caught in NITT. In doing so, candidates are losing their credentials, they are being banned from the testing programs, and likely are jeopardizing their jobs and careers in IT. As a manager of IT staff, it is important to broadcast the message of this new test security initiative for several reasons.

Protecting the value and integrity of IT certifications - If individuals without the validated skills represent themselves as being certified (through an NITT violation) in a product or solution, their failings in practice will dilute the value anyone will place on the skills of others who have proven and validated their skills legitimately. In effect, credibility is built upon performance and when supposedly “certified” individuals fail at performing a task, then the value of hiring certified individuals is discounted. Integrity is maintained when individuals without validated skills (due to NITT) are identified, and the appropriate corrective action is taken. This assures unethical certificants are not allowed to misrepresent themselves. In short, this corrective action upholds the certification value of IT professionals who properly prepare and who earn the recognition for their validated skills.

As a hiring manager - The credibility which a hiring manager places on a certification credential is based on their experience—good or bad—with other certified individuals they have worked with. Whether it is true in your case or not, the credit you give to individuals holding certifications on their resumes can be tainted by the misrepresentation of those who cheat in acquiring their credentials. If one of your employees is identified to be in violation of testing policy, their certification can be revoked by the provider and they can be banned from testing. At the very least, you should no longer have confidence in this employee’s skills. This employee may be a liability to your company if they make egregious mistakes. If your employee is willing to cheat on a certification exam and misrepresent their skills, you may question whether they are performing other unethical behaviors.

As a partner or a reseller - The loss of a certification may jeopardize your company’s authorization to sell and support a vendor’s product or impact other program benefits that are based on your company’s achieved skill level. However, because the industry is policing and removing those individuals that do not deserve that credential, the new security initiative will provide increased confidence in the value that a hiring manager places on an IT certification when evaluating a candidate for a job. As a hiring manager, you can strongly influence your staff’s inclination to not use
NITT methods by sending a message through establishing policies and taking action that NITT will not be tolerated.

**What are Some Common Forms of Cheating Your Employees May be Engaging In?:**

The elements of this problem are varied and significant. Some of the recurring challenges met by most IT certification programs are as follows:

- **Stealing IP** - All exam content, including the items, options, and correct responses, is the intellectual property (or IP) of the certifying agency. There are a growing number of individuals who will go to extraordinary measures to obtain actual exam content. There is high demand from intentional cheaters as well as from potentially uniformed candidates who are searching for study resources. IT certification programs and their test delivery providers take standardized measures to secure the test content. Test content is expensive to produce and very difficult to replace. Whether exam stealers (pirates) infiltrate the communications between the certifying agency and its vendor, take a test to solely memorize the content, or take any other step to intercept the test content, pirates are at the center of the security problems.

- **Sharing questions or answers with others** - Some test takers discuss the results of their exams with fellow candidates. It is natural for most to have experienced this and to want to discover the answer or discuss shared challenges, in an effort to understand the content of the exam. These discussions can occur in person, through email, or through online community forums and chat rooms. However innocent these discussions may seem, all IT certification programs have Nondisclosure Agreements (NDA's) and candidate agreements in place that specifically prohibit sharing information from a test. The reason this sharing is prohibited is because candidates end up working together to figure out an answer—a dynamic referred to as “collusion.” In short, certification programs wish to certify individuals based on their own knowledge and skills and not on a “collective knowledge” gathered from discussions. In addition to collusion, discussing items from a test, especially in public forums such as online spaces, may also pre-expose other candidates who have not already taken the test. Both collusion and pre-exposure inhibit a certifying agency from doing the job of certifying an individual on their independent knowledge and skills. By giving help on a test item or teaching others the content found on an exam, candidates are essentially enabling someone who may or may not meet the qualifications of the certification to pass the test.

- **Cheating during the test** - Cheating during a test has become a sophisticated strategy that no longer is limited to bringing cheat sheets and unauthorized notes into the testing environment or copying answers off another candidate’s test. In this digital age, candidates have smart phones and other mobile technology to aid them in cheating. This type of cheating can be detected with data forensics and is often backed-up with video or eyewitness evidence. Candidates who are discovered cheating during a test can be subjected to decertification and can be banned from testing with a specific program or testing center again.

- **Taking a test for another** - Proxy test taking is when one individual takes a test on another individual's behalf. This behavior is considered test fraud because the results of the test are not those of the person seeking certification. Those who commit this type of fraud risk their identities and their professional integrity. They pay large sums of money to individuals they have likely never met and provide them with intimate details of their personal backgrounds, up to and including copies of their government-issued ID. IT certification programs have gone to great lengths to detect this type of
fraud, including requiring photos on score reports, digital signatures and more. Candidates should also be aware that entering into transactions with organizations that engage in this unethical business method is risky and could result in identity theft.

- **Falsifying scores or the ownership of a credential or certification** - A few candidates will go to any length to obtain certifications, including falsifying their certifications by altering their score reports or producing other false “proof.” Again, this is test fraud and can easily be tracked down by the IT certification program.

- **Downloading or using brain dump content for test preparation** - While innocently preparing for certification, candidates may have discovered websites that offer “study guides” or practice materials that come with a guarantee of a passing score. In most cases, these companies boast the effectiveness of their products and will cite validation of the content by actual instructors. These websites are called brain dumps. The phrase “brain dump” refers to a collection of confidential information relating to examinations, which is obtained by examinees who memorize, then “dump” (or record) the information after the examination. Brain dumps are also a way to refer to collections of exam items that have been stolen from high-stakes certification exams. While many of these companies and sites blatantly detail their illegal source of the testing material, others do not. Either way, the content is stolen IP. Candidates should watch for basic signs of brain dumps, which include lures like money-back guarantees, 100% pass rates, and other too-good-to-be-true promises. IT candidates should be careful of what companies they use to find additional preparation resources. To be sure of the validity of a site, you should be in touch with your IT certification program. Often, the IT certification program will have recommended sponsored sites that can be trusted. If it sounds too good to be true, that is a good sign for a test taker to avoid the site. Most importantly, candidates should always be mindful that obtaining a copy of a certification exam is cheating. When caught, the consequences can be severe.

- **Not understanding or following the terms of an NDA** - IT organizations require candidates to agree to an NDA before they can take an exam. This agreement usually includes the specifics of what is expected of candidates and which types of study resources are prohibited. Candidates can familiarize themselves with the terms of an NDA by visiting the IT certification program’s website and downloading the terms in advance.

**What Can an Employer Do to Protect Their Employees and Company?:**

- **Ensure that your employees take the time to become educated** - Let your employees know your position around cheating. Candidates should read the IT certification program’s testing policies and practices in depth, before preparing for a test. Special attention should be given to the information regarding NITT and the issues regarding test questions. There is one example which is shown in this IBM document (can be viewed at: http://www.ibm.com/certify/nitt.shtml). As a general rule, only study materials listed on the IT certification program’s web pages, (under the test you are preparing for) can be 100% assured of being authorized. Advise your employees to stay away from websites selling exam questions and/or that guarantee passing. Most likely, your employee will spend more time and money trying to cheat successfully than preparing to pass with their own knowledge and skills. By promoting the messaging around NITT and industry actions being taken, many more candidates will be driven to read and become familiar with the essence of these practices and their warnings.
Summary:

Employers in IT frequently use certifications as part of hiring or promotion criteria, due to the knowledge, skills, and competency demonstrated through these programs. However, an increasing percentage of IT professionals are trying to achieve certification through dishonest means—namely, cheating. Employers in IT play a key role in setting expectations of honesty by making your position on cheating known. This IT Certification Council (ITCC) white paper walks employers through the common ways IT professionals try to illegitimately achieve certification and how you can educate your employees about this issue. By setting these expectations, IT employers strengthen your ability to rely on these certifications as a hiring or professional development tool, while reinforcing high ethical values in the IT industry.

By understanding cheating in IT certifications, IT professionals can help educate each other and ensure that their hard earned certifications maintain a high level of value around the industry.

Learn More:

You can learn more about the importance of securing certifications at ITCC’s website. Visit the website for other whitepapers regarding the importance of IT certification and honest test taking.

- ITCC’s Website
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