Survey on Attitudes Around Cheating & IT Certification
Overview

In 2013, the ITCC (IT Certification Council) surveyed candidates about their attitudes towards cheating and their perceptions regarding how cheating can impact the value of IT certifications. This brief paper is meant to be a companion to the deck of charts that present the survey findings. Copies of this whitepaper and the deck can be found on the ITCC website, under the focus area of Securing Certifications (http://www.itcertcouncil.org/SecuringCertifications.aspx).

We use the term “cheating” throughout the survey and this paper. At a high level, think of cheating on certification testing as any act, by the candidate or others, which leads to “non-independent test taking”; that is, cheating occurs when any candidate uses means other than knowledge, gained through learning and experience, to answer the questions on the test. The larger issue of cheating, or non-independent test taking, is test validity. When someone cheats on a test, has prior knowledge of test content, steals test content, or shares test content with others, the test becomes unreliable as a measure of someone’s knowledge, skills and abilities. In other words, the value of the test has been diminished, and the results cannot be trusted.

The survey was structured into five sections:

I. Demographics—Who did we reach?
II. Intellectual Property—Whose property are the certification exams? How should the intellectual property (IP) of certification companies be treated?
III. Cheating—What is considered cheating? What attitudes do candidates have about cheating?
IV. Value of One’s Certification—What impact do candidates perceive as a consequence of cheating on certification tests?
V. Enforcement—What do candidates see as the effects of enforcing actions that combat cheating?

This short paper will address each of the five topics and provide an executive summary of the survey results. Our hope is to repeat this survey again in 2014/2015 to be able to evaluate any changes in the attitudes around cheating and its impact on the candidate’s value in becoming certified.
I. Demographics

Almost 4,000 candidates who had registered and taken an IT certification began an electronic survey, and about 2,500 answered the entire set of questions—a response rate of 62.5%.

There were four key characteristics of the survey population:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where are you located?</th>
<th>What is your Age?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Europe: 42%</td>
<td>40+ years old: 26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America: 33%</td>
<td>26-40 years old: 50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia Pacific: 18%</td>
<td>19-25 years old: 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America: 5%</td>
<td>13-18 years old: 2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan: 2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How many IT Certifications do you hold?</th>
<th>When did you obtain your first IT certification?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: 22%</td>
<td>Not yet: 8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-5: 45%</td>
<td>&lt;1 year ago: 38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;5: 26%</td>
<td>1-3 years ago: 21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None: 7%</td>
<td>4+ years ago: 33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The distribution of respondents is well represented by different geographies, ages of candidates, those holding multiple certifications, and recent and long-term certified individuals. We feel that the attitudes that were expressed are representative of the broad range of certified individuals.
II. Intellectual Property—Whose property are the certification exams? How should the intellectual property (IP) of certification companies be treated?

In this section of the survey, we examined the understanding of who owns the test questions and whether purchasing or selling these test questions is a clear violation of the certification owners’ intellectual property rights.

(A) Who owns the tests that the candidate is taking?

The vast majority of the respondents (75%) understand that the test is the intellectual property of the sponsoring company and very few (8%) disagree. Of course, the test is the intellectual property of the sponsoring company, and inappropriate use of that test (buying stolen content, sharing or selling test content) is considered stealing and cheating.

*Action*: It is the 17% that are not sure that represents an opportunity to educate. The [ITCC Securing Certification initiative](http://www.itcertcouncil.org/SecuringCertifications.aspx) has written two whitepapers on cheating, with an attempt to begin that education process. Please take a moment to read or forward these whitepapers.

(B) Is buying test questions and answers not authorized by the test sponsor violating the policies I agreed to when I took the test?

YES!! Certification sponsors generally have a clear statement in their policies and in their non-disclosure agreements (NDA) that explicitly prohibits the use of test questions purchased on the web (or otherwise acquired) that are the intellectual property of that sponsoring organization. (Policies state the rules by which the certification program is run, and the non-disclosure agreement will outline the rules that the candidate is explicitly agreeing to prior to entering the test.) Further, policies generally state that cheating can result in the invalidation of that test score and possible banning from future certification testing with that organization. Unfortunately, over 30% of the respondents indicated indifference or disagreement with this statement.
**Action:** This again points to the need for either better education on this issue, and/or stronger and clearer messaging in the policy statements and non-disclosure agreements by the sponsoring organizations.

(C) **Is sharing or selling test questions wrong and cheating?**

Once again, YES!! Websites that are found to be selling the certification IP of sponsoring organizations are subject to action by those companies. U.S. federal and international laws, such as the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), allow certification companies to take legal action against such sites. Individuals who acquire these stolen tests, or who in any way sell or distribute them, are clearly violating the policies and NDAs of most all sponsoring organizations and thus the law. When identified, that candidate will likely be banned from all future testing for that certification company, along with any others with whom they have shared the test content.

**Action:** Make the consequences very clear to candidates who either naively (12% in the research), or intentionally (9%), share or sell the test questions.
III. Cheating—What is Considered Cheating?

Our research next delved into different types of cheating on certification testing, and what attitudes the respondents had on each. Understanding which areas are clearly understood to be cheating exposes those areas where there is question. Education, or explicit messaging about these less obvious areas of cheating, will help the industry reduce the actions of a few that may be compromising the value of the certification for the masses.

Types of cheating and attitudes on whether they really are cheating

Of the eight types of cheating that were asked about, the lowest agreement (30%) was on “Discussing what was on the test with others.” This description was not specific enough, encompassing non-cheating discussion (e.g., “Was the test harder than you thought?”) as well as cheating discussions (e.g., repeating test questions or answers verbatim).

More problematic is the 38% that did not consider “Using unauthorized questions and answers from the actual test to study” to be cheating. Buying or sharing test questions and answers is clearly a violation of virtually all testing company policies and the non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) endorsed by all candidates.

The six remaining statements (excluding the “none of the above”) show a clear agreement that these are indeed forms of cheating. Read them through, and hopefully you’ll agree with each.
**Action:** A recurring theme from Section II is that the ITCC needs to better address the entire area around buying, selling and using the intellectual property of the sponsoring certification organizations. A specific work initiative has been created by the ITCC Securing Certifications workgroup to better educate and deal with these forms of cheating.

**Additional questions on behaviors around cheating**

We then asked four additional questions to shed more light on the respondents’ attitudes about cheating on certification exams.

1. *How often do you think cheating happens?* The answer shows that 2/3 believe it does not, or only occasionally, happens. A disturbing 16% believe it usually or always happens. **Action:** Repeat the survey again to see if industry (ITCC) or individual vendor actions can reduce the 16% number.

2. *Are you likely to report a cheater?* A very healthy 78% said they very likely or definitely would report a cheater. The most likely geographies to report a cheater are North America and Latin America, with the least likely showing as Asia Pacific. While 78% is a good response for this question, note in the next question....

3. *Do you know how to report a cheater?* A disturbing 60% indicated that they did not know how to report a cheater, even though 78% said they’d like to. **Action:** The ITCC has created a vendor neutral form ([ITCC Exam Security Incident Form](http://www.itcertcouncil.org/SecuringCertifications/ITCCExamSecurityIncidentForm.aspx)) to provide a method for describing and reporting a cheating incident, or other form of test security violation. Please follow the link, and be aware it exists, in case you come across a cheating incident to report.

4. *Do you think that cheaters should have serious consequences including losing their certification?* A very supportive 80% said YES! This is a promising response, because it shows that the vast majority of testing candidates would want to see cheaters penalized for their cheating. In a later question, 83% of the respondents agree that cheating devalues their certification. These candidates form a solid core of individuals that have a positive attitude around preserving their certification’s value, by identifying, reporting and penalizing cheaters. **Action:** Identify initiatives for incenting the 80+% to be the eyes and ears of secure testing, by helping the sponsoring companies to combat cheating and its effects.

An interesting contrast was observed regarding buying or selling stolen tests versus using them to study for the test. A full 25% of those who agreed that it is wrong to buy or sell test questions nonetheless believe that it is OK to use the stolen test questions to study. **Action:** Another example of stressing via education the identical violation and
consequences for either buying/selling stolen tests, and for using them—a likely ban from the sponsoring organization’s program for six months, or possibly for life.

IV. Value of One’s Certification

While candidate attitudes towards cheating are important, the heart of the ITCC’s Securing Certification initiative is about protecting the value of a candidate’s certification, which is derived from the integrity and authority of the sponsoring organizations and the usefulness of the credential to employers’ validation of employees’ skills. In this section we examined what value candidates place on their certifications and what factors affect the value and the impact of cheating.

*More than 83%* believe that cheating – by themselves or by others – devalues their certification and only 5% disagreed. Coupled with the 80% who agreed that cheaters should face serious consequences, there is a solid body of non-cheaters that want the cheaters stopped and punished in order to protect the value of their hard-earned certification.

Interest in protecting the value of their certification from cheating ties directly into feedback given on what other factors devalue their certifications. The most common responses were:

- Certified people not being able to do their job
- Little to no increase in pay for certified people
- Fewer jobs requiring the certification
- Too many people having the certification
- The alignment of skills tested vs. real world skills needed
V. Enforcement

In this section we examined what certification candidates see as the effects of enforcing actions that combat cheating. When asked about how the amount of cheating has changed in the last year, 30% of respondents say there have been improvements, while 13% feel it has become worse.

The improvements in perception and the potential reduction in cheating incidents shows that there is confidence that certification providers have effective programs and are making an impact to reduce cheating (67% agreed and only 6% disagreed).
Has amount of cheating changed?  Do Certification companies have effective programs against cheating?

**Action**: As we look at these perceptions on the amount that cheating has changed and their belief that there are effective programs to detect and combat cheating, ITCC is motivated to repeat this survey every 2 years to track any positive changes in both measurements.

Other recommendations for methods to reduce cheating include:

| Better test center security                  | • Monitoring  
|                                           | • Stricter proctoring  
|                                           | • ID requirements  
|                                           | • Camera security  
|                                           | • Biometrics to increase onsite test center security |
| Test development                           | • Larger item pools  
|                                           | • Swapping items more often  
|                                           | • Simulations and performance-based testing based on real world skills to make it more difficult to obtain and memorize test questions  
| Providing authorize training and prep materials | • High training costs and lack of self-study resources cause candidates to look elsewhere for training methods  

Summary

The ITCC has a number of ongoing actions driven by this research:

- **Education** on the issues presented by cheating, especially focused on awareness and consequences.
- A form that can be filled out and submitted to the ITCC to report any incidents of cheating.
- Collecting and promoting the creation of **stronger and clearer policy and NDA statements**—communicating expectations of the testing candidate and consequences of cheating.
- Seeking ways to **rally and include the vast majority (80+%) of the certification candidates** in identifying cheaters and communicating the messages around honest test taking.

These are all initiatives of the **ITCC Securing Certification initiative**. As a collection of certification industry companies, we continue to strive to protect the value of IT certification, and to identify, report and punish cheaters attempting to erode the value of the certifications earned by the majority of certified individuals.

For more on the ITCC Securing Certification initiative, go to...

http://www.itcertcouncil.org/SecuringCertifications.aspx

For more on the IT Certification Council, its initiatives, and membership, go to....

http://www.itcertcouncil.org/Home.aspx