

Fast, cheap and easy: Five IT certifications that won't break you

Looking to get a certification to boost your IT career? Here's a shortlist of relatively easy-to-obtain and inexpensive certs that are valued by employers.

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Getting an IT certification that will advance your career doesn't have to break the bank. While the costs associated with acquiring some certifications are high, others that can carry weight with employers are much easier on your wallet -- and your time. No certification worth its salt is easy, but some are easier to complete than others.

With this in mind, *Computerworld* asked experts in the certification and training industry to name their top picks: those IT certifications that are relatively inexpensive and easy to obtain -- and that employers value.

The certifications that meet these criteria tend to be foundational. They may be best suited to those new to a discipline or to IT professionals who want to pick up skills in areas adjacent to their core expertise.

Related story: [Free and cheap ways to study for IT certifications](#)

Before you make a decision to pursue a certification for your own career needs, [these tips](#) can help you decide whether a prospective certification is a good fit. With that caveat, here's the shortlist.

1. [CompTIA A+](#)

If you're just getting started in IT, this is the certification to get. [CompTIA A+](#), which covers the job skills required to configure and maintain personal computers (including laptops) and mobile devices, is one of 17 certifications offered by [CompTIA](#), a nonprofit trade association that's highly respected in the industry.

Unlike CompTIA's more basic [Strata IT Fundamentals](#) certification, A+ is a foundational certification for professionals that can qualify you for a job; in fact, it's often cited as a requirement. It's also one of a handful of IT certifications that are accredited by a third party -- in this case the [American National Standards Institute](#) (ANSI).

CompTIA A+ is broad-based rather than vendor-specific, there are no prerequisites, and you can do all of your studying online or using books, says Jim Zimmerman, director of product marketing at e-learning vendor Skillsoft. "Most people just use books to prepare -- no need to take an instructor-led course," he adds. (Not that they aren't available: Global Knowledge Training, for example, offers a classroom-based training course for \$3,295.) You will, however, need access to hardware and a network at home or at work for hands-on self-training.

Expenses related to the A+ certification include the price of two exams, at \$188 each, plus a study book, which will typically set you back \$50 to \$80. Time requirements will vary with your level of



experience. "If you're just getting started, an A+ certification can be daunting," says Zimmerman. But if you already have some experience, spending a few hours with a preparatory book may suffice, says James Stanger, senior director of certification product management at CompTIA.

2. [Microsoft Technology Associate](#)

Microsoft offers its product-centric [MTA certifications](#) in three tracks: IT Infrastructure, Database and Development. You can earn an MTA certification by passing any exam in one of these tracks, from Windows Server Administration Fundamentals in the IT Infrastructure track to Software Testing Fundamentals in the Development track.

"The MTA appeals to those new to IT... and those already in IT who want knowledge in areas adjacent to their current job role," says Greg Timpany, senior marketing research manager at IT training firm Global Knowledge. "This gives you entry-level exposure." Exams are priced at \$115.

Like the A+ certification, MTA credentials are entry-level, foundational certifications. As such, you don't need to spend a few thousand dollars on classroom training for an MTA-level certification such as Windows Operating System Fundamentals. A good preparatory book and/or online materials are all you need -- assuming that you have access at work or at home to the hardware and software you need.

One caveat here: MTA certifications won't count toward a [Microsoft Certified Solutions Expert](#) (MCSE) credential. IT professionals going that direction might want to opt for [Microsoft Certified Solutions Associate](#) (MCSA) certifications, a track that focuses more on designing and building systems and that is a prerequisite for the MCSE. "Earning an MCSA requires a moderate time and monetary commitment," says Timpany, but, like the MTA path, it can be done through a program of self-study. Exam costs start at \$150.

3. [VMware Certified Associate](#)

VMware's VCA certification will let you get your foot in the door with one of the most popular [virtualization](#) technologies used in business -- and demands only a low to moderate time commitment, says Timpany. VMware offers variations of the VCA in three areas: [Data Center Virtualization](#), [Cloud](#), and [Workforce Mobility](#).

Exams within each category cost \$120 apiece, and VMware offers a free online e-learning program for each topic to get you up and running. There are no prerequisites, and outside of the e-learning program you do not need access to VMware products to study for and pass the exams.

4. [Cisco Certified Entry Networking Technician](#)/[Cisco Certified Network Associate Routing and Switching](#) or [CompTIA Network+](#)

If Cisco products are central to your professional life, consider a Cisco certification -- but skip the entry-level [Cisco Certified Technician](#) (CCT) credential. "The CCNA Routing and Switching track is the better way to start unless you have no networking experience at all," says Stanger.

[Cisco Certified Entry Networking Technician](#) (CCENT) is the first certification on the road to the [Cisco Certified Network Associate \(CCNA\) Routing and Switching](#) credential, which covers the administration and maintenance of midrange Cisco routers and switches, according to Cisco. It is, says Timpany, "the launching pad for a career path with Cisco technologies."

CCNA Routing and Switching consists of two exams at \$150 each: Interconnecting Cisco Networking Devices Part 1 (ICND1, the CCENT certification) and ICND2 -- or you can take one

accelerated exam (\$295). In addition, Cisco recommends, but does not require, one to three years of related experience.

If you don't need Cisco-specific expertise, or if you want to broaden your credentials, the equally desirable [CompTIA Network+](#) certification is worthy of consideration. In fact, the CCNA is commonly combined with the CompTIA Network+, which focuses on a more general skill set. About two thirds of CCNAs also hold the Network+ certification (exam cost: \$269), according to Global Knowledge.

Both the CCNA and the Network+ are accredited by ANSI. There's a substantial overlap between the two credentials, Timpany says, which means if you get one you should be able to attain the other with just a bit more effort -- and, of course, about \$300 more.

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How much do they make?

How much do people with these IT certifications typically earn? Global Knowledge Training and Windows IT Pro commissioned a survey that shows the median compensation for IT professionals for dozens of IT certifications. The [2014 IT Skills and Salary Survey report](#) is based on responses from 10,299 IT professionals and 1,798 business professionals.

But while the survey serves as a general benchmark as to what people who hold a given certification typically earn, keep in mind that **these figures don't necessarily reflect what you would earn after completing the certification**. The results include people with many different experience levels and who may have other credentials as well.

- **Cisco Certified Entry Networking Technician:** \$70,000
- **Cisco Certified Network Associate Routing and Switching:** \$81,308
- **CompTIA A+:** \$73,000
- **CompTIA Network+:** \$73,960
- **ITIL Foundation:** \$92,715
- **Microsoft Technology Associate** (median for all exams/tracks): \$61,050
- **VMware Certified Associate - Data Center Virtualization:** \$70,500

Source: Global Knowledge/Windows IT Pro 2014 IT Skills and Salary Survey

5. [ITIL Foundation](#)

A career isn't made on technical certifications alone, and the [ITIL Foundation](#) certification is the starting point for understanding IT service management and the fundamentals of business process transformation. "Practitioners with an ITIL Foundation certification can easily earn in excess of \$90,000 a year," says Timpany -- that is, assuming that your employer has adopted and follows [Information Technology Infrastructure Library best practices](#).

This is the only ITIL certification that has no prerequisites. Axelos, which runs the ITIL program, doesn't set exam prices or administer the tests, but Global Knowledge charges \$170 for a paper test or \$190 for the online exam.

Foundation certificate holders can then move on to test for one or more of the [ITIL Intermediate Level qualifications](#)-- modules focusing on different aspects of ITIL. But each of the nine modules

requires completion of an accredited training course, and at least two years of IT experience is recommended.

Which IT certification is right for you? A checklist

That IT certification may sound great on paper, but is it really a good fit for your needs? Before investing your time and money, ask yourself these questions:

Is the certification valued by your employer or industry? If it's a recognized or required certification in your business, industry or line of work, then it's worth considering. If not, then you need to be doubly sure that the credential makes sense for your career before committing.

Is the certification accredited? Unfortunately, most IT certifications -- including some of those recommended here -- are not accredited by independent third parties, says Roy Swift, chief workforce development officer at ANSI. Why should you care? Accredited certifications are reviewed by industry experts to ensure that the content is relevant to real jobs and that tests are fair and prove competency, Swift says. Some certifications don't rigorously assess people's knowledge, skills and abilities, and employers know that -- which means you could be left with empty pockets and no job prospects.

Is the certification commonly cited as a requirement in job postings online? If so, that's a good indicator that it carries weight with potential employers. Having it won't get you the job, but it could represent table stakes for getting the interview.

Is the certification focus broad-based or vendor-specific? Generally speaking, broad certifications such as CompTIA's Network+ are more valuable than vendor-centric ones -- that is, unless the certification is associated with one of the [dominant vendors in enterprise IT](#), such as Microsoft or Cisco. Even then, many IT professionals pursue a general credential in addition to a vendor-specific one. You might be administering Windows servers or Cisco routers today, but your next gig could be with a firm running products from Red Hat or Juniper Networks.

What is the true cost of the certification? Be sure to include total preparation costs as well as the exam fee itself. Can you do everything virtually, through e-learning and books, or will you need to take a \$3,000 class? And find out up front if you will be required to sit through a course as a precondition before sitting for the exam, as that adds substantially to your cost, says Skillsoft's Zimmerman.

Do you have access to what you need to practice what you learn? Some certifications require spending considerable hands-on time with the subject software or hardware, Zimmerman notes. If you don't have access to what's required, either at home or through your employer, you may need to attend a class or use a simulator, such as Skillsoft's Virtual Practice Labs. Those costs can add up, so budget for them before you make a commitment.

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