

## 10 Steps To A Quality Cisco Certification

With the rapid growth and expansion in the field of network technology there is increasing demand for skilled network professionals. Cisco Systems has long been the industry leader in the field of data networking and continues to grow market share in all major technology areas, including those areas of current high demand such as voice, video, and wireless. Gaining experience with and certifications in Cisco technologies can provide a safe harbor for your career in uncertain economic times such as these. While many technology professionals are interested in Cisco certifications there is often confusion as to the best path to take and how to achieve a quality certification experience.

Achieving that quality certification experience is the key. Many of us have been in the industry long enough to hear the term 'paper certifications' which refers to a certification gained by an individual with little resulting practical experience and knowledge; the certification is said to be worth as much as the paper it is printed on. When you make the decision to pursue a Cisco certification you should make the decision to pursue a quality certification, to which you will commit the investment of your time and energy with the goal of gaining the technical skill set and knowledge to make you a leader in the field. Without the drive and determination to earn the certification you are doing nothing more than memorizing answers and taking tests. This is how 'paper certifications' are born; little effort is put in to learning the technology and little effort is put in to earning the certification.

To aid you in earning a quality Cisco certification I have put together a recommended set of steps that will assist you in making the right decisions along the way. These steps are designed to build an in-depth knowledge of the network technologies you are studying to pass your certification exams, while allowing you to maintain that knowledge for application in real-world scenarios while on the job.

**Step 1 - There Are No Experts.** In your career experiences you are likely to meet individuals who consider themselves an 'expert' or 'guru' in the field. This is often intimidating for people new in their technical careers. It shouldn't be and the reason is simple: there exists no such thing as an 'expert' in the field of networking. There is so much technology in this field, with the technology changing and maturing so rapidly that it is impossible to know enough to be an 'expert' in the subject. By the time you could learn enough to master the technology it has already become antiquated.

The breath and depth of network technology can be overwhelming. Remember that you do not need to know everything about networking to be a good network professional. Cisco offers so many areas of network technology that you can pick an area that interests you and focus on that area. As your career grows so too will your interest in other areas of network technology. As a starting point select one technology such as telephony, data security, or wireless and focus your energy on gaining knowledge and certification in just that area. Ignore the urge to learn everything as it will only rob you of your focus and delay your efforts to earn your certification.

**Step 2 - Select an Area of Focus.** Cisco offers certifications in several areas of network technology. Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA) and Cisco Certified Network Professional (CCNP) certification tracks are focused on the core components of network technology; routing and switching. Cisco Certified Network Associate - Security (CCNA-Security) and Cisco Certified Security Professional (CCSP) certification tracks deal with network security technologies such as firewalls, intrusion detection and prevention, and the like. Cisco Certified Network Associate - Voice (CCNA-Voice) and Cisco Certified Voice Professional (CCVP) certifications are focused on telephony technologies. There are several other certifications available to choose from and it is important that you select the certification track that you find interesting and rewarding. Once you achieve your first certification you will likely want to work towards other certifications that interest you, but the key is to concentrate on one area of certification and to focus on that area as your specialty.

**Step 3 - Invest in Your Future.** Gaining a certification takes an investment of both time and money. Before you sit for your first certification exam it is important that you spend your time and money in a manner that positively impacts the outcome. All too often an individual either fails to invest in the proper study materials or attempts to study from cheap or free study materials. This usually results in gaps in the knowledge the candidate is building, poor preparation and low exam scores.

Take the time to research the study materials available. While Cisco Press certification study books and guides are an excellent resource because they are written with the exams in mind, there are a wide range of other study materials including books, videos, and test simulators available to you. Do your homework before investing money in study materials by asking peers, co-workers, or by asking for recommendations on public Internet forums. Read book reviews on sites like Amazon.com, or seek out several of the Cisco CCIE (Cisco Certified Internetwork Expert) web sites or blogs. I have found that most CCIEs are more than willing to recommend good study materials they or their peers have used to obtain prerequisite certifications like the CCNA or CCNP.

**Step 4 - Create a Study Plan.** It is not enough to simply study the material. You need to create a plan for how and when you will study and then stick to your plan. Develop a study routine and practice good study habits. Study away from distractions such as television, music or buzzing cell phones and schedule study time around meals so that hunger isn't breaking your concentration (having a glass of water and a few cookies nearby can help to keep you on task).

Remember that a single hour of quality study time is worth several hours of study filled with noise and interruption. To create these quality hours of study you need to devise a study plan that puts you in the right environment during the right time of day with limited interruption and distraction. Make sure that your study plan provides a minimum of two hours per day of quality study time and stick to your plan.

**Step 5 - Study for Your Future, Not an Exam.** Depending on the certification you are studying for it may take several days or weeks of consistent study before you feel comfortable enough to pass the exam. Remember to study until you are confident that you know the material; you will know when you are ready. Refrain from scheduling an exam until you know you are ready, as you do not want to feel pressured by a looming exam date if it is taking longer to absorb the material than you anticipated. It is important to note that you will need to retain what you have studied for one exam as this knowledge will likely appear in some form on one of the other exams required for the certification. This is why I recommend studying for the future and not for an exam. Study to retain the information long term as you will need this information for one or more future exams. Study at a pace that allows you to retain the most information, and allow time to go back and review material that you may not feel completely comfortable with.

Passing Cisco exams require that you have a thorough understanding of the exam content. Because Cisco exams can cover several areas of technology each exam requires concentrated study as part of your preparation. Remember that you are studying for your future, not for an exam. Keep this in mind as you study and it will help you to stay on task and focused on the overall goal of achieving the certification.

**Step 6 - Avoid the Easy Road.** This is one of the most important pieces of advice I can offer anyone studying for a technical exam. While it might seem easier to pay for cliff notes, brain dump exams (some of which are explicitly forbidden by Cisco as a study material and can result in your being barred from certification), boot camps, or other methods of fast track memorization using these options will not provide the same benefit as taking your time to study and learn the material. By memorizing material simply to pass the exams you are robbing yourself of the opportunity to learn the technology in-depth and to develop the understanding of the technology that you will need to apply in the real world. You can develop this understanding only from investing your time and energy to study the material as it should be studied.

The caveat to this step applies to experienced network professionals that may need to obtain a certification quickly by passing exams with little study time, often referred to as testing out of an exam. Often times a network professional has enough hands-on experience in real world environments to pass the exam with only a refresher of the material. The benefit of certification boot camps can be realized here, as the technical material is covered at a rapid pace to allow the certification candidate to sit for all required exams in short order. This is not the recommended path for those new to network technology or those with little experience in the field. Boot camps are typically recommended only for those individuals already having previous experience and the prerequisite knowledge to pass the exams.

**Step 7 - Concentrate on One Exam at a Time.** You may find it tempting to study for more than one exam at a time; it is more common than you might think for many reasons. You might become bored of a particularly dry topic or study material and change focus to find something more interesting. The pressure of having to study for and pass several certification exams could create the

perceived need to split your study time between multiple exams. No matter the reason it is usually not a good idea to try to study for multiple exams at one time. The continued change in focus from one topic to another can impede your ability to concentrate on and retain the material, preventing you from being as prepared for the exam as you could have been. Resist the urge and dedicate yourself to passing one exam at a time.

**Step 8 - Balance Life and Study.** It is easy to become overwhelmed by certification study. The weeks of concentrated focus required to pass an exam can quickly consume you and raise the possibility of 'burn out.' You should spend as much time as required in studying for your certification exams but remember to make time for the other things in your life, as well. Taking routine breaks or stepping away from the books for a few hours is important. This will help to not only prevent your becoming bored with the material but will provide you will an opportunity to digest and reflect on the information you've learned so far.

**Step 9 - Create a Study Guide.** One of the best ways to retain the material you are covering is to create your own 'study guide'. This is nothing more than a compiled list of the terms, details, and explanations of the information covered in your study materials. Include only the information which you find to be the most difficult or challenging for you to comprehend or memorize, as this will be the information that determines your grade on the exam. Break your study guide in to logical sections keeping related information together for quick reference. Make your study guide as simple to read through as possible.

On the day on your exam arrive at the testing center an hour early. Take this hour to sit in your car and quietly review your study guide; cover the material several times. By doing this you are refreshing your memory with the information you felt most difficult to retain, and this information will likely address the majority of difficult exam questions you will face. Cisco exams are 'adaptive' in that the testing software will continually analyze the answers you provide and present additional questions to challenge you on your weakest areas. It is this information you are attempting to review prior to taking the exam. Once you feel you have adequately reviewed your study guide it is time to enter the testing center without delay and sit for the exam.

If you take the extra time to compile and use your personal study guide you will find it invaluable in achieving higher scores and a greater level of confidence. Remember too that information covered on one exam is likely to appear on the next. Reviewed past study guides prior to each exam in a certification track will be of great benefit.

**Step 10 - Test Confidently.** When it is time to sit for the exam it is important to be confident. Rely on your studying to get you through the exam and remember the study guide material you reviewed earlier. If you have taken the time to properly study for the exam there is no reason to be nervous or anxious. Keep an eye on the test timer and make sure you are not spending too much time on any one question. Where you just don't know the answer narrow down the choices and make an educated guess; never leave a question unanswered. Don't worry about passing or failing, instead focus on achieving the highest score you can.

While taking the exam try to remember as many test questions as you can, especially those where you were not sure of the answer. If you do fail the exam put your emotions in check and head back to the car. Take a few minutes to write down every question you can remember and the answer you provided. Use this list by reviewing your answers against the study materials to see if you were correct, and if not what the correct answer should have been. These questions will likely appear again when you retake the exam and you will now be armed with the correct answer.

While these steps may be common sense to some of us for many they will be the keys to earning a certification. Follow these steps and you will not only pass the exams but also score higher. More importantly, you will retain the information you learn while studying and be able to apply that information in real-world network environments. Achieving a quality Cisco certification isn't a difficult endeavor. It takes dedication and commitment, but also a love of the technology. This single trait alone is the key to your certification. If you love the technology you will be more than willing to invest the time and energy in your own success as a Cisco certified professional.