

Why Microsoft Office Certifications?

In today's business world it is important for everyone to be fluent in the software they use. Much time is wasted when an employee has to research how to solve a problem or accomplish a task. Everyone uses computers in the performance of their daily duties – or if they don't, they probably should. Microsoft Office software can do more than just write a memo, or prepare a cost analysis, or send e-mail, it can help workers get things done. The software isn't cheap either. Every company has a significant amount of capital tied up in their computer systems. The computer industry has spent billions of dollars and billions of man-hours building them – to help people do their jobs. The more you know about how the software works and what it can do, the more you will find yourself getting more things done quicker.

Sounds pretty simple doesn't it? The more you know – the more effective you are. There is just a catch or two. One problem is that even though Microsoft tries very hard to make its software easy to use, most people still have difficulty figuring out how to use it. In addition, some of the features are not easily noticeable or understood by people – so they do not know that a feature exists, or what its capabilities are. Then we have the issue of how these features apply to their job and the task at hand. It can take years to discover that you've been doing an easy task the hard way.

So what are the answers? They are training, experience, and certification.

Most hiring supervisors, recruiters, and human resources departments spend a lot of time sifting through resumes and interviewing applicants to find people who fit the job requirements and can do the work asked of them. But how do they know? Anyone can say they know Word or Excel, but how much do they really know? What features do they use, and do they understand how to apply them to their job? What is needed is a way to measure the knowledge and capabilities of prospective employees – so they ask them a battery of questions, maybe put together some exercises and evaluate their performance. Why re-invent the wheel when Microsoft will do all of this for them? Through the Microsoft Office Specialist (MOS) and Microsoft Certified Application Specialist (MCAS) certifications, Microsoft recognizes ordinary people that understand what their applications are capable of and how to use their advanced features.

So that would take care of prospective employees – but what about the ones that are currently working, do they really know their stuff? These applications are complex and rich with features. Many of these features operate in a way that is not intuitive – they don't work the way normal people think they should. The programmers and designers understand how they work, but do the users? Most people are taught on-the-job by the person they are replacing, or by a co-worker that knows how to get the job done. This is fine in many cases, but often it leads to the old problem of *you don't know what you don't know*. Someone figured out a way to do something and it works fine for them but that may be the only way they know how to do it. There may be a better way. The only way to be sure is by understanding the features of the software and how they can be used to get things done. This is where training comes in. Many people learn by reading books, watching videos, and listening to experts on the software. Any training method can be effective – depending on the ability of the student to understand the concepts being taught and manipulate the medium used for teaching. Some people learn well from books, others from video, and others from audio, but they don't learn at the same rates from these different sources. One training medium stands out above all the rest – instructor led classroom training. That's why it is

used in schools across the world. Nothing beats hands-on instruction in a lab type format from an expert. A good instructor listens to his students and helps them to grasp the concepts he is teaching, giving each student opportunities to ask questions and learn from him. He will use different media to provide his students with multiple learning paths. A good instructor will also learn from his students. They may have a question he has never heard or he may learn a more effective way of communicating a concept to his students. This can be especially instrumental in a classroom setting because other student's questions will provide the class with a truly dynamic learning experience.

Certification validates the knowledge gained from good training, so that just leaves the issue of experience. Every business is different – if for no other reason than the people involved are different and have different knowledge levels. No new hire knows the specifics of any business process. So one of a business's greatest assets is their current employees, no one knows the business better than they do. No instructor knows his student's job better than the student themselves. These are the people who benefit most from instructor led training; they are the ones with the real-world applications and problems that the software features were designed to assist with. Many students come out of a class with a theoretical knowledge of what the software can do, but no practical experience. That is not to say that they do not benefit from these classes, just that it takes experience and practice to put the knowledge they have gained to use. We often see a seasoned worker come to class with an understanding of what they do and they learn how to apply the software to it.

So how do you cover all the bases? Take a seasoned worker who knows how to get the job done, send them to training to learn better ways of using the software, and then get them certified to prove that they know what they have learned. This validates the expense of the training, increases the value of the employee, and brings that value back to the workplace where they can mentor others and spread the wealth of what they have learned to other employees. Your employees will stop wasting time trying to figure out how to do something and simply do the job right - the first time.

- Peter Hawley 2009