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Tid Bit

by Willie Favero

While attending a conference this fall, I was amazed at the number of people waiting in line to take one of the many DB2 certification exams. One could only assume that to them, this exam was important enough that missing one, maybe more, technical sessions just to sign up seemed like a fair exchange. Of course, once signed up, they would most likely have to miss at least one more session to take the exam. In addition, if they were planning to take multiple exams, they might miss even more sessions.

I observed a similar event at the spring IDUG conference. On the Sunday prior to the start of IDUG, an all day seminar was held to prepare folks to take one of the certification exams. The seminar was completely sold out. Why did the attendees at these conferences think it was so important that they attempt to pass one of these certification exams? Waiving the usual fee and taking the exam free at the conference was probably a major motivator for some. However, I don&##146;t think that was the primary motivation for most. More and more DB2 professionals are being led to believe that they need some kind of certification to be successful in our business today.

Have employers simply reached a point where they need some external source to measure the usefulness of their IT employees? Perhaps the industry, with its multiple database managers, now needs a ruler by which to measure a database professional. Perhaps the need to take the exam is simply the desire for an occasional challenge to learn &##147;how good they really are&##148;?

This may not be the most humorous topic my column has covered. However, it has been on my mind for some time and this column seemed like the perfect forum to voice a few personal thoughts on the subject. What follows are some random thoughts I had flying back from IDUG Europe &##150; they have absolutely nothing to do with any company, organization or group.

Despite what you read here, I need to state up front that I actually favor some kind of certification. There are far too many self-proclaimed &##147;experts&##148; in our industry already. Too many people assume fiction is gospel simply because it is in print or stated with expert authority. Somehow testing, certification, and eventually labeling will all become unavoidable in the near future. So, it seemed only right that I throw my hat into the testing arena and attempt to pass a few

of the certification exams. The basic reasoning was nothing more than to learn whether I could pass them. Passing these tests is a personal accomplishment, but I do not feel it demonstrates how well I know DB2. Thus, you will find no mention in my biography or on my business cards that I am &##147;certified.&##148; Nevertheless, it is the result of taking these exams, three successfully and one unsuccessfully so far, that actually prompted the focus of this column on the &##147; concept&##148; of certification.

Let&##146;s start with a little back patting. I&##146;m sure I can handle that part of the column (see, there is humor here after all.). Here is a tally of my score so far. Although I have managed a passing grade for the DB2 UDB Version 5 Fundamentals exam, the prerequisite for the remaining exams, it is also the only failure so far. That first attempt at a certification exam does prove that ego can, on occasion, get the best of all of us. I walked into a testing session while attending IDUG Europe a few years ago and took the exam cold turkey. I was sure it would be a cakewalk. Just in case, on the chance I messed up, Europe seemed far enough away so no one would find out. Then &##151; ooops! A 54 percent is not an acceptable grade in IBM&##146;s testing eyes. That night I picked up the certification book (excellent read, by the way), and read it cover to cover. I re-took the test a few days later and passed both the Fundamentals and DB2 UDB Version 5 Application Development on UNIX, Windows, and OS/2 exams. Can you imagine an old OS/390 dinosaur passing an UNIX/Windows based exam? I am now an IBM Certified Solutions Expert for DB2 UDB Version 5 Application development. What a mouthful!

Does my certification mean I can now get a job writing applications using DB2 for NT and become an applications programmer once again? Yes, I was an applications programmer once, for a very short time. Remembering back to that time, I doubt that any company that wants to stay in business would want me to program for them, certification or not. And here lies the first flaw in any certification program, not just DB2&##146;s. You can get the certification without having the skills to be certified. I must mention that since that time, I have gone on to pass the DB2 UDB Version 7 Database Administration for OS/390 exam and received that certification. But even acquiring a certification in an area in which I am probably qualified still carries a flaw. The certification is for a version of DB2 for OS/390 not yet available.

Let&##146;s talk more about the DB2 UDB Version 7 Database Administration for OS/390 exam. I took this exam at the IBM DB2 Technical Conference a few weeks ago in Las Vegas. Now in my case, using the time to sign up and then take the test may have actually saved me some money by keeping me out of the casinos (just joking). Big surprise &##151; I actually passed. (I know some of you had your doubts. Shame on you.) I thought I did exceptionally well. Not only did I pass, but also I passed an exam on a version of DB2, Version 7, that is not yet available.

Wouldn&##146;t you think passing the Version 7 test would make me happy with that exam at least? Not a chance. I have a problem with this test also. Although I did very well in four out of the five sections, I got about 50 percent of the SQL questions wrong. How did I manage that? My excuse is simple: syntax. Many SQL questions were based on SQL syntax. I have been telling attendees at my presentations and students in my seminars for 16 years that you shouldn&##146;t memorize information that is easily available to you in a manual. You need to know where to find it. A true professional knows how to use the resources available to them. I really do not care what keyword I can&##146;t use on an SQL ALTER statement. The last time I checked, there was an SQL Reference manual on my notebook computer for that purpose. Besides, you may memorize SQL syntax, but it has been known to change.

New and different stuff is introduced in DB2 all the time. One method for testing an individual&##146;s true skill would be to have him find the correct information in the manual.

Let&##146;s take an old IBM DB2 course as an example. At one point, IBM Education taught a five-day class on application design as part of its DB2 curriculum. The students were split into groups of four or five. The instructors were there simply to explain the scenarios and monitor the students. Each of the 8 to 10 scenarios was based on a real DB2 situation faced by customers. The students would arrive at solutions and present them to the class for an open discussion. They were given manuals to use as references and could ask the instructors questions. They solved real problems using real resources. This was a true demonstration of the skills they had acquired during the class. What is the problem with expecting a minimum training requirement or proof of equivalent experience prior to taking the exam? Perhaps we should make the exams longer, more challenging, and allow the use of the DB2 Manuals to research questions. Wouldn&##146;t it be novel if being &##147;certified&##148; actually impressed all the DB2 professionals with whom you dealt?

While I am on this little rant, one of my recent &##147;battles&##148; is the proliferation of DB2 outdated nonsense and misinformation. We still have people asserting that the correct way to do something in DB2 is the method they learned in some class in 1985. It may come as a surprise to a few that DB2 Version 7 is just a little different from DB2 Version 1.1. I was even told once that LOCKSIZE ANY has always been in DB2 and should always be used;, that is why it is the default. I even noticed at the last Tech Conference, that Richard Yevich was distributing a poster describing DB2 myths. What a great idea! I applaud him. It seems that passing bad DB2 information from one DB2 generation to the next is getting under the skin of others too. I would even be willing to bet that this same person, using the same techniques they learned 15 years ago, could pass a certification exam with just a little bit of study.

We cannot forget to point out the criteria for passing a certification exam. This is another aspect of the certification process that upsets me. A 68 percent overall correct is all that is necessary to pass the test. When someone takes one of these exams, they need answer only a little more than half the questions correctly. If you flip a coin, it will come up heads 49 to 51 percent of the time. Does that mean if I get a 69 percent in the Applications Certification exam, that an employer should be satisfied that only 69 percent of the programs and SQL I wrote actually worked?

Is certification needed? In my opinion, absolutely! Is certification available today? That&##146;s an entirely different question &##150; a question I am not qualified to answer. It is ludicrous to think that someone making it through a 70 minute test and getting a little more than half the questions right is qualified to have the title Certified Expert. In fact, using only a test may be the real problem. While teaching at IBM, we tested the IBMers who attended some of our classes. This testing went on for only a short while. It really did not accomplish what we had hoped. We were not able to tell from the test whether we had created a good or bad DB2 technician. We discovered that some students were better than others at taking a test after sitting in a classroom for 10 days.

Yet, when you interview a prospective employee or future consultant, what else do you have available? DB2 Certification is off and running. But there is still much more to do before it becomes a test on which we can really stake our jobs. We cannot have certification ending up like the old joke about doctors who asked whether your DB2 professional got As or Ds in his/her exams.

About the author

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