

RHCE: Red Hat certification GETTING CERTIFIED

Now that Linux is becoming recognised in the corporate world, what can you do to make your skill set more noticeable and relevant so to gain that new job? Robert Morris has the answer

RHCE is an acronym of Red Hat Certified Engineer, and is Red Hat's certification programme for Linux professionals. It's one of a number of certification schemes throughout the IT industry – with perhaps the most ubiquitous being Microsoft's MCP and MCSE qualifications – all geared towards giving the employer or manager a benchmark against which the suitability of a candidate for a job position or project can be evaluated (and, of course, generating profits for the vendors who are providing the certification).

The MCSE, in many respects the Microsoft parallel to the RHCE scheme, has received bad press in some quarters for being too easy to pass (due to it consisting entirely of multiple-choice questions), and therefore not a good reflection of the "real world" skills which professionals dealing with Microsoft systems should possess. Red Hat has countered this with the lab-based tests in the RHCE, which account for the majority of the marks. It would have been very easy for Red Hat to make money from dishing out easy-to-pass certificates, however it has resisted this temptation and instead taken the view that the industry needs a well-respected Linux certification programme, and that to gain such respect the exam needs to be challenging and be reflective of candidates' skills and experiences, not just their

ability to "cram" answers to simplistic multiple choice questions.

This is an important point, for one of the hurdles facing the adoption of Linux in a corporate environment is the extra difficulty of selecting and managing Linux-skilled people by managers, who most likely won't possess Linux skills themselves. Such managers need to have a reliable method of evaluating personnel for Linux projects and job positions, and the presence of a Linux certification scheme which carries industry-wide respect can surely only help in this.

The exam

Before commencing the exam a non-disclosure agreement must be signed, to prevent details of the questions/scenarios used being leaked, thereby ruining the validity of the certificate.

There are three components to the exam – debug, general knowledge and install/setup. Each of the three components are given equal weight, and in order to pass, an overall score of 80 per cent is required, with no less than 50 per cent in each component.

The debug lab exam is 2.5 hours in duration and consists of four scenarios where you are given an already installed Red Hat system and a fault report. Although no external documentation may be referred to, man pages and other online documentation can be consulted, as you would ordinarily find on an installed system.

The general knowledge exam is multiple-choice and is an hour in duration. No documentation may be referred to whatsoever in this part of the exam.

The install lab ("Server Install and Network Service Setup", to give it its full title) is 2.5 hours in duration. You are given a specification to work to, and a "clean" machine, onto which you install Red Hat and configure as specified. As with the debug exam, you are allowed to refer





to any documentation that may be found in the Red Hat distribution.

In total, together with coffee break and lunch, the exam takes up a full day. It's conducted at Red Hat training centres and is incorporated into their training programmes, as well as being a stand-alone exam. The Rapid Track Training and Certification Course is a week-long programme consisting of four days of training, with the exam immediately following on the fifth day.

The cost of the exam only (module RH302) is £485, plus VAT. RH300, the Rapid Track course, costs £1,599, and includes the RHCE exam. This compares quite favourably with other lab-based courses.

My experience

I originally booked for RH302 in my home town of Manchester, but this was cancelled due to lack of demand, so my booking was transferred to Red Hat's headquarters in Guildford. Having stayed in London the night before I had to struggle with the rush hour trains to get down to Guildford, and only just made it to Red Hat by 9am.

After the initial briefing, we got straight into the debug lab. I was impressed with the examining system, which is very well designed – using kickstart files downloaded from a remote server to give you your scenario installations. These are randomised, so should you look over the shoulder of the person in front, they will not be tackling the same problem as you, which is a good idea.

After a coffee break came the multiple-choice exam. You were able to collect your marks immediately afterwards from the examiner, although one criticism I had was that the examiner could not tell me which questions I had answered

incorrectly. This is a pity, because I would have liked to have looked up the correct answers afterwards, out of interest.

Lunch was provided by Red Hat, which was a nice touch. I had quite an interesting talk with the examiner over lunch, who proved to be very knowledgeable. The afternoon session was then taken up with the install lab.

As promised, I got my results emailed a few working days later (I did pass by the way!). My certificate arrived in the post a couple of weeks afterwards. This came with an RHCE lapel badge, which was a pleasant surprise. The certificate could benefit from being printed on something other than standard 80gsm paper, although what is probably more important is that the certificate number can be used to verify an RHCE using the form on Red Hat's Web site (the URL to this service, and other RHCE resources, are provided on my RHCE page at <http://www.r-morris.co.uk/rhce.html>)

Conclusion

Overall, the design and implementation of the RHCE programme is first class. It is a good measure of "real life" Linux skills, which of course can only be gained with an amount of hands-on experience. Although Red Hat is eager to point this out at every opportunity, the RHCE exam is under the same section of their Web site as the training courses, and their Rapid Track course, which combines the exam with four days of intensive training, only serving to reinforce the association.

Whilst certification may be an obvious follow-on from a training course, in order to gain the respect of management and decision makers, the RHCE needs to have some "real" experts on-board – people who have considerable Linux skills built from experience, and are obtaining certification to prove it. If it turns out that the vast majority of certificates are issued to those who have only just completed a training programme, then I fear that the respect Red Hat seems so anxious to acquire may be lost.

The RHCE has met with some opposition from certain sections of the Linux community. It is argued, with some justification, that its not appropriate for a company such as Red Hat to be setting standards and that this should instead be a community-driven process, and that any profits made from certification should be ploughed back in to the Open Source movement. Unfortunately we do not, at this point in time, have the luxury of choice – in the corporate world Linux is still an outsider in the majority of cases, and therefore we need a good certification scheme for Linux professionals, with the respect of the industry at large and not just within the community, if Linux is to penetrate into the mainstream. At the moment, for this the RHCE is our best bet.

The author

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