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Certifications versus Experience

Let's say you buy an old house. It has knob and tube electrical wiring so ancient that the insulation crumbles off the wires when you touch them. You want to replace the old electrical system with new, modern wiring throughout the house. You know you need a licensed electrician to do that work.

Now let's say you look at your business and realize at least some of it needs modernization. In particular, some of its computer systems are showing their age, and other parts of the business probably could use computers where they have none now. You might need to change business processes to make the best use of Information Technology upgrades, too.

This is not as clear-cut as rewiring a house. There cannot be a single license or certification to attest that a person knows all about computing. The field is too large. The technology changes so fast that nobody can keep up with all of it. Everyone in IT works in a niche—desktop PC support, mainframe support, database administration, network design...

Certifications do not even exist for some niches in IT. When they don't, a person's track record is all you can go by when you decide who to engage. But where certifications do exist, how much should you rely on them?

When There Are No Certifications

At the two extreme ends of the field, the oldest and newest technologies rarely have meaningful certifications to guide you. By the time the field matured enough to begin offering any certifications, the oldest legacy technologies were already in the shadow of sexier newer tech. People devising certifications focus on the newer tech.

Don't dismiss people who are expert with that old legacy tech, though. It takes a lot of skill and cleverness to build usable systems in environments that offer limited resources. Everything, including software, has to be compact and efficient. The brains that built those systems are accustomed to being thorough and demanding excellence of themselves and their colleagues.

They don't have computer science degrees because such degrees did not exist when they went to school. They may never have attended any college classes.

I personally work with some of those old systems from time to time. A number of them were built in the 1980s. They are still

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running, still operating machinery and making money. It is not unusual for them to run 2 to 5 years between reboots.

Just in case you think this applies only for manufacturing systems, remember when the Space Shuttle first flew. I worked with that, too. In the lab where we ran performance tests on Shuttle communications systems, I worked with some of the world's top experts in what was then the relatively new art of digitally encoding information onto radio signals—and most of them had never gone to college. I always understood that they knew more than I did. Even though I had a degree and they didn't, I needed to learn from them, not the other way around.

The newest tech has no certifications for a different reason. It is so new, nobody knows yet how to teach it or what to include in a certification for it.

When there are no degrees or certifications for needed skills, pay attention to track records. When a person has done good work with the type of legacy system you use, their history is a sample of what you can expect. When a person has repeatedly done well with bleeding edge tech, that indicates they can come up to speed readily with the new tech you have chosen.

Where Degrees or Certifications Are Available

When a technology matures somewhat, certifications, training courses and degrees begin to be available for it. University courses and degrees tend to lag farther behind the current state of the art than non-credit training courses and industry certifications.

The most important meaning of a degree is that a graduate has learned how to learn—and in information technology, with the state of the art constantly advancing by leaps and bounds, the most essential trait for a good IT worker is being ready to learn continuously to keep up with their niche in the field.

But you cannot expect university graduates to have learned everything they need to know to be productive in the commercial world. A few manage to do that, but most do not. Even those who do are not necessarily well rounded yet. I will never forget the fellow who had worked his way through earning a degree in computer science, then admired the large new hard drive I had just gotten in my notebook PC... by bouncing the PC on the desk while the drive was spinning! The university never taught him how hard drives work.

That's the rub about degrees and certifications. They tell you whether someone is willing to learn and willing to try to stay current with their niche. A degree or certification is a good sign. But it is no substitute for depth and experience.

Even if the person you are considering has exactly the degree or certification that you think is ideal for the work that needs to be done, you still need to look at track record—and you would be wise to keep an eye open for someone who can do the work well, but lacks the paper credential.

A Few Cases In Point

There is no substitute for sound judgment, which tends to require some experience. These are just a couple of examples I can offer at first hand.

- One group of new graduates built an application that became a steady earner for their company. Their employer preferred C, but one of the group tried to emulate C++ in his C modules because C++ was what he knew best from college and loved. The result was nearly unmaintainable source code. He rose to management and literally had to pay the price in his budget for that mistake from his youth.
- A manufacturer's headquarters dictated a particular vendor's software for its supervisory-level data acquisition and archival, but the software could not keep up with a type of high speed equipment used at many of the factories. The manufacturer got around this by using an extra PLC computer to acquire and store the data from batch runs, then feed it into the corporate standard software at a slower rate after the batch. I led the team that set up block data transfers which readily kept up with the machinery, with no need for an extra intermediate computer. No one else in the team had thought of it. I have only attended a fraction of the training courses in the software that the others in the team attended, but I have more experience.

A manager at the manufacturer that needed high speed data acquisition tried to get me stricken off as technical lead because I had been to hardly any training courses about the software. I had been working with the software since its infancy, before most of the training courses existed. By being on the project, I saved him many tens of thousands.

As the economic situation changes, I see more projects getting underway. You can use degrees and certifications to help you find good talent. Just don't let the paper credential tail wag the dog. You want the best performers—even if they got that way, like the NASA engineers I worked with, by learning on their own.