The Secrets to Passing Certifications Exams
By Andrew Ramdayal

Certification exams can be extremely difficult to pass. I have been taking certification exams since the late 1990's, and have heard many stories from my students about their experiences with exams. In this article, I will share my experiences and some of these student stories with you - along with what I think is a "sure fire" way of passing any certification exam, from A+ to the CISSP and even the CCIE.

I remember sitting for my first technical certification exam about 15 years ago. It was the A+ test. I had taken a class about two months before, and had studied with the book that was given in the class. The exam consisted of a two-part test, and I had studied for about three weeks straight. I took the first test and passed. It was the greatest feeling in the world, knowing I had passed the test. I went out partying that night. The following week, I took the second part of the exam and I FAILED. It was the most awful feeling in the world. I had spent a great deal of money and had invested a lot of time studying for the test. I took the test three days later, and passed with almost a perfect score. After this experience, I made a promise to myself that I would never fail another test.

I know most of you are thinking that I am going to say that you should study for nine thousand hours and you will pass any exam - but who has that many hours to study when you have to take care of family and work a full-time job?

In June of 2002, I taught a CCNA(Cisco Certified Network Associate) class and there was a student who was really excited about the class. The student had done well in the class, and was one of my top students. After the class ended, I asked the student when he would be taking the exam, and he said in two weeks. I told him that if he needed any help, he should let me know. Eighteen months later, he came back to the school and I asked if he was ready for the next level, which was the CCNP. He told me that he hadn't taken the CCNA yet. His reason was that he got a little busy after the class and never really had any time for it - and that he was now back to the take the class over, because he had forgotten a lot of the material. When the second class ended, I took him over to the computer and made sure that he signed up for the exam two weeks later. He passed the test and is now a CCNP, working for a major telecommunications firm as a network engineer.

The first secret to passing an exam is to first sign up to take it. I know most people wait for their class to finish and then take the exam. I think this is ineffective, because when you finish the class, you might convince yourself to "take a break" and resume studies in a week. When the vacation is over, you have other things in your life that make you postpone studying for another week. One year later, you are still on vacation. The best approach is to register for the exam when you sign up for the class or during the class, because this will keep you focused on the test. How much time should you give yourself after the class? I would recommend a minimum of two weeks. If you feel you need less time or more time after the class, you can always reschedule the exam. This works well because no matter how many breaks you want to take, you still have to take the exam. Until you have taken it, the exam will be a weight on your shoulders, since you know that you will have to study for it.
I had one student who registered for the Security+ exam two weeks after the class had ended, but kept postponing the exam. Three months later, I met her and asked, "How was the test?" She said she hadn't taken the test yet, and that she was having a hard time studying for it. I sat down with her and created a study plan for her to pass the test in two weeks, which she did.

The second secret to passing an exam is to have a STEADY study plan. Steadiness is critical. I always had a study plan for every exam I took, and I love to help my students create study plans. An efficient and effective study plan begins with identifying the books and labs you need to read and practice - and then to schedule days and times. After defining this, I would then open my Microsoft Office Outlook calendar and input my plan. An example would be that on Monday, May 1, between 10-11p.m., I would read Chapter 2 and finish labs 2 and 3. I would try to just input a plan for Monday through Friday, because I knew that if I would miss one or two days, I would have Saturday to make up the study time. This is a great way to know if you are on schedule. It also lets you know if you need to extend or reduce the date of your exam.

The third secret is to diversify your study material. Almost all certification exams have multiple study guides. Some are easy to comprehend, while others are more difficult. For best results, you should read at least two study guides and review a couple of Websites that relate to your exam topics.

About one year ago, I met a student who had taken an A+ class and had passed one part of the exam, but had failed the second part twice. It was the same part that I had failed many years ago. I asked the student how the class was, and she said that the teacher was great and the book was ok. She had gone over the book at least five times. She didn't know what to do and didn't want to fail for the third time. I asked her if she had read another book besides the current book, which she hadn't. I recommended that she read another book. She passed the exam one week later with the use of other book.

I hope these secrets help you to pass your next exam. It has helped me to pass more than 45 exams with no failures since the time I failed the A+ exam so many years ago. These secrets have helped many of my students pass their certification exams. I am certain that they can help you, too.

About the Author:
Andrew Ramdayal is an instructor and currently holds over 40 professional certifications in Microsoft, Cisco, PMI, ISC², and ISACA. He has been teaching for over 10 years with over 15 years of professional experience in Project Management, systems administrations and management.