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The Intensity of Boot-Camp Training

 PRINT  EMAIL  SHARE By Heinz Ulm —

As an IT training instructor for more than 20 years, I've learned a lot about boot-camp-course design, preparation and the elements of success. IT boot camps can offer some of the greatest benefits to students seeking to pass a certification exam. And for an instructor, you have the opportunity to shape the IT industry by helping students achieve certification status, increase their earning potential and improve their professional standing. But boot camps are not to be taken lightly. They are one of the last steps in exam preparation offering highly condensed and focused training, which can lead to a stressful and tense environment.

IT boot camps are not intended to initiate the learning of a particular subject matter. They are valuable tools for students with a proficiency in the basic fundamentals, designed to assist them in honing required skills and gaining mastery-level expertise and full command of the subject matter. Effective IT drill instructors value the learning experience and aim to prepare students not just to pass their certification exams, but to return to their jobs with greater knowledge and a broader perspective. This responsibility possesses many challenges and you must be highly experienced, well prepared, organized and able to quickly assess a student's strengths and weaknesses.

Prepare for the unprepared. Many students will expect to obtain the rudimentary training they failed to acquire in advance of taking the boot-camp class. It can be very frustrating, as you often get students who lack a strong theoretical and practical understanding of the course content and don't have sufficient hands-on experience with the blueprints provided by the specific certification vendor, said boot-camp instructor Nikolai Pitaev. Students tend to underestimate the complexity and quantity of tasks and challenges that will be covered in a boot camp.

Training companies often implement a screening with set prerequisites students must possess prior to entering a boot camp. But, you will not completely screen out the premature candidates who require additional practice and hands-on experience. Some students rely too heavily on workbook exercises, which tend to separate each individual task and can give a false sense of full comprehension. When you throw all of the tasks together, as will be done on the exam and should be done in your training sessions, a new dimension of complexity is created, and that's when you separate the qualified from the novice.

In addition to managing your class time around students lacking a solid foundation, you must be prepared to handle situations that arise from those who are not equipped to endure the extreme stress and pressure. You will be challenged to keep students motivated, focused and on task. This is especially difficult when candidates arrive overconfident, naive regarding preparation options and with poor organizational skills. Having a thick skin will serve you well in order to remain confident in your training skills, as the ill-prepared rarely see the fault in their own lack of readiness.

Certification exams generally have crucial time management elements that can have even the most competent students on the ropes. Knowledge is simply not enough. Boot-camp instructors must continually drill students using severe time constraints so they can practice not just the technical requirements, but also achieving them under the pressure of a ticking clock. Instructors must emphasize the importance of efficiency as a key component to passing a certification exam and train students to improve their speed of performance while increasing their knowledge base. This facet of boot camp training is exceptionally stressful for most students.

As students begin to excel and improve their skills, they will expect the instructor to issue greater challenges. You have to be able to provide this benefit day in and day out, while finding time to assist those who are lagging behind. It's imperative that you stay on course with the instruction in order to keep students on track with the goal of the training program. You cannot be overly focused on the inexperienced and ill-prepared students at the expense of the rest of the class. Keep in mind, these students and/or their employers are paying a premium tuition fee to get the training they need to pass a certification exam and advance their professional expertise. They will not be sensitive to the needs of below-par performers taking up valuable instruction time.

With the intense demands of the boot camp format, there will be students who crack under the pressure. Toward the final days of the boot camp, panic sets in as students realize they are running out of time to master the tasks. The point where you might expect to see students relaxing and feeling more confident is when many start scrambling to acquire every last bit of information needed to pass. And students often have the added stress of employers who might be paying for their training and expecting a passing score on the first attempt, or from family and friends who have sacrificed their time while students study for months on end.

Nevertheless, you can make the boot-camp experience enjoyable for your students. You have the ability to provide insight and practical experience that they can apply not only to passing the exam, but on the job where it really counts. Instructors can offer excellent tips and advice to prepare for the challenges ahead. The better instructors ensure there is time for one-on-one interaction with each student, allowing for questions and discussion. And you should encourage group discussions to allow students to benefit from shared experiences and gain perspective and insight into how others might approach a challenge.

Boot-camp instructors are faced with many challenges. There is a lot of pressure to satisfy the expectations of each student, said boot-camp instructor Heiko Groeger. You want your students to get everything they need to pass their exam and succeed professionally. And you want to maintain the reputation of your company.

As you witness your students progressing and transforming into well-oiled machines capable of performing tasks with greater precision and speed, you will see the confidence building as they push ahead and persevere. It's very rewarding for an instructor to witness this metamorphosis.

Heinz Ulm is president of Heinz Ulm Internetworking and has been conducting IT training classes for more than 20 years. As one of the few 10-year CCIEs in the world, Ulm has trained more than 450 students to pass the CCIE lab exam. He can be reached through his Web site at www.heinzulm.com.

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