

INSIDER TRAINING MCITP: Enterprise Administrator Certification Training – The New MCSE 2008

12/09/2008 13:11:00 [Tim McMurphy](#)

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2009 Editor's Choice Award

5 out of 5 Stars 'Editor's Choice Award for Best IT Training' for 2009. This is the 8th year Insider Training has been given this distinction.

Given the current state of the economy, I was very motivated to get my certifications up to date as a network administrator in a predominantly Microsoft environment. Things have changed quite a bit in the world, however, since the last time I went deep into certification training for Windows NT. Gone are the days when I could sell my boss on getting approval to take two or three weeks out of the office for training. My friends in the industry all seem to be in the same boat. All training now has to cost less than it did before, add immediate value to the organization, and keep me functioning for the company during the training process. Those constraints led me to Insider Training's live, online MCITP: Enterprise Administrator program.

My overall experience with the Insider Training MCITP: EA program was excellent. The factors that I used to rate my training were quality of knowledge taught, quality of instructors, certification preparation, cost, scheduling flexibility, and quality of feedback regarding my progress.

The Microsoft Certified Information Technology Professional: Enterprise Administrator program came to fruition with the release of Windows Server 2008 and replaces the well-known MCSE certification. Aside from the ridiculously long name (we will refer to the program as MCITP: EA from now on in this article), Microsoft has not done a great job marketing the certification to industry professionals. I originally intended to get my MCSE on Windows 2008, but then discovered that the MCITP: EA had replaced the MCSE program altogether.

I did look at other training options. Traditional classroom training was too time consuming and expensive. Boot camp style programs were too expensive, would not give me enough time to process all the knowledge for real learning, and aside from the cost, I would never get approval for two solid weeks out of the office.

One major concern that I had with the MCITP: EA certification was the fact that the focus is on Windows Server 2008 technology and my company has not upgraded to 2008 from Windows Server 2003 yet, nor do we have a definite upgrade date set for the future. We will eventually upgrade to 2008 because there are features that we really need. However, when I considered the certification options it really became a no-brainer decision.

If I focused my efforts on the MCSE 2003 certification (which you can still do), I would have to take seven exams and I would be certified on a technology set that is over 5 years old. To get the MCITP: EA certification requires passing only five exams, and would have me positioned with a certification that will grow in value and last in the job market until at least 2011. I was also pleasantly surprised during my Insider Training MCITP: EA program that we were always comparing 2008 features with 2003, so I was really learning both 2008 and 2003. That made a lot of sense to me as a good target: Learn both 2003 and 2008, and certify on the latest technology.

The Insider Training MCITP: EA course is taught over sixteen weeks, with live class sessions meeting online for two-hour segments twice a week. They offer both daytime and evening programs. Class sizes are no bigger than a traditional classroom so there is plenty of opportunity to ask questions live in class.

Insider Training uses the WebEx Training Center with Voice over IP as their classroom infrastructure. The technology is very simple and mature which means it falls into the background in the learning process as it should. Live classes consisted of instructor lecture, live demos on real servers, and review quizzes to make sure that we all understood the material. Students can ask questions by raising their hand and speaking through a microphone or by typing into the chat screen. I used chat a lot since I found it very convenient, but it was nice to be able to speak through the microphone if I needed to. I really appreciated the fact that I did not have to watch a video headshot of the instructor or 'see' the instructor at all, so the visual focus was all on the material. All the live class sessions are also recorded so if a student misses a session or has to leave early they can still 'attend' the class.

In addition to the live classes, I received a set of five Microsoft Press books (one for each exam), five Transcender test preparation software products, a headset with microphone, and access to Insider Training's own study guides. Between class sessions, I had 24x7 access to all the previous class recordings, and unlimited e-mail access to my instructor.

Insider Training's program really changed my view of the capabilities of online training. My previous experience with online training was a program I took a few years ago for Microsoft Exchange. It was a very passive experience. We had no direct interaction with the instructor and there were no live class sessions. I had trouble paying attention and probably learned and retained a fraction of what I could have. The MCITP: EA program from Insider Training was a totally different experience.

One of the major selling points for me on the Insider Training programs was that I would receive access to all the class recordings, study guides, and even the instructor for e-mail mentoring for up to 12 months. This was huge for me because I don't always think of all my questions during live classes and I want access to the instructor after the live training ends. Also, I think most people are more comfortable learning when they know they can go back and review the class again in the future. I missed four live class sessions because of my boss had a server emergency. Because of the recording access, however, I didn't skip a beat. That's flexibility.

As far as the quality of knowledge taught, I was very impressed with how the course was designed. As I mentioned before, there was a great deal of attention paid to the differences between Server 2003 and Server 2008. This was very beneficial because I learned new, cool things that I could do with our existing 2003 infrastructure right now. That made my boss very happy, which is always a good thing to accomplish.

I also now feel very comfortable with the new technologies in 2008. Insider Training does a great job at balancing the need to learn real usable knowledge while at the same time preparing for certification exams. Sometimes what the exam requires and what real life demands are wildly different. My instructor was very comfortable noting which topics were 'test only' and others that were 'real life' and not test objectives. I would have liked more time on some of the fringe technologies for larger enterprises like Windows Federation Services, but I appreciated the instructor's honesty in stating that certain topics would require more detailed research beyond the class scope because we would need to customize the solution to our own environments.

The other major difference between the Insider Training model for the MCITP: EA versus other training vendors is the fact that the Insider program includes all the training for the entire certification, whereas other training companies seem to bulk up their prices and the time involved by requiring you to register for at least five separate classes.

Their use of shorter two-hour class sessions leads to much focused discussions and I did not have to keep pumping caffeine into my system like I usually do in the afternoons at a regular training program.

The course begins with Vista (which is actually a good precursor to learning the new interface and features of Server 2008) and then moves on to Active Directory, Network Configuration, Server Applications, and then Enterprise Administration. They made Active Directory the centerpiece of the whole program, which makes a lot of sense because it is so important to master.

My weekly regimen during the course was to attend the two live sessions on Tuesday and Thursday, and then between classes I would skim the related chapters in the MS Press books, and work with the Transcender and Insider Study Guide for test preparation. I would usually send two or three e-mail questions a week to my instructor. As for my hands-on work, I had access to their remote live servers, but they also taught us how to build our own private lab environments using MS Virtual PC and VMWare Workstation. I had a full lab environment with two servers running on my XP laptop.

Between the Transcender software and the Insider study guides I was able to get excellent feedback on my learning and test preparation. When I had a question during my studies, I had a variety of resources to call on - class recordings, instructor mentoring, books, Transcender, study guides, lab environment. I'm not a real book person (I tend to fall asleep reading tech books) so I was very appreciative of the variety of materials that I could choose from. At present, I have passed the first two exams and am scheduled to take the third exam shortly.

I strongly recommend the Insider Training program because of the quality of instruction/instructors, the flexible class schedules, ability to really learn the materials and not just pass the tests, and the all-in-one set of resources such as Transcender software, study guides, and instructor mentoring. Aside from the learning quality, perhaps most importantly, the Insider Training program beats the cost of any traditional classroom program or boot camp by thousands of dollars. That will make your boss or significant other happy, too.

"Insider Training receives our strong recommendation and the 5 out of 5 Stars 'Editor's Choice Award for Best IT Training' for 2008." Phil Ferreira, Editor of Reviewboard Magazine.

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