

(March 5th, 2012)

If you know someone who you think would benefit from being an Insider, feel free to forward this PDF to them so they can sign up [here](#).

Quick Tips for our Insider friends!

Hey Insiders!

This bi-weekly Quick Tips is coming from Tampa, FL, where we've just completed our first Immersion Event of the year (IE1 – Internals and Performance) and tomorrow I'll be lecturing about using wait statistics on day one of our first IE2 – Performance Tuning class of the year.

Now that we've had our fix of scuba diving for a while, we're knuckled down until the summer with a packed schedule. It's amazing to see the passion for SQL Server in the class attendees and the passion for learning being re-ignited in people during the week – it continually makes teaching our classes a lot of fun. Also, we've seen a bit of an uptick in folks going for the Microsoft MCM certification. In our class last week, 8 attendees were working towards the certification – helped along by the knowledge exam and lab exam discount vouchers we were able to give out.

The most recent book I've read is Gore Vidal's *Lincoln*. It's the second book in his acclaimed *Narratives of Empire* series which traces American history from the 1830s through the 1950s. *Lincoln* is a 3rd-person narrative account of Lincoln's first presidency and is a masterful way to present the history of what happened during the Civil War as well as the inter-personal relationships and political intrigues that went on around the White House. I strongly recommend the book for everyone, not just history fans, it's immensely readable.

Please [let us know](#) if you liked what you read/saw here and/or have any suggestions for future Quick Tips.

Note: you can get all the prior Insider newsletters [here](#).

Paul's Ponderings

There's constant debate in the SQL Server community about whether the current certifications are worthwhile. Until recently, if you'd asked me, my opinion was that apart from the MCM certification, most SQL Server certifications were a waste of time and money.

This has understandably annoyed some people as many employers require certain certifications, and people like to get certifications to prove to themselves that they're capable. I'm not saying your certification is worthless – but that its worth to anyone but you has been diluted through the actions of others. You know whether you have the real-deal skills or not, but how do others?

Why have I held this somewhat controversial view? It's because over the last few years there's been a sad proliferation of ways to allow someone to pass these certifications without the required knowledge and experience.

And don't get me wrong – this isn't a rant against Microsoft. It's a rant against those whose actions have led to the detraction of the integrity of the existing certifications – those who want a short-cut to a certification and those who provide them.

For example, for most of the Microsoft SQL Server certifications, you've been able to:

- Attend a 3-5 day 'boot camp' that crams enough knowledge down your throat so you pass the exam at the end of the week
- Buy a book that gives you all the knowledge you need to *pass the exam*
- Buy a brain-dump from someone who's memorized the exam
- (Allegedly, in some countries) Pay someone else to take the exam on your behalf

I cannot fathom how someone can live with themselves after doing #3 or #4 above – blatantly cheating to achieve a certification is despicable.

#1 and #2 aren't that much better in my opinion. The point of a certification is that it certifies that you have a certain level of knowledge **and experience** in a subject. Reading a book or having knowledge drummed into you isn't experience – it's just book learning. Many prep guide books have given you the knowledge needed to pass the exam, not the complete set of knowledge implied by the certification – same for the boot camps.

This state of affairs has not been limited to the SQL Server certifications, and has not been limited to Microsoft at all – it's been all pervasive through the certification industry, from what I can tell.

There's also been the perception that in many of the non-MCM SQL Server certifications, some of the questions have incorrect answers and that some of the questions try to steer you towards picking the new features as the answer. I've heard this from many people who've taken certification exams.

This means there's been a big problem: lack of confidence that someone with certification X actually has the commensurate knowledge and experience that certification X implies. I've even heard of companies that discard resumes when the candidate lists a bunch of certifications, on the premise that they must be falsified – which I think is taking the not-trusting-the-certifications to a misguided extreme.

The people who have been suffering are the vast majority of people who take the certifications the 'proper' way – building up experience over time and then taking the exams. For these people, hearing that anyone can take a short-cut and get the certification without having the real knowledge and experience really reduces the value of their having the certification. And, because it's been common knowledge that people can cheat or short-cut the exams, it must be incredibly frustrating for those who do it the right way and spend money on the certifications in good faith.

The sad reality has been that one cannot assume that a certification equals the holder having the certified qualities.

This is one of the (many) reasons why the SQL MCM certification was created – a certification that cannot be passed without taking a practical exam and that you cannot pass with just book learning. (Ironically though, you need to have some of the lesser certifications before you can be awarded the MCM.)

There are various layers of security that were used in the re-launch of the SQL MCM program. Right now, having the MCM really means a lot. I won't get in to the specifics of the security precautions here (for obvious reasons) but I will be incredibly upset on the day I hear of the first brain-dump for the MCM because then the MCM certification won't be trustworthy.

I wish this overall situation were otherwise. I wish people didn't cheat or look for short cuts. There's even been talk amongst the SQL Server MVP community of creating a set of community certifications to try to work around these problems. Why hasn't it happened? Because it's very hard, time consuming, and expensive to do – and, ultimately, it would be vulnerable to some of these issues as well.

My opinion has been changed recently by steps Microsoft has taken to re-instill confidence in the integrity of their certifications. Last November Microsoft released an interview with Don Field, their Senior Director of Certification and Training (see [Microsoft Ensures Integrity of Its Certification Program](#)) which lists a bunch of things they've been doing, including suing a notorious brain-dumping site, banning exam candidates that can be proven to have used unfair means to pass, and aggressively shutting down web sites with leaked exam content.

The Microsoft Press exam and certification guides have also started emphasizing that reading through the book is not enough to pass the exam and the exams themselves are becoming a lot more in-depth and higher quality. Furthermore, testing centers are coming under high scrutiny to ensure they are not allowing cheating to take place.

I applaud these actions. It's high time that the millions of people with Microsoft certifications can start to feel that their certification means something to other people. However, I think that Microsoft learning partners and testing centers have to play along here and get with the security program – for the benefit of everyone. And I think that Microsoft has to continue to be aggressive in its anti-cheating crusade – as the cheaters will never stop trying to make a buck from people looking for a short cut.

If you ask me my opinion today, it's that things are slowly moving in the right direction and I hope the overall value is going to re-emerge for the non-MCM certifications. I really, really hope this happens – as otherwise, how can we gauge the knowledge and experience of the vast majority of SQL Server professionals out there? And then what value will the certifications be?

Call to action: Simple: if you're going for a certification, go about it the right way. Don't cheat or take short cuts – you're only cheating yourself, and making a mockery of the certification you just 'attained'.

I'm really interested to know your thoughts on certifications—feel free to [drop me a line](#), confidentially as always.

Video Demo

Continuing the series of videos about free tools for the SQL Server DBA, Jonathan shows how to make use of the PerfStats SQLDiag collection template and SQL Nexus to simplify SQL Server data collection and analysis in your environment. It's about 14 minutes long.

I produced the video in WMV and MOV formats so everyone can watch. You can get the videos:

- For WMV: [here](#)
- For MOV: [here](#)

I recommend downloading before watching. Click on the link to start Windows Media Player, and then click the icon in the top-right corner to switch to the library mode. Then in the bottom left, right-click the buffering icon and select File then 'Save As...' You'll need to figure it out for different media players.

You can get the demo code [here](#). Enjoy!

SQLskills Offerings

Registrations are piling in for our 2012 classes and right now we're in the middle of our Tampa Immersion series (IE1-IE2-IE3). But, for some of you, we also know that that getting travel and training sorted is difficult early in the year as budgets are still being defined.

We've extended our "buy in bulk" discount where you pre-pay a block of seats now to get a 28% discount off of full price and a 16% off of the early-bird price. See [here](#) for details. You can even use these "buy in bulk" seats for classes that no longer offer the early-bird price as long as they are not "sold-out."

We are offering all of our Immersion Events in 2012; these classes are available for registration now!

- March 12-16, 2012: High Availability/Disaster Recovery (**IE3**) in Tampa, FL
- April 16-20, 2012: Internals and Performance (**IE1**) in Chicago, IL
- April 16-20, 2012: Business Intelligence (**IEBI**) in Chicago, IL
- April 23-27, 2012: Performance Tuning (**IE2**) in Chicago, IL
- April 23-27, 2012: Developers (**IEDev**) in Chicago, IL
- May 7-11, 2012: Internals and Performance (**IE1**) in London, UK
- May 14-18, 2012: Performance Tuning (**IE2**) in London, UK
- August 2012: **IE1-IE2-IE3-IE4, IEDev**, and **IEBI** in Redmond/Bellevue (WA) again!

NOTE: These are the **only** locations/classes/cities being planned from January through August 2012. We are likely to offer only one more IE1 & IE2 combination later in the year and we're currently considering Houston, Newark or Atlanta.

See [here](#) for all the details.

Summary

We hope you've enjoyed this issue - we really enjoy putting these together.

If there is anything else you're interested in, we'd love to hear from you - [drop us a line](#).

Thanks,
Paul and Kimberly

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