The engineers among us

12/13/2002 5:00:00 PM - Microsoft has taken most of the criticism for its MCSE designation, but what about Cisco, Novell and other certification programs? Follow our search for the answers
by John Lee

You know you've hit a sensitive topic in IT when some of the largest high-tech companies in Canada refer your calls to a public relations firm.

In this case, Novell Canada and Cisco Systems Canada Co.used different representatives at the same Toronto-based PR agency to address -- at arm's length -- the thorny issue of using the term "engineer" in their popular training programs.

Although Microsoft Canada Co. has been at the forefront of this issue -- it continues to defend its Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer designation -- the Canadian Council of Professional Engineers (CCPE) is scrutinizing other tech companies that use similar designations.

"The bottom line is it's against the law to call yourself an engineer in Canada unless you have a licence to practice," said Marie Lemay, CEO of the CCPE, representing 12 provincial bodies and 160,000 engineers across the country.

While Novell's long-established CNE certificate -- currently held by 150,000 individuals around the world -- is recognized internationally as the Certified Novell Engineer designation, the company claims to have a different position on its meaning in Canada.

Discovering that everyone at Novell was "trapped in meetings" for four days, the company's PR representative eventually released a qualified, carefully-worded statement on the issue.

"Novell has an extensive technology training program in Canada. Our primary professional training mark is the CNE mark, which is a symbolic mark and not an acronym. Novell doesn't use the term 'engineer' as part of its training programs in Canada."

Despite this, "Certified Novell Engineer" appears prominently on the company's Canadian Web site and is widely used in the U.S., where alleged abuses of the engineering designation are fought only by a handful of state professional engineering bodies. In the U.S., Novell has gone to court several times to defend its use of the term.

But even if Canadian companies don't officially promote the term, Lemay says they rarely advise their trainees not to use it. Many companies have a vested interest in seeing the designation continue.

"Microsoft told me there's marketing value in calling yourself an engineer; that's why they don't want to stop," said Lemay.

Over at Cisco, the company's PR representative lamented that, unfortunately, his "main spokesperson was in Singapore." After searching for almost a week to track down an alternative, he eventually produced the following company statement:

"Cisco does not use the term 'engineering' in any of its certifications. One of Cisco's job titles is 'systems engineer.' This is a worldwide Cisco job title and is not specific to the Canadian market."

A search of the company's U.S. Web site -- which, like Novell's, is closely linked to its Canadian online presence -- also revealed widespread use of the term "Cisco engineer." With more than 300,000 Cisco certificate holders worldwide, the company estimates there are thousands of Cisco certifications in Canada.

The sensitivity towards this issue by companies like Novell and Cisco is attributable to the CCPE's persistence on enforcement.

Aside from monitoring training programs, the organization approaches companies that uphold unlawful designations in their own IT departments and individuals who illegally refer to themselves as engineers. One of the most active CCPE regions policing the rule is Alberta.

"We have escalated our program (of enforcement) because there is growing use of the title engineer," said Dave Todd, director of compliance at the Association of Professional Engineers, Geologists and Geophysicists of Alberta (APEGGA)

The organization scours adverts, career listings and yellow pages directories for possible abuses, and has current investigation files on more than 200 companies and 300 individuals, although not all of these are in the high-tech field.

According to Todd, most comply with the rule once informed of the legal situation, and APEGGA rarely resorts to court action. He has seen many alternative designations adopted, including "senior systems integrator," "network consultant," and "field service technician."

Lemay supports new job titles like these as well as the use of acronyms. But enforcing the law is not something the CCPE or its regional associations is happy about.

"This is not something we enjoy doing. It means our members have to do the dirty work," she said.

John Lee is a frequent contributor to ITBusiness.ca

Comment info@itbusiness.ca