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Self-Paced MCSE Training Tools

November 1998

by Roman Loyola

If you want to prepare for the MCSE exams on your own, here are four tools that can help.

The growth of NT has led to an increased demand for Microsoft Certified Software Engineers, better known as MCSEs. Recent polls have shown that the number of persons who have successfully completed MCSE training has more than doubled in the past year. MCSE certification is proof that a systems administrator has at least gone through some formal or informal training in NT-enough to pass Microsoft's tests.

MCSE training is expensive. The tuition for a hands-on, one- to four-week MCSE training course can equal the cost of attending a state college for one year (and many people are pursuing MCSE training in lieu of a college degree). It also may be difficult to set aside time to attend a hands-on course; most courses require full-time attendance, eight hours a day, five days a week.

The alternative is self-paced training, available on CD-ROM or video. Self-paced programs are more affordable than hands-on courses, and you can take them at your own pace and at your own convenience. There are several self-training programs available. I looked at four different programs from Microsoft, KeyStone, LearnKey, and ViaGrafix. Not surprisingly, although all these programs are suitable learning tools, how much you gain from any of them depends on you.

KeyStone

KeyStone develops training videos for MCSE, NetWare, A+, and various applications. KeyStone does not sell training products on CD-ROM, but the company plans to develop some CD-ROM products.

The videos for MCSE training are lecture style. Your host is an MCSE, and he or she discusses NT's features and technology. The lectures are moderately paced; you have to pause the tape every so often to gather your notes, but you don't feel as if you are constantly trying to catch up. The lecturer has a comfortable, informal presentation style.

The videos cover the MCSE testing process but lack practice tests. They show a sample test from Transcender (www.transcender.com) that is modeled after the Microsoft exams, and Keystone refers you to Transcender for practice tests.

KeyStone's program is great for the confident prospective MCSE. If you feel that you don't need hands-on simulations and think that practice tests don't add any value, then the KeyStone program is right for you. The videos provide excellent lectures as supplemental training or as a refresher course. The KeyStone program is also good for experienced NT administrators who know NT well and simply want to be familiar with the kind of information required to pass the MCSE exams (without taking the exams).

LearnKey

LearnKey specializes in training products for a wide variety of disciplines, such as those for MCSE, A+, NetWare, programming, and application training. LearnKey has products on both CD-ROM and video.

The company markets its products to customers who prefer to rely solely on self-paced training. According to LearnKey, if its products are the only programs you use to train for MCSE, you will be properly prepared to pass the MCSE exams.

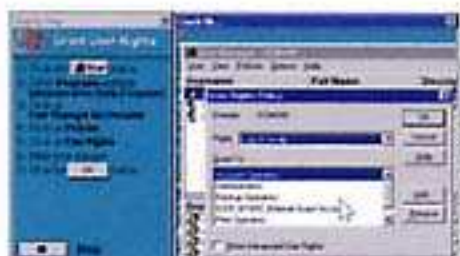
Because LearnKey has profiled its customers this way, its CD-ROMs offer more than just lectures on NT technology. After a lecture is presented, you can participate in walk-through simulations called Challenges. The Challenges simulate different tasks in NT, such as using the User Manager or setting up an NT server for remote access.

When you select a challenge, you choose the task you want to practice. When the simulation starts, you go through the proper steps for performing that task. The program will tell you when you've made a mistake, and if you get stuck, you can have the program take you through the steps. The challenges can be repeated over and over again.



The CD-ROM series feature a lecturer, pictured in Figure 1, who tells you about NT's features and underlying technology. She makes her

appearance mostly at the beginning and end of lectures; the meat of each lecture is accompanied by notes and diagrams that appear on screen. The CD-ROM movie player has only a stop button; it lacks rewind and fast-forward controls.



The CD-ROMs have a feature called the Lifesaver Multiuser Module, which is available for training across a network. Lifesaver, shown in Figure 2, is a series of step-by-step guides on using NT, including information on user management, networking options, and NT fine

tuning. The Lifesaver modules simulate a task while the user watches,

LearnKey's videos are similar to those of the other vendors. They show a lecturer, in an informal setting, who reviews the fine points of NT. The videos are accompanied by notation, and they lack practice tests.

This series may be a good alternative if you want the luxury of a completely self-paced training course. The simulations on the CD-ROMs are as close to the real thing as they can get (they use actual setup windows and interfaces). The videos are good supplements. LearnKey claims that many customers have passed the MCSE exams by relying solely on its program. If you simply want to pass the certification exams, and you don't need hands-on training, consider the LearnKey program.

Microsoft Press

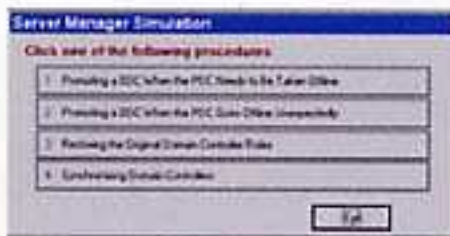
Microsoft offers a series of training tools for MCSE through its publishing subsidiary, Microsoft Press. In addition to its popular books, Microsoft Press publishes MCSE training courses on CD-ROM. It also sells the Microsoft Certified System Engineer Core Requirements Training Kit, which includes training for Networking Essentials, Implementing and Supporting Windows NT Server 4.0, Implementing and Supporting Windows NT Server 4.0 in the Enterprise, and Implementing and Supporting Windows NT Workstation 4.0.



The Microsoft program combines books, movies on CD-ROM, and simulations. The lessons start with the books that come with each kit. You read the book, and at certain points in the lesson, the book refers you to a movie on the CD-ROM. Figure 3 shows a scene from one such movie. The movies consist of lectures about NT. At the end of each lesson is a brief quiz that does

exams.

not follow the format of the MCSE



The simulations are of particular tasks done in NT, such as backing up or managing users. When you start a simulation, you select the type of task you want to perform, as shown in Figure 4. You then go through the procedure, and messages

appear when you've gone astray.

A nice feature of the Microsoft Press kit is that it includes a 120-day trial version of Windows NT Server 4.0. This allows you to work with the real thing if you don't have NT and want true hands-on experience. The lectures lack the personal touch that the other vendors' videos have, but the movies are well done and feature some good animation.

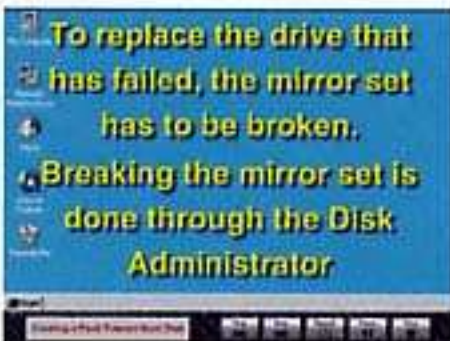
ViaGrafix

ViaGrafix markets a giant selection of training products on CD-ROM and video. In addition to its MCSE series, ViaGrafix has training programs available for NetWare, A+, programming, CAD, application suites, word processing, spreadsheets, and graphics programs.



ViaGrafix's presentation is straightforward and mostly in the form of lectures. There is no user interactivity, except in the summary quizzes at the end of each chapter and volume. The volumes are divided into chapters, which are subdivided into specific aspects of NT. Each subcategory features a person sitting behind a desk as if in a

newsroom, as pictured in Figure 5. That person lectures on the topic at hand. At appropriate times, the image of the person disappears, and the lecture continues, but with notes splashed across the screen, as shown in Figure 6.



The pace of the lectures is steady on both CD-ROM and video. On both, you can go back to review by hitting the rewind button; you can fast-forward as well. Since the pace can sometimes be too fast for you to note down important details, you'll definitely need to rewind. Also, the lessons do not need to be taken

linearly, so you can skip around or replay a chapter. The videos cue you to pause to perform hands-on training, should you be using these tapes in a lab environment. I sometimes felt that the presenters were hurrying through the material; this haste is emphasized by the notes that quickly zoom on and off the screen.

If you want a complete, straightforward study guide on CD-ROM or video, and you don't need a lot of interactivity, take a look at the ViaGrafix series. The company markets its products as a supplement to hands-on training, and their style of presentation is suitable for that purpose. If you plan to use a self-training course as your only means of training, or you don't have access to hands-on training, then you may find ViaGrafix's programs limited. If you're sharp and test well, you may be able to use this program as your only means of training, but you may find yourself limited in the real world. ViaGrafix's programs are excellent supplements if you are already undergoing hands-on training or need no more than a refresher course.

Summary

The LearnKey program provides a system that comes as close to a hands-on environment as possible. The ViaGrafix and KeyStone programs are excellent to supplement your hands-on training or to refresh your training. Microsoft Press's kit has the bonus of the trial version of NT.

MCSEs are in high demand. If you are investigating self-training, keep in mind that nothing can ever replace hands-on learning. If you plan to rely solely on a self-paced program, prepare to study intensely. Also, keep in mind that you'll have to spend extra money on training for the elective testing required for MCSE.

Roman Loyola is a technical editor for Windows NT Systems. He can be reached at rloyola@mfi.com.

Product Summary

MCSE Certification Pro
KeyStone Learning Systems Corp.
2241 Larsen Pkwy.
Provo, UT 84606
Tel.: (801) 365-8680
Fax: (801) 373-6872
Web: www.keylearnsys.com
Price: \$1,199
Select 301 at www.ntsistemas.com/NeTinfo.

MCSE CD Series

MCSE Video Series

LearnKey Inc.

1845 W. Sunset Blvd.

St. George, UT 84770

Tel.: (800) 865-0165

Fax: (435) 674-9734

Web: www.learnkey.com

Price: CD series: \$1,995; video series: \$1,895

Select 302 at www.ntsistemas.com/NeTinfo.

MCSE Core Requirements Training Kit

Microsoft Press

One Microsoft Wy.

Redmond, WA 98052

Tel.: (800) 677-7377

Fax: (800) 826-5399

Web: <http://mspress.microsoft.com>

Price: \$299

Select 303 at www.ntsistemas.com/NeTinfo.

Windows NT MCSE CDs

Windows NT MCSE Videos

ViaGrafix

One American Wy.

Pryor, OK 74361

Tel.: (918) 825-6700

Fax: (918) 825-6744

Web: www.viagrafix.com

Price: CDs: \$599; videos: \$599

Select 304 at www.ntsistemas.com/NeTinfo.