



Microsoft Certification and You

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Compatibility is one of the biggest challenges facing enterprise administrators - ensuring that hardware, software, and services work together on the desktop, the server, and over the network, is increasingly difficult. Companies have tried many different approaches to solving this problem, most of which involve reducing the amount of complexity and diversity in their environments. However, complexity reduction still requires IT teams to pick products that will work well together, and the natural competitiveness of the IT marketplace makes this hard to do because there isn't much objective data available.

Microsoft has long offered a certification mark that indicates product compatibility with desktop and server versions of Windows. Understanding what this mark means, and what it tells you about the products that bear it, is an important part of knowing which products offer the highest degree of compatibility and interoperability.

The Compatibility Challenge

Microsoft faces a daunting challenge: Windows is intentionally designed to support a very large variety of hardware, from single-processor home systems to symmetric multiprocessing (SMP) servers that can handle thousands of users at once. Software vendors write software using the Windows application programming interfaces (APIs), but no one outside the vendor is responsible for making sure that the software uses those APIs properly and in a way that won't cause problems for other applications.

In addition, the Windows platform makes it possible for hardware manufacturers to write and provide their own drivers to make additional devices compatible with Windows. There's no way for Microsoft to test and certify Windows itself for compatibility with every third-party software or hardware product; although customer pressure provides one useful way of weeding out products that cause compatibility problems, that pressure takes time to mount, so Microsoft decided in 1996 to start offering the "Designed for Windows" logo to vendors whose products passed an objective set of compatibility tests. There is actually more than one certification logo; for example, the "Designed for Windows XP" logo applies only to products that run on Windows XP, and it has a different set of requirements than the "Certified for Windows" logo used for products that run on Windows 2000 Server and Windows Server 2003.

What "Certified for Windows" Means

Microsoft allows companies whose products pass a specific suite of tests to use the "Certified for Windows" logos. Microsoft doesn't perform the tests itself; the "Certified for Windows" (CFW) program is managed for Microsoft by Veritest, a software hardware and testing firm. (Interestingly, Veritest also manages compatibility testing for Alcatel, EMC, Hewlett-Packard, and Palm, among others.) As part of their relationship with Microsoft, Veritest maintains a catalog of products (available at <http://cert.veritest.com/CfWreports/server/>) that have passed the certification tests.

The Certification Process

The application specification for the Windows Server 2003 "Certified for Windows" logo (<http://www.microsoft.com/windowsserver2003/partners/isvs/appspec.msp>) is quite detailed; it sets out the exact standard that applications and their components must meet in order to gain the right to use the certification mark. For example, applications aren't allowed to require reboots after installation; debugging symbols must be available, the application must install and uninstall properly, and it must work right when the default Windows "high security" system template is applied. These sound like simple requirements, but they reflect two facts: some application vendors aren't doing these things on their own, and over time, the market has come to expect a higher standard of reliability, stability, and security for Windows applications and tools.

To earn certification for a product, a software vendor begins by reviewing the application specification and doing their own internal tests to ensure that they meet it. Microsoft makes the 130+-page test framework available (<http://www.microsoft.com/windowsserver2003/partners/isvs/apptest.msp>), so both the required standards and the way that Veritest will measure compliance are 'out in the open'. Most organizations that choose to seek logo certification will use the test framework to design their own internal tests to ensure that they're checking for the same things that Veritest will look for.

The certification process itself is very straightforward: the developer submits the application along with a substantial payment. More complicated programs (like those that support Microsoft Cluster Services or integrate with Active Directory) cost more; Veritest doesn't publicly cite prices, but getting a single enterprise program certified can easily cost upwards of \$50,000. Once Veritest has the program and the payment, they run tests according to the test framework. If a submitted product fails even one of the tests, it has to be retested. Once the product has passed all of the logo tests, the vendor gets the right to use the "Certified for Windows" logo. While later releases of the product have to be recertified, service packs and patches may not require it.

What Certification Means... To You

Microsoft is very careful not to say that uncertified applications are bad or undesirable, and their field staff generally doesn't recommend products (or recommend against products). However, Microsoft's frequently asked questions list on the certification process (<http://www.microsoft.com/windowsserver2003/partners/isvs/cfwfaq.msp>) is clear about what the program is testing for: "Certified for Windows... focuses on enterprise issues: availability, reliability, security, and supportability." With that in mind, a certified product offers some key advantages:

- *The vendor invests in its product quality.* The Veritest fee itself is substantial, and so is the manpower required to build products that meet Microsoft's certification standards. That kind of investment is strong proof that a vendor is committed to building and delivering high-quality products.
- *The product meets Microsoft's standards.* Microsoft's test standards are rigorous, and they cover a number of critical areas for enterprise software products. For example, any product that uses file system filter drivers (or other kernel-mode components) must pass a set of additional checks, as well as shipping only digitally signed drivers. Given two applications of equal capability, the one that's been certified gives you additional assurance that the product was developed in accordance with Microsoft's recommendations and requirements.