Cisco Certified Architect Mirrors Years of Hard-Earned Technical Expertise

Summary

ERROL ROBICHAUX, CCAR
Senior Solutions Architect
at Cisco Systems

INDUSTRY
Networking

CHALLENGE
Chasing the "black box" to reach top tier of his profession

SOLUTION
Cisco Learning Network Certification Program

PROFESSIONAL BENEFITS:
· Challenging, widely varied job responsibilities
· Global industry-wide recognition and respect
· Top-level strategic architect role at his dream company

Challenge and Opportunity

Errol Robichaux is one of Cisco's top "go-to" guys for crafting global enterprise architecture strategies for Fortune 250 customers. As a senior solutions architect, he leads a team of networking gurus to integrate multiple infrastructure projects into a visionary, business-based plan. In the process, Errol meets with tough-to-please CTOs, VPs, and business unit managers to explain why his team's solution will fulfill their company's business mandates now and in the future.

Errol believes that the Cisco Certified Architect (CCAr) certification, with its emphasis on business and communication skills as much as technical expertise, is a good fit for the job he does today. He can speak from experience, having earned his certification last autumn after a months-long process. The CCAr is the highest level of Cisco accreditation, or as Errol says, "The CCAr is the pinnacle achievement from the company that is at the pinnacle of the networking industry."

The CCAr certification is designed for top-level infrastructure architects who also possess a high degree of business acumen and exceptional communication skills.

A Career of Chasing the "Black Box"

Errol began his storied career in networking out of necessity. As a young married computer science student, he needed a job, and his wife got him one at her company as a part-time AppleTalk support engineer. Networking technology as we know it today was then in its infancy, and he found it very intriguing.

His next job introduced him to Cisco. Errol recalls, "There was this mysterious tan and orange box in the corner that only a small group of people were allowed to touch; I instantly knew that I wanted to be in that group. Chasing after that "black box" is what has motivated me throughout my career."

As he advanced his career and hands-on education, he learned about IBM, Novell, Cabletron, and 3Com and Motorola products and technologies such as Token Ring and Ethernet. A cable company job gave him exposure to early Voice-over-Frame Relay technology and a chance at his first formal training, at Motorola University.

As a LAN/WAN specialist at a financial company, he again encountered Cisco routing and switching equipment. Here he began to pursue Cisco's recently introduced technical certifications in a decades-long friendly rivalry with colleague Brian Stanford. Together they studied for CCNA and CCDA exams, experimenting with spare lab equipment and using whatever study materials they could find. Errol says, "We were both very excited about getting our certifications and establishing relationships with the local Cisco account team because we had a goal—to work at Cisco. By then, Cisco had become the pinnacle: one of the most influential network vendors with one of the best industry reputations in the world."

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Brian actually landed the Cisco job first. While Errol waited for his opening, he worked on his first CCIE certification with equipment acquired from the now defunct financial company; his "lab" was set up in his children's toy room. "With a full-time job, two young children and a working wife, preparing for these certifications meant a lot of late nights and weekends, but I felt the effort was worth it and central to my career." he says.

Beyond the Black Box, "Chasing Smoke"

Errol eventually joined Brian on the Cisco WAN Switching services team supporting large enterprise and SP customers. But even with his wide experience, Errol found himself in an extremely challenging environment. He says, "The only thing I knew about some of the technologies was how to spell them; and the capabilities of my colleagues, million-dollar equipment, and complex customer situations were way beyond anything I'd encountered; it was like drinking through a firehouse."

But he found he loved the challenge of the fast-paced, aggressive environment, and with friend Brian set about earning additional CCIE certifications. The two also began to help with certification content testing and with proctoring Cisco certification exams. Errol soon discovered his proctoring to be a useful icebreaker with customers. He explains, "During initial meetings there was always someone who was earning or had just earned a Cisco certification, so we could talk about how to approach the exams and what resources were helpful."

Eventually Errol moved from a purely technical consulting role to designing networks for global Fortune 250 companies, earning his CCDE certification in the process. At this point he explains he had moved beyond chasing the black box to "chasing smoke". The object of the hunt was no longer an easily definable technical certification, it was the insight that comes from an accumulation what has been discovered, learned and experienced over many years.

Now leading design teams, he found a very different set of capabilities to be critical to success. He says, "Of paramount importance is the ability to liaison between technical and non-technical personnel, to see their points of view, and to make sure that every team member understands the vital importance of their efforts in making the project successful." For example, Errol says that taking project management classes helped him understand how to help his project managers be more effective.

And, now with the CCDE in hand, Errol set his sights on the CCAr, finding that his expanding responsibilities and job scope fit nicely with the focus of this top Cisco certification.

Steps for Potential CCAr Candidates

"When people ask me how to prepare for the CCAr certification, I warn them that while they can create a strategy for preparing for CCIE and CCDE exams, the CCAr is completely different. Because of its reliance on a diverse, years-long set of complex experiences, the CCAr requirements come the closest to reflecting the knowledge gained over a professional lifetime," he says.

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> "The CCAr is the pinnacle certification achievement."
>
> — Errol Robichaux, Senior Solutions Architect, Cisco Systems

That philosophy is reflected in the Cisco CCAr web page, which states that there are no formal training programs for certification. Errol adds, "While other certifications are multi-month endeavors in exam preparation, the CCAr is a months-long, multiphase endeavor in the attainment itself."

In his first stage, he had to submit a complete dossier of projects that he had personally led. A phone screen by the CCAr certification board followed. Once he had passed, he moved to stage two, working on a complex business case study—where he had to examine corporate executives' backgrounds, motivations, and political loyalties as well as determining key business needs. Errol notes, "Just like in the real world, only a partial view is provided, so I had to ask board members for additional information that may or may not have been accidently overlooked to build a complete picture." He then had to defend his proposed solution in person before the committee during an unscripted, dynamic cross-examination.

In the end, Errol says, "It's all about understanding the business goals, identifying potential solutions, objectively arriving at the best solution regardless of your own technology niche, and deciding how best to implement that solution. The goal is not to create the coolest network, it is to build the most efficient network that will fulfill your customers' business mandates."

Errol believes that there are some key basic traits of a successful CCAr candidate:

- First, you need to posses innate curiosity along with dedication and drive.
- Next, in addition to technology expertise, you need to develop "soft" written and communication skills, influencing and selling skills, and the ability to think on your feet. Those skills give you the confidence to communicate with high-level executives. Also, you have to have the desire to want to interact with people and possess the ability to deal with the challenges that sometimes occur.
- Finally, you must be willing to get out of your comfort zone, to engage and work with senior consultants and business executives, learning, watching, and absorbing. Not every technology expert can "get out of the weeds" and make that difficult jump.

For More Information

The Cisco Learning Network is a social learning community focused on the IT industry. Its mission is to provide learning tools, training resources, and industry guidance to those interested in building an IT career through Cisco certifications.

- To find out more about the Cisco Learning Network, go to: https://learningnetwork.cisco.com/index.jspa
- To find out more about the Cisco Certified Architect CCAr® Certification, go to: https://learningnetwork.cisco.com/community/certifications/cisco_certified_architect

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