The MEF Carrier Ethernet Certified Professional Program

Meeting the needs of PLDT and CYTA for qualified Carrier Ethernet skills and experience

On December 9th 2011, Polis Anthousis from Cytaglobal International Network Operations became the hundredth candidate in the world to achieve certification as an MEF-CECP (MEF Carrier Ethernet Certified Professional). This reveals an amazing uptake on what might seem a highly specialized qualification launched less than six months previously – but it does reflect the soaring demand for skills and experience in a technology that has powered telecommunications development over the last four years.

Cytaglobal manages the international wholesale market business for CYTA – the Cyprus Telecommunications Authority. The word "copper" – so fundamental to traditional telecoms networks – derives from the Latin word meaning "metal of Cyprus", but Cytaglobal is better known for its state-of-the-art fiber optic submarine cable systems. These include an extensive network with links to Mediterranean countries and thereafter to the rest of the world. Cyta's international reach is further extended by an extensive satellite network and co-owned transatlantic and other regional cable systems.

CYTA sees qualified MEF-CECPs as an important factor in its international strategy: "CYTA believes that employing MEF-CECPs increases the quality of its Carrier Ethernet services and products, and strengthens its positioning in the relevant market… Employing MEF-CECPs, provides customer assurance that they are dealing with a company which has the ability to deliver and support Carrier Ethernet services in a professional way."

With two MEF-CECPs already on the payroll, CYTA actively encourages staff to take the exam – starting with international connectivity services' product managers – and is considering listing the qualification as preferred for future recruits. Indeed, the company sees the certification as a benefit to the whole industry: "Employing the right people is crucial in succeeding in a competitive environment such as telecoms. The MEF-CECP program validates the knowledge and expertise of individuals in Carrier Ethernet technologies and improves the candidate assessment process."

Judging by the enormous interest in the certification worldwide – with over 260 MEF-CECP examinations already sat in 24 countries and 55 organizations worldwide in the first six months – CYTA is not alone in recognizing the importance of this new certification. So let's look at it in more detail…

The MEF Carrier Ethernet Certification program

Since the MEF first defined Carrier Ethernet in 2005 the technology has been an outstanding success story. It promised so much that the business world wanted but, in a world of hype and promises, the market needed the assurance of certified compliance before it could really take off. So the MEF launched its first certification program, covering equipment, in the same year and then began certifying Carrier Ethernet services in 2006. Products or services bearing the MEF certification logo offered the assurance of features and performance in line with globally recognized MEF specifications.

That assurance added a lot of resilience to CE sales, which remained remarkably firm despite the 2008 downturn. Carrier Ethernet offered an unbeatable combination of the lowest cost per bit, plus the scalability and flexibility needed to survive in an uncertain and fast shifting economic environment – but the basic assurances of globally recognized certification were needed before the cash-strapped business world dared try anything new.

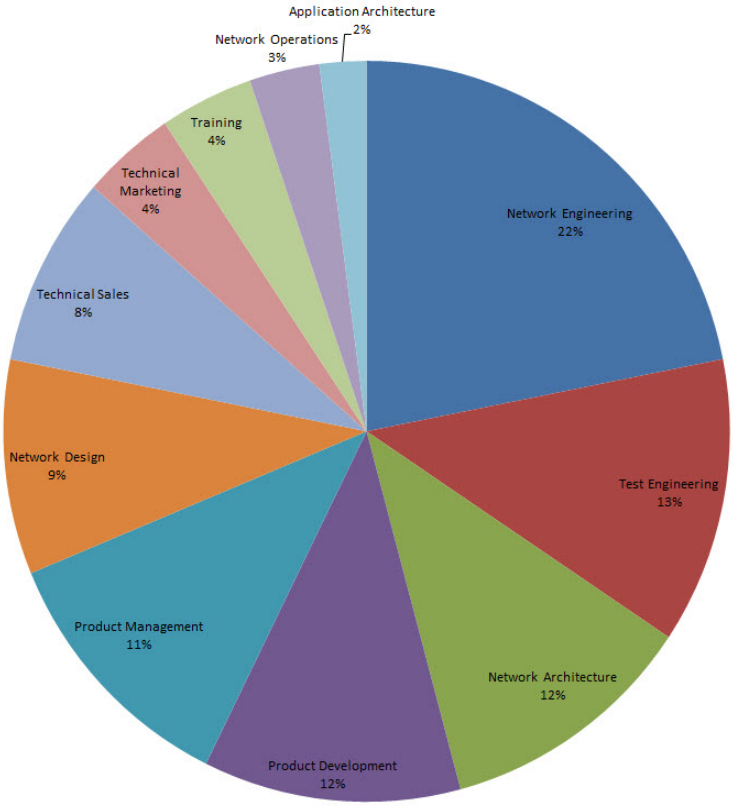
By the end of 2011, 83 certified vendors were offering over 800 certified devices, and 62 certified service providers were offering over 200 Carrier Ethernet services. The hunger for Carrier Ethernet continues, making it a significant business opportunity not only for service providers and equipment vendors, but increasingly for consultants, sales engineers and professional services. With this in mind, the MEF extended its certification last year with a MEF Professional Certification program designed for individuals whose Carrier Ethernet technology and application skills meet MEF defined standards.

The MEF-CECP program

The MEF-CECP program was developed over the course of a year, including beta testing for four months with the help of exam psychometric specialists, then formally launched in June 2011 as the world's only industry-body certification for Carrier Ethernet professionals. According to Michael Howard, Principle Analyst, Infonetics Research: "This professional certification could not be more timely… with Ethernet services forecast to hit $49 billion in 2015, there will be a growing demand for accredited Carrier Ethernet expertise."

The syllabus was built around ten year's cumulative knowledge and specifications developed by the MEF Technical and Marketing Committees. It is planned as the first of a series of professional certifications, initially targeting technical sales and marketing, engineering and operations staff – though the demand for such an exam reaches far wider – see Fig 1. A wide range of study materials is provided on the MEF website, along with a checklist, and a range of study guides is planned. Training for the exam is also available from the MEF's rigorously audited Accredited Training Providers (MEF-ATPs) around the world.

Fig 1 – Distribution of MEF-CECP examinees in first 6 months



The multiple-choice exam can be taken online, regulated by web based proctoring technology to ensure a valid test and result. It can also be taken in-house at an MEF-ATP following the completion of their training course. Over forty topics are covered, including:

- MEF services definitions for E-Line, E-LAN and E-Tree
- Implementing services over various transport and access technologies
- Definitions and application of UNI, EVC and ENNI
- Key UNI, ENNI, EVC and OVC service attributes
- Definitions of MEF 9, 14, 18 vendor equipment and product certifications and benefits
- Key service requirements for wholesale access, Ethernet access to IP, mobile backhaul, retail Ethernet services etc.
- Comparison with layer 2 Frame Relay, IP/MPLS and TDM private line
- Circuit Emulation over Ethernet and synchronization
- Role of Service, Operations Administration and Maintenance (SOAM)

Successful candidates receive an MEF certificate, qualifying them to use the MEF-CECP logo – for example in e-mail signatures, business cards and CVs for instant recognition of their

status – Fig 2. They are also listed on the MEF's on-line MEF-CECP Directory at www.ethernetacademy.org.

The first six months

By the end of January 2012 there were already 155 MEF-CEPs from fifty five organizations and spread over twenty-four nations – led by North America with 42%, APAC region with 28% and Europe with 26%. To start with, the pass standard proved challenging – with only 55% first time passes among 258 applicants proving the certification's value as a mark of excellence. On the other hand it is good to see the pass rate improving as candidates recognize the nature of the challenge and prepare themselves better for it – in the last 30 days the ratio of first time passes has reached 74%.

The certification was always intended to offer benefits beyond the obvious ones of adding value to professionals competing for work or positions. It was also meant to benefit organizations employing MEF-CECPs as a demonstration of their commitment to quality and knowledge of the technology – as well as helping the recruitment of suitable staff. As a result, the whole industry would benefit from the confidence of accredited skills, just as the product and services certification had done so much to boost the acceptance of Carrier Ethernet by business users.

An outstanding example is provided by The Philippine Long Distance Telephone Company (PLDT) – the Philippine's leading fixed line, wireless and ICT business provider with high speed fiber links to Europe, the United States and the rest of the APAC region. PLDT had already committed itself strongly to the MEF certification program by achieving MEF certification for three families of its Carrier Ethernet services offered both domestically and internationally when it decided to adopt MEF-CECP certification within the organization. By actively encouraging its staff to take the exam, the company was leading the international field at the end of January with no less than twenty one MEF-CECPs on its staff (number two contender having eleven MEF-CECPs to date).

In PLDT's opinion: "The most important part of a company is its people. Technology, no matter how cutting-edge, will not be maximized to its fullest potential without the right people-power skillsets . Having a large pool of MEF-CECP's has put PLDT in a strong competitive position when providing global quality Carrier Ethernet services. Customers can be assured of a service that will enjoy the highest level of support from service/project scoping, provisioning and the after-sales aspects."

The company sees its MEF-CECP strategy as a further boost to its credibility as a premiere Carrier Ethernet service provider with the technical know-how to serve its customers well, in particular as providers of MEF E-Line, WAN and Ethernet IPLC services. It gives out a strong message that they: “do not only invest in infrastructure but, more importantly, in people”.

Conclusion

The MEF’s focus on network interconnection marks the start of a new wave of global connectivity. Cytaglobal, for example, have recently collaborated with Hong Kong’s PCCW Global Ltd to jointly enhance their services coverage and availability to more than 70 countries – with a suite of Ethernet solutions riding on their MPLS network platforms to deliver high quality, cost-effective international connectivity.

Shahar Steiff, PCCW Global’s AVP, EMMEA PreSales, is very clear about the value of the MEF’s alignment of standards a in the constantly developing Ethernet environment: “MEF certification, in particular the MEF-CECP, provides assurance of capability: on the cooperation level – as when interfacing networks with a proven partner – but also when approaching customers who need assurance that the provider is truly up to the mark”.

The MEF-CECP program is only half way through its first year, but is already proving as successful as the MEF’s services and equipment certifications. It is seen to be a challenging test of technological knowledge, but the pool of candidates is rising to the challenge. What’s more, PLDT views the program as setting an example for the whole industry:

“This strategic direction will elevate the level of expertise in the industry, since other service providers in turn will encourage the same competencies in their people to remain competitive. This cumulative pool of new skills and capabilities will hasten the adoption and growth of Carrier Ethernet services…”

Further certification levels are being planned to address the more general needs of marketing and sales professionals as well as more specialized technical roles. For the latest details on the examinations and how to apply see the MEF–CECP page on the MEF website or the Ethernet Academy at www.ethernetacademy.org