

Although at the time of writing I have not yet passed the CCIE Lab Exam in Routing & Switching, I have come a long way in my journey to become a CCIE and have learnt a lot. My journey to date has taken over 3 years and my second attempt is booked for September 2013

The most important thing I have learnt is that I have probably wasted about 2 years studying on and off in and round work schedules and family ties and financial issues, that if I had my time again I would do things so very differently, hence the reason for this post as hopefully I can impart some of my experiences to date to help someone else take a shorter path to the CCIE.

Believe me there is no shortcut to becoming a CCIE but you can certainly make your journey towards it more focussed and reduce your study time.

So here are my top 7 CCIE study mistakes that I made.

1: I did not accurately assess my current skills at the start by referencing the blueprint.

Before you start your journey from whatever point you are in your career you need to accurately and honestly document your strengths and weaknesses from the blueprint <https://learningnetwork.cisco.com/docs/DOC-4603> and be brutally honest with yourself.

I initially read through the blueprint and said RIP – easy, EIGRP, easy, OSPF I do that every day, BGP not bad etc etc.

What I should have done is said do I know how to configure and verify all types of authentication in OSPF?

Do I really know the difference between BPDU filter and BPDU guard and how they interact with interface portfast configuration?

Can I configure a MPLS L3 VPN from scratch?

Can I explain to somebody else the difference between RD and RT?

Looking back I actually cheated myself a lot in the early days by not accepting my weaknesses and really focussing on them, but in the beginning there were no time pressures and I was just taking it easy.

2: Agree with your Wife/Husband/Girlfriend/Boyfriend/Partner your study schedule.

This is another huge mistake I made. At the start I would just say to my wife “I am going to be studying for the CCIE and I need to do a lot of work” So that evening I would do some studying, from her perspective she had no clue how much work I had to do, how many hours I needed to study for, how many weekends I would need and in fact she didn’t know when the exam was (neither did I!) so she was just confused and left out of my future plans.

When she studied for her degree, I knew it was a 2 year course, that she would be working quite a bit in the first year and a lot in the second year and leading up to her exams I would not see her very much. By not knowing where the end goal was she had nothing to focus on and to know when the end would be.

Set out your study plan and agree that you will study for 3 nights a week and every other weekend initially. Once this is on the calendar everyone knows that on a particular evening you are working.

So my advice here is to fully assess your current knowledge and work out roughly how long it is going to take you to get there. Then say I will be sitting the exam in 18 months.

3: Do not attempt a mock lab until you are least comfortable with most of the topics on the blueprint.

I took an 8 hour mock lab in the early days and firstly gave myself a huge reality check but not being able to do a lot of required tasks and secondly the thought then of sitting for 8 hours during the lab make me think I can't do this.

Build up to a mock lab, by all means jump into a full scale lab but just attempt one topic, ie. Switching for 2-3 hours, work through it slowly and write down everything you need to learn, this will be your study plan for the next week! By attempting a full mock lab early it made me think I am never going to be able to do all of this in 8 hours and there is no way I can concentrate for 8 hours.

My first mock lab score was 11 which really got me down for a while, but I made sure that every one after that would be an improvement and it was.

3: If you attend a boot camp do not go do early.

I attended the INE CCIE 10 day Bootcamp in February 2012 – and although it was by far the best Cisco training I have ever had. Brian Dennis is an amazing instructor, I did not benefit from it as much as I should have as there were still big holes in my knowledge and the CCIE bootcamp is not really the place to be learning new things, I believe it is to solidify your current already strong knowledge.

I was fortunate enough to re-sit part of the bootcamp again in Feb 2013 and the difference was clear, I was already on top of a lot of what Brian was teaching and then could take the time to absorb all the deeper stuff he was teaching. For those who have not attended one before I would highly recommend it but a few months away from your lab is the best time to go.

4: Explain to your Wife/Husband/Girlfriend/Boyfriend/Partner nearer to exam time that you might not pass and if you don't there will be another few months of intense study ahead of you.

Although I do not want to be a defeatist here, the reality is that only 10-15% of candidates pass on their first attempt, my wife fully believed that this was going to be a one shot, pass the exam and move on. Which if you have prepared properly it should be, but you should also prepare them for the fact that if you fail there will be more studying to be done. I think my wife accepted this more easily than my daughter when I failed my first attempt.

5: Do not just read Cisco Books

When I started my studies I did what everyone else probably did and went out and bought the entire CCIE Reading list and then stacked the books on top of each other and thought Wow! I have to read all of that to become a CCIE. I am not a great reader so the thought of ploughing through all those books was not a pleasant one. Then I watched a CCIE preparation seminar by Brian Dennis where he

outlined the books you should be reading – his list included some vendor independent texts that focus more on the theory rather than the commands. Two of my favourites are

MPLS Enabled Applications and QOS Enabled Networks

If you broaden your reading to these books as well you will get a much better understanding of the technology and then the actual commands are just a way of saying so how does Cisco do this, then you can expand that to how does Juniper do it?

6: Buy an iPad – other tablets are available..

Put all the training resources you have onto your device and carry it with you everywhere, I have loaded a lot of training videos, and all my books and most of the Doc CD are on there. Anytime you get some downtime even if it's 15 minutes just plug in your headphones and watch a bit of a video or read ten pages you will be amazed how much time you do have in the day to just squeeze in these mini study sessions. I stopped watching TV and focussed my attention onto training videos, some evenings I would be watching a video about BGP while my wife watched her favourite soaps. She was happy I was with her and I was learning.

7: Book the exam and cancel everything

After all this preparation it was only when I had finally paid for the exam and I was locked in with 90 days to go that I really started to study and did not feel guilty about not going to social events.

It has always been said to me "To become a CCIE you need to cancel your social life" at the time I thought I can manage to study and socialise, and I did for a few years! (I was only cheating myself)

When the exam was booked I had all the understanding from my wife and family that with my exam in 4 weeks I was not going to be coming to that BBQ or going to the Cinema. I had a tight schedule and every day counted. I put a countdown timer on my phone and when you realise you only had 24 days to go the thought of going to beach for the day was just not there.

This focus did not come before the exam as always some way off, when the clock is ticking you really study, I think I learnt more in the last 2 months than I did in the last 2 years.

Final thoughts

I could go on forever with this list but I hope somebody can take something from it, I have just put down what I wish I had read 3 years ago.

I have my second attempt booked for September 23<sup>rd</sup> so hopefully all the hard work will pay off.

I feel so much more confident now than I did on the first attempt and at the end of the day this is a journey to become a better network engineer and not to just pass an exam. In the last few years I have gained so much knowledge that I would not have done if I had not been studying for the CCIE so I am very thankful for that, and once I have cleared Routing & Switching my plan after a short break is to jump straight into Data Centre!

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