

FROM ZERO TO YOUR FIRST IT JOB

The cert route a Marine and tradesman took from a repair bench to senior systems administrator. One cert at a time, in this order.

PHASE 1 • GET HIRED		TARGET: HELP DESK, DESKTOP SUPPORT, MSP TECH
01	CompTIA A+ (2 exams)	Hardware, operating systems, troubleshooting. The filter most help desk postings use. ~\$265 each
02	CompTIA Network+	How networks actually work: IP addressing, DNS, DHCP, VLANs, routing. ~\$390
03	CompTIA Security+	Security fundamentals. Required for many government and defense contractor IT jobs. ~\$425

PHASE 2 • MOVE UP		TARGET: SYSADMIN, M365 ADMIN, MSP TIER 2
04	Microsoft AB-650 M365 and AI Services Admin	Running a Microsoft 365 tenant: users, Entra ID, Defender, Purview, Copilot. Replaces MS-102, which retires Nov 30, 2026. \$165
05	Microsoft MD-102 Endpoint Administrator	Managing laptops and phones with Intune and Autopilot. Most of what an MSP touches daily. \$165

PHASE 3 • CLOUD		TARGET: CLOUD ADMIN, AZURE ENGINEER
06	Microsoft AZ-900 Azure Fundamentals	Cloud concepts and core Azure services. Optional if your Microsoft 365 work already has you in Azure. \$99
07	Microsoft AZ-104 Azure Administrator	Identity, virtual machines, networking, and storage in Azure. The cert cloud job postings ask for by name. \$165

PHASE 4 • SPECIALIZE • PICK ONE BY GOAL			
Cisco CCNA Networking track. Routing, switching, and the deep troubleshooting network engineers are hired for. ~\$300		CompTIA CySA+ Security track. Threat detection, log analysis, and incident response for SOC and blue team roles. ~\$425	

FREE STUDY MATERIAL

Professor Messer for CompTIA videos and notes. **Microsoft Learn** for every Microsoft exam, including free practice assessments. **Cisco Packet Tracer** for CCNA labs.

ABOUT THE PRICES

Approximate US exam costs as of October 2026. Check the vendor before you buy, and look for student and military discounts. Veterans: see page 2 before paying anything.

BUILD A HOME LAB

Certs get you the interview. A lab gives you something real to talk about in it. Start free, upgrade when you're ready.

The \$0 lab

USE WHAT YOU HAVE

GEAR

Any PC or laptop with 16GB RAM and an SSD.
VirtualBox (free) or Hyper-V (built into Windows Pro).
Windows Server evaluation (free for 180 days). Ubuntu Server (free).

BUILD

1. A domain controller running Active Directory, DNS, and DHCP

2. A Windows client VM joined to the domain

3. Users, groups, and Group Policy you can test against

4. Break it, fix it, and write down what you did

The ~\$300 lab

BUY USED

GEAR

Used business mini PC with 32GB RAM. An 8-port managed switch that supports VLANs. Proxmox VE hypervisor and OPNsense or pfSense firewall (both free).

BUILD

1. Everything from the \$0 lab, running on Proxmox

2. A firewall VM routing between your networks

3. Separate VLANs for users, servers, and lab traffic

4. Wazuh for security monitoring or Pi-hole for DNS filtering

PUT IT ON AN IT RESUME

You already did the work. Describe it the way an IT hiring manager reads it.

- Certs at the top, including ones in progress with a target date
- Use the posting's own words: tickets, SLAs, Microsoft 365, Active Directory

- Add a Projects section for your lab: what you built and the tools
- One page, with numbers wherever you have them

INSTEAD OF	WRITE
Troubleshoot electrical faults using schematics and meters	Diagnosed and resolved system faults using documentation and test tools
Followed work orders and code requirements	Worked tickets to resolution within SOPs and compliance standards
Ran pre-op checks and preventive maintenance on equipment	Performed preventive maintenance and monitoring to reduce downtime

VETERANS AND SERVICE MEMBERS · GET IT PAID FOR

COOL cool.osd.mil

Each branch's credentialing program funds cert exams for eligible service members. Ask your education office.

VET TEC 2.0

Covers eligible 6 to 28 week tech training programs for veterans. Not exam fees. Programs must start by Sept 30, 2027.

Program rules change. Confirm eligibility with the VA or your branch before you count on the money.

GI Bill test reimbursement

VA pays back approved cert test fees up to \$2,000 per test, pass or fail. File VA Form 22-0803.

DoD SkillBridge skillbridge.osd.mil

A civilian IT internship in your last 180 days of service, still on military pay.

Questions? journey2tech.com/contact

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