

Becoming Certified as a Microsoft Office User Specialist (MOUS)

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Preparing for the Microsoft Office User Specialist Exams

A Microsoft Office User Specialist (MOUS) is a person who has passed an exam administered through a Microsoft Authorized Testing Center on one of the Office products. Introduced in 1997 as the Microsoft Certified Office User Program, users today can receive designation as Microsoft Office User Specialists at the core level in Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access, and Outlook. For those who really want to demonstrate their skills, exams are also available at expert levels for Word and Excel. A Master credential is available for someone who has passed the PowerPoint, Access and Outlook core exams and Word and Excel expert exams.

The MOUS Difference

The Microsoft Office User Specialist certification is fundamentally different from other certifications that Microsoft offers. A person who passes a MOUS exam is just as likely employed in a profession outside of the computer field. Whether it is in a large corporation or a small office, a MOUS is using applications such as Word and Excel to function effectively as an administrative assistant, a secretary, a manager, or a myriad other positions that require day-to-day problem solving skills. The Microsoft Office family of products has helped this person accomplish the impossible to meet a deadline, impress their bosses and perform their job more efficiently. The MOUS is interested in improving their skills and increasing their opportunities. As more and more employers begin looking for verification of a person's software skills, there is no better way to stand out from the crowd than to show your credentials as a specialist in the software the job requires.

Should I Become a Microsoft Office User Specialist?

If you were applying for an office job only a few short years ago, probably the only test you had to take was a typing test. This test would document your speed and accuracy at a typewriter. It didn't matter if you understood what you typed or if you could create a similar document from scratch, all you had to be able to do was recreate what someone handed to you and do it in an acceptable amount of time. With the proliferation of personal computers in workplaces everywhere, the expectations placed on office workers have increased significantly.

Typing speed and accuracy may still be important but even more valuable is knowledge about how to make the most efficient and effective use of new office technology. Microsoft Office is the most used office suite on the market today. Knowing how to apply this group of powerful applications to the demands of your work environment can put you ahead of the pack. You immediately stand out from others and become recognized as a problem-solver to those who are in a position to help advance your career.

The Microsoft Office User Specialist Program provides a mechanism for all types of users, regardless of their motivation, to prove their competency in the family of Microsoft Office applications. Whether you are a student with little real world experience or a highly trained professional with a top-level staff position, you may find that it is beneficial to add the Microsoft Office User Specialist designation to your portfolio.

Getting Your Employer to Foot the Bill

Companies that place a high value on employee education and training may very well agree to pay for you to take one or more of the MOUS exams. As the credential is becoming more widely known, more and more employers are looking at the MOUS credential as a mark of excellence in their company. Certainly, there is no hard and fast rule about this—employers are not required to pay for them. However, it certainly doesn't hurt to ask you boss or your human resource department. Many companies may agree to reimburse you if you pass a MOUS exam.

Unless your company has issued a company statement about paying for the exams, do your homework before approaching your employer. It helps if your company has already adopted or plans to adopt Office 2000 as the company standard. Visit the Microsoft Office User Certification web site (www.mous.net) and other Office certifications sites such as www.certcities.com/certs/mous/ for more information to convince your employer of the benefits to the company of having certified employees.

If you decide to give your employer the opportunity to demonstrate his or her commitment to quality improvement and staff development, here are a few tips for you to consider when you are preparing a proposal to give to your boss:

- 1) Plan to study for the exams on your own time. If you spend an hour after work or at lunch time studying three or four times a week, you'll be ready to take one or even two of the exams after just a few study sessions. By doing it on your own time, it shows that you can take initiative and that you are committed to personal improvement. Even if this doesn't impress your employer, you will have improved your skills to help you in other areas of your job (or to get a better job!).
- 2) Become familiar with Microsoft's requirements and the process for taking the exams so that you are prepared to answer any question your employer may ask about how the exams work.
- 3) List at least three specific benefits to the company for having certified employees. Be able to point out the financial savings resulting from fewer technical support calls and from less downtime figuring out how to do something.
- 4) Develop an argument that ties your getting certified into the company's overall quality initiative. Having certified employees in every field helps a company demonstrate to their customers and potential customers that they are committed to quality. It makes the company look good and that goes a long way in today's competitive market.
- 5) Offer to be a mentor to other employees—individually or as a group. If work time is too precious, organize a weekly bag-lunch of Office users and have someone present a different topic each week based on a project they just completed. However you approach it, show your employer you are a leader and it may be easier to make a case for the value of the certifications to the company.

If all else fails, pay for the exams yourself. Being certified makes you a more valuable commodity and may make your employer think twice when he or she sees you using Word to update your resume!

What are the Microsoft Office User Specialist Designations?

Once you've decided to pursue certification, you have to determine if you want to take all of the exams or pick and choose among them. Unless you plan to train other users or you have a technical support type job, you probably don't have a need to take all of the available exams. However, if you want a comprehensive knowledge base and you want the new plum of the Master certification that Microsoft has placed on the platter, you may want to set up a plan of attack and go after them all.

It's possible to earn certification in each of the major applications that are a part of the Microsoft Office family. These include Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access, and Outlook. Because Word and Excel are the most popular of the six products and have the most widespread application, two levels of designation—Core and Expert—have been developed for these applications; that means that there is a separate test for each level. A core and expert exam is also available for Microsoft Project.

Microsoft expects that a Microsoft Office User Specialist at the Core level is able to complete the everyday tasks that arise in a typical office setting. A Word Specialist should be able to format text and paragraphs, create tables and columns, manage files and work with pictures and charts. An Excel Specialist should be

able to format cells, and worksheets, enter formulas and basic functions, work with multiple worksheets, create charts and insert objects.

In order to become an Expert Specialist, you are expected to be able to create more complex documents. A Word Expert should be able to conduct mail merges to create personalized form letters with envelopes and mailing labels, work with master and subdocuments, add references and use collaboration features. An Excel Expert should be able to use templates, work with multiple workbooks, create macros, use analysis tools and also use collaboration features.

What Are the Exams Like?

Exams are hands-on. You will be expected to be able to apply your knowledge of an application to real-world tasks that you will complete using the application. Unlike other Microsoft certification exams, there are no multiple-choice questions (with the exception of Outlook and Project which include a few multiple choice). Instead, each user is expected to complete specific tasks, such as formatting a document in a specific way, creating a formula, sorting a list, etc. The exams must be completed within the designated timeframe; timeframes differ by exam, but all are under an hour.

This is not a paper and pencil test. You will be working with a live version of the product on which you are being tested. You can use all of the features of the product, including Help. However, if you access Help too often, you'll run out of time before completing all of the required tasks.

When you're ready to start, take a deep breathe (be sure to exhale too!) and click the Start Test button. You complete each task on the sample documents provided to you so you don't have to spend time creating documents of your own. Each task has a set of instructions for you to follow. When you've completed one task, you click Next Task and move on to the next task.

Preparing to Take an Exam

Before you start studying, review the objectives for the test you are interested in taking. If you're an experienced user, you may even want to check off those activities in which you are already pretty comfortable. Spend some time reviewing those activities and making sure you are 100% confident in completing each of them. When you are ready to tackle new ground, move on to the next set of activities on which you want to focus.

If you'd like to get a taste of how the exams work and receive a discount on the exam fees, through August 31, 2001 you can purchase a MOUS Master Passport that includes discounted exam fees and a CD with practice exams. If you plan to go after the Master credential, these packages of 4 or 5 tests will save you a bundle. These practice tests help you get used to the format and the structure of the exams so you'll know what to expect when you sit down to take the real ones. Visit the MOUS Online Store at www.mous.net for more information.

Registering to Take an Exam

You can receive information about a local iQCenter (authorized testing center) by calling (888) 893-0104 or visiting www.mous.net/testing/locator.asp. Not every city has a testing center but the number of centers is growing rapidly--there probably is one within a couple hours drive if not right in your city. Although some centers allow walk-in test-takers, it's best to call first to make sure.

Each test you take has a fee associated with it. The average fee is \$65 and the testing center may also tack on a proctoring fee. If you purchase the MOUS Master Passport, the fee is discounted to \$49.75. You can usually pay by check or credit card – check out payment arrangements when you call to register. Be sure to bring a picture ID (driver's license, passport, credit card, etc) to the testing center with you.

Taking More than One Exam

It's not unusual that you may want to take more than one exam in a day, especially if the testing center is a distance from your house. Be careful not to overload yourself, however. Some people may be able to handle taking three or four in a day—others may faint after taking one. Evaluate how long you can realistically concentrate without affecting your ability to think clearly. There's no point in paying for an exam and then not allowing yourself optimal test taking conditions.

If you plan to take more than one exam, talk with the testing center about spacing them out a bit throughout the day. Take one or two then go to lunch before taking another one or two. You'll be fresher and have time enough to refocus on the new topic (maybe even get in a little last minute cramming).

The Moment of Truth

The tests are scored electronically so you'll know your score immediately. You need to get about 80% correct to pass the tests. If you pass, you'll receive a certificate of completion in the mail. Take yourself out to dinner to celebrate or better yet, have someone else take you out!

What Happens If I Don't Pass?

If you need to take a test again, ask the test administrator for a printed score report which identifies where you need to focus your energy as you prepare for another round. Of course, you'll have to pay to take a test again but it was probably money well spent. You learned some things and although it would be nice to not be out the exam fee, being more experienced means you'll probably pass it next time.

If you thought you were prepared and still didn't pass, you may just have test anxiety that probably won't be as bad the second time around. You'll be in familiar surroundings and know very clearly what you are expected to do. You'll be told what areas you need to focus on. If you realize that you didn't know how to do certain tasks that were asked for, study up on those and then be sure to review all the material before taking the test again.

Becoming a MOUS Instructor

If you want to share your Office expertise with others, you may want to look into become a certified MOUS Master-Instructor. Microsoft just announced this new certification on July 6, 2001, with more details to come. To qualify for a MOUS Master-Instructor Certificate, you must first obtain the MOUS Master credential. Additionally, you must demonstrate any of following instructional experience/credentials:

- A diploma or transcript indicating that the instructor has satisfied the requirements for a college degree in one or more fields of educational study; or
- Written verification from a current or past employer of two (2) or more years of employment delivering competent training on Microsoft Office applications; or
- A certificate indicating that the instructor has completed a Microsoft approved presentation skills or Train-the-Trainer course; or
- An instructor completion certificate from any of the following vendors: Caldera, Certified Internet Webmaster, Cisco Systems, Citrix, Lotus, Microsoft, Novell, Oracle or Santa Cruz Operation, Inc.