The Journey In Passing The
AWS Certified Solutions Architect Associate
Certification………. Passed at 77%!

Contents:

Summary: The following are the details of my experience in obtaining the AWS Certified Solutions Architect Associate certification which ended on July 28, 2017. Hopefully this information will be useful to facilitate a training plan in order to learn the technology and pass the AWS CSAA exam. A student from A Cloud Guru was kind enough to post his journey, therefore, I want to give back to the student community with similar information.

I don't fit the average profile of someone who would be interested in obtaining this very popular AWS certification since my background is in technology sales, and I never really expected to use AWS's Cloud services in a full production environment. I first learned about cloud technologies several years back from a generic cloud course from Rackspace, and then in more detail from a cloud certification that I obtained from COMPTia. My interest at that time was to simply expand my knowledge on cloud

technologies for career growth in sales. My motivation to obtain the AWS CSAA certification is to perhaps work for AWS or for one of the growing AWS ecosystem partners in a sales capacity.

Since I was laid off a few months back, I felt this was the perfect time for me to learn more about AWS and obtain the AWS CSAA certification. Looking at AWS's exam blueprint on the suggested knowledge that a person should have prior to taking the training, it was clear that this endeavor was going to be a real challenge, and I knew this up front. In hindsight, if I had known at the beginning the amount of effort that would be required, I most likely would have not taken on the challenge. I have had a lot of experience selling several different areas of technology but very little, if any, networking experience.

My 247 training hours is not a good representation of what the average student will require as it will most likely be far less. Any activity that was related to the AWS CSAA certification I counted as training hours. Reading an AWS blog page on updated AWS services, cutting up flash cards, reading input from students on AWS training community sites, or listening to a 35 minute AWS PODcast was all added up.

It is important to understand that you really need to immerse yourself in the technology and, more specifically, be genuinely interested in AWS since there is a direct correlation in understanding the technology and passing the exam. Personally, I was 100% committed to do whatever was needed in order to learn the technology and pass the exam. This mindset was what helped me because, in the back of my mind, I knew all along there was a possibility that my technical foundation knowledge related to IT might be inadequate in order to pass the exam.

The following is the process that I went through in preparing for the exam. At the end, I have concluded with what I would I do if I had to do it all over again, which I hope will assist anyone that is interested in obtaining the AWS CSAA certification.

Student Background:

Experience Background- BS Marketing, 20+ years high technology sales (semiconductors, professional services, CAD software, hardware, software,

technical training, co-location data centers, IaaS, DRaaS, managed cloud services)

Technical Certifications: COMPTia "Cloud Essentials", Rackspace "Cloud University"

Other Technical Training:
Stanford University Cloud Computing CS309. Several training courses for Account Managers from various technology companies (VMware, Cisco, Veeam, etc)

My Study Timeline:
Start / End date- 6/6/17 to 7/28/17 (52 days)
Total hours- 247 (Yes… my math is correct!)

My AWS CSAA Exam Scoring Breakdown:
Overall Score -77%
1.0 Designing highly available, cost efficient, fault tolerant, scalable systems: 86%
4.0 Troubleshooting: 60%
2.0 Implementation/Deployment: 60%
3.0 Security: 66%

Total costs: Training from Leaning Partners, IOS Apps, books, AWS exam fees, other, $509

Resources Used:

Video Training Resources Used
Cloud Academy - AWS Cert. Solutions Architect Associate(30% of content)
Linux Academy- AWS Essentials (100% of content)
Linux Academy- AWS Cert. Solutions Architect Associate (100% of content)
A Cloud Guru - AWS Certification Exam Prep Guide - Video (100% of content)
A Cloud Guru - AWS Cert. Solutions Architect – Assoc. (90% of content)
AWS Certification Exam Readiness Workshop – 4 hour
Other AWS related video training- YouTube, Linked-In (Lynda) – Approximately

Practice Exams: WhizLabs

Books: AWS Certified Solutions Architect Official Study Guide

IOS IPhone App Quizzes: A Cloud Guru

IOS IPhone AWS App: Access AWS Console

PodCasts: AWS Podcast, AWS TechChat

Flash Cards: Over 300

The AWS CSAA Journey
Regardless of which learning partner you decide to use for the training, there are two main areas of the training, which are the lectures / quizzes and then the lab exercises. This alone is perhaps 18-25 total hours, but you still have a long journey ahead of you prior to taking the exam. There are additional hours that will be required on your own to learn the technology from other resources, i.e. AWS white papers, practice exams, reviewing videos, etc. If I recall correctly, A Cloud Guru mentioned that you should expect about 4-8 hours of additional study for every hour of lecture. They also mentioned an estimate of 40-80 total hours of effort would be required in order to be fully prepared for the exam. Embarking on 18-25 hours of lecture and labs is the easy part; the big question is how are you going to remember everything that you need to know in order to actually use AWS services and also pass the exam? It is important to note that the video lecture and labs do not cover all AWS products only the core areas.

For the most part, you need to nail down your own personal study plan that you are going to use based on your own individual learning style. Perhaps take notes during the video lecture and the video labs? Review the videos lectures several times? Read all 437 pages of the AWS study guide? Take screen shots of important information during the video lecture? Keep in mind your study plan will change along the way as learn new things and find out about other training resources.

I originally started my AWS CSAA training with Cloud Academy and completed about 20% of the course. I then decided to move to another training company A Cloud Guru based on positive feedback from a friend who was using it. Ryan Kroonenburg, from A Cloud Guru, and his team

have a great AWS CSAA course as well as other AWS courses. They also seem to make updates to the course as best as possible. Keep in mind that it is very challenging for learning partners to keep the course updated based on all the product changes and updates that AWS will make on a weekly basis.

I had read some positive feedback from students about QwikLabs, which is a company that provides AWS lab exercises that students can do on their own. My revised plan was to complete the AWS CSAA course through A Cloud Guru and watch Ryan do his labs; however, I would do the lab exercises on my own through QwikLabs.

At this point, I honestly did not feel confident that I fully understood everything that was going on when Ryan was going through his lab exercises that I was watching. Yes, you can watch all the steps as he goes through to spin up an instance, add in a load balancer, etc., but you really need to understand the big picture of what is going on in the background. Also, when a student embarks on a lab exercise, you are actually tapped into the real AWS console of your own account.

I now realized that I needed to step back and obtain some basic networking knowledge in order to have a solid foundation before I pressed on to do the QwikLab lab exercises. Even though I knew I would never be using AWS, I sincerely wanted to understand it. Ryan stressed that understanding the lab exercises would be very beneficial in helping you pass the exam and to understand how to use the AWS product. Realizing I needed additional networking knowledge was the easy part the problem; however, where would I be able to find it without spending countless hours on the Internet or at most taking another training course? The plan to do the Qwiklabs now went to the back burner for the short term as I spent the next 10 or so hours on YouTube and Lynda (LinkedIn), I actually found some very good content on AWS networking which was very helpful. I still did not feel 100% confident about pressing forward with the Qwiklabs exercises. I had now invested about 80 hours in the following areas, but I still had long ways to go in order to be fully prepared for the exam.

1. Cloud Academy- 20% of their course
2. A Cloud Guru - 100% of their course
3. Read all 5 AWS whites papers
4. Ongoing review of FAQ's "general area" for the key AWS products

5. Ongoing review of over 300 flash cards
6. Listening to PODcasts on AWS (See resources)
7. Reviewing screen shots of the lectures
8. Doing 5-20 min short quizzes via A Cloud Guru IOS IPhone app
9. Reviewing certain sections of AWS Exam preparation guide

I then came across the AWS Essentials course from LinuxAcademy. This course for the most part is somewhat of a stripped-down version of the AWS CSAA course. It covers about 80% of what would be in a typical CSAA course but not in the same detail. The purpose of this course is to obtain a high-level understanding of the core AWS services. The interesting part of this course is that the content is delivered as a typical lecture video course, but you can see things in visual manner with block diagrams. The student also has the ability to select the diagrams in an intuitive manner. It was late on a Friday night when the light bulb went on in my head. This was exactly what I needed, but the AWS Essentials course would now require another 7 hours of training. I would be going somewhat backwards, but it was something that I really needed to do. My revised plan was to take the AWS Essentials course (only 1 lab) from LinuxAcademy, do the 9 QwikLabs for the AWS CSAA course, and then review all content and resources that I had accumulated to prepare for the exam… at least this was what I thought my plan was going to be.

Tom Haslett is the instructor who developed the AWS Essentials course at LinuxAcademy, and he also teaches the course via recorded video. The learning process that he takes you though is somewhat like a project which has the name of the "Omega Project". I used to work for a Cisco Learning Partner for 11 years, and after having worked with many different instructors, I can tell you that Tom does a great job in delivering the content. The visual aspect of this course really excelled my knowledge since I could now understand how the different AWS services worked together. Once I finished the AWS Essentials course, I made contact with Tom and he suggested that I consider taking their AWS CSAA course (lecture, quizzes, labs) instead of doing the Qwiklabs as I had planned. If I decided to take his advice, it would then be another 17-plus hours of training. Keep in mind that a course which is supposed to be 17 hours long will actually take much longer since you will need to watch some videos more than one time if it is a complex AWS product. You might also need to slow the videos down when you are watching the labs exercises, since you are doing the labs at the same time. I did not track the specific time, but my

guess is that a course which is 18 hours long could really take 25-30 hours if you factor in everything that you are doing with the course, labs, quizzes, 60 question simulated exam, etc.

I decided to take Tom's advice, but I am now thinking…. "wow, more hours of training". I was actually excited to take LinuxAcademy AWS CSAA course since I was now very familiar with Tom's method of teaching and I was building a lot of confidence on what I was learning. I still had a long ways to go before I was prepared to take the exam. As I stated earlier, you really need to be interested in gaining knowledge about AWS products, and for those who do, the net result will be a better understanding of the products and a higher probability of passing the exam on the first attempt. The LinuxAcademy AWS CSAA course is delivered very similar to the AWS Essentials course, but they call it the "Orion Papers". Once I finished the LinuxAcademy AWS CSAA course, I decided to do their lab exercises, and I abandoned the idea of doing the Qwiklab lab exercises.

Lab Exercises
Regardless of what learning partner you decide to use, the lab exercises are very important. Understanding the labs exercises by watching a video is one thing, but more importantly, it is being able to do the labs by yourself. Even if your goal was like mine, to simply to learn the technology and pass the exam, you are still going to need to understand how to use several different AWS's services. Doing the lab exercises is the only way to accomplish this, or you are going to have problems passing the exam and even more important if you plan on using AWS in a production environment you will be struggling. Think about it, when you first learned how to use Microsoft Word, Excel or PowerPoint, did you just read a big thick textbook on everything you wanted to understand? Was that all you needed to do? Most likely it was not until you actually used the application did things start to come together; this is the same thing when using AWS. The AWS training partners call this "Getting dirty" which is simply hands-on experience using real live labs from AWS. As I mentioned earlier, I did not do the lab exercises with A Cloud Guru; I used the labs from LinuxAcademy, but I did view all the lab videos from A Cloud Guru and they are very good. The LinuxAcademy labs are also very good, and they provision the labs for you.

In addition to doing the lab exercises that are a part of the course, there is nothing that is preventing you from simply logging on the AWS console and

playing around with it. There were several times when I was either watching a training video or reading something in the AWS Certified Solutions Architect Official Study Guide, when I would say to myself, wait, is that how CloudWatch works? Sometimes I would just stop whatever I was doing and log on to the console and explore; you really have to feel comfortable in doing things like this. At first, I was a little bit hesitant, and I thought perhaps someone from AWS support was going to contact me and ask me why I was doing something in a certain way. I might be doing something on my own on the AWS console then think to myself, I wonder what this might look like on the AWS console app on my IPhone? You might also consider doing the lab exercises from two different learning partners and see two different approaches for same AWS product. The cost of using two different learning partners is really not that signification and if your goal is to learn the product and pass the exam, why wouldn't you? Yes, correct, the hours can start to rack up with this approach, hence another reason for the high number of hours that I had accumulated.

Practice Exams
There are a several companies that sell practice exams for different technologies such as AWS, Cisco, VMware, HP, RedHat, Microsoft any many others. These exams are developed to simulate taking the real certification exam.

Some of these companies that sell practice exams will sometimes get a bad reputation since they are able to obtain the actual exams questions, resulting in students simply memorizing the questions and answers. I have no idea why someone would spend the effort in trying to memorize exam questions in order to pass an exam. Personally, I have more confidence in my ability to learn the content in order to pass the exam than trying to remember answers to exam questions. If your plan is to really use AWS in a production environment, memorizing exam questions are not going to help you learn how to use AWS products.

I decided to use Whizlabs based on the feedback I was able to obtain from other students. There are 7 different practice exams for a total of 420 questions, but I don't feel there are actually 420 different questions. The diagnostic exam is very easy and is not a good representation of the actual AWS exam. The 7 exams seem to be a better representation of the actual

AWS exam. If you do all 7 practice exams and then spend the time to review the wrong answers as well as correct answers, it will take you about 20 hours total. It takes about the same amount of time to take an exam (80 min) as it does to review all of the answers.

The value of taking timed practice exams is to test your knowledge, and therefore, there is no value in taking the practice exams until all of your video and lab training has been completed.

Personally, I feel that taking practice exams which simulate the real AWS exam is a good idea, but there is one bad thing- more about this later.

Here is the value in taking timed practice exams.

- There is a skill that you need to learn in taking multiple choice question exams, and you can find a lot of information on the Internet on best practices for taking multiple choice question exams. The only way you can gain experience with multiple choice question exams is to simply take them.

- Answering 60 questions over 80 minutes is a great way to learn time management. It is a good ideal to track your time in 20 minutes increments for every 15 questions. By the time I completed all 7 exams I could tell my time management had improved. The ideal situation it to learn to manage your time so that you have enough time to complete any questions that you passed over on the first pass. Whizlabs uses 60 questions over 80 minutes where the official AWS exam is 55 questions.

- Taking a practice exam will question your knowledge, which I feel is more valuable than simply relying on only re-reading your notes, watching the same videos several times or reading the AWS Official Exam Guide.

- Reviewing your wrong answers points out your areas of weakness. Whizlabs does a fairly good job in explaining the reason for the correct answer as well as the wrong answers and will often insert links that will take you to the AWS web page on the specific topic. This process will force you to fully understand why the correct answer is in fact correct and why the other answers are incorrect. Being

directed towards these AWS links will most likely result in a better understanding of the topic therefore it is worth the time.

- Reviewing your correct answers is also important since it reconfirms the correct answers that you selected. Also, if you guessed correctly on a question that you really did not know the answer it is technically correct but you truly did not know the answer which is the reason why you should review your correct answers.

- Some questions on the AWS exam can be very long as well as the 4-6 multiple choice answers they give you. It is interesting that 80% of the time a very long question will often include information that has nothing to do with what you need to know in order to answer the question. Doing the practice exams helped me gained confidence in my ability to not freak out when a long question came up as long as I was able to pick out the key words and sentences in the question.

- There is one bad thing about practice exams. Once I completed all 7-practice exams, I was only in the high 70% and I really wanted to be in the high 90%. I decided to take the 7 practice exams again for the second time since I still felt I was not fully retaining all the key concepts on a consistent basis. After taking the first 2 exams the second time I started to feel like I was answering some of the questions based on what I remembered from the first go around and not by the knowledge that I had gained. It's like your brain is desperately trying to select the correct answer but it is fighting this internal dilemma of choosing an answer based on what you learned in the training compared to what you remembered when you answered the same question the first time around. Once I figured this out, I stopped taking the practice exams.

AWS Certification Exam Readiness Workshop
This is a free workshop that AWS delivers which is supposed to be 4 hours long, but it was only 3 hours when I completed in mid- July 2017. They review the exam blueprint, sample exam questions, logistics of taking the real exam, and a few other areas. It is a live class in which you can ask questions, but there were over 150 people that attended the class. They reviewed about 15 or so questions, some of which I felt were very long and difficult. It was interesting that the AWS spokesperson delivering the

workshop specifically mentioned on two separate times that certain AWS products would not be on the exam, but within a week, students posted on community sites that those same products were on the exam, and I noticed them also when I took the exam 3 weeks later.

AWS Product FAQ's
The product FAQ's are normally broken down into a several different sections, and some product FAQ's are larger than others. During the video lectures you will often hear, "just look over the FAQ's". Yes, the FAQ's are good to review but there are a TON of little facts, facts that can easily be viewed at potential exam questions. Just the general section alone on the key AWS products is a lot of information. I timed it one day, and it took me 1.5 hours just to the review the general section of the key AWS products. There is no way that you can review the FAQ's one time and retain all the information. You have to really watch out in the process of reviewing the FAQ's because it is very easy to select a link that will take you to the AWS product documentation. Before you know it, you have traveled way off the reservation down in a rabbit hole reading the details of an AWS product in far more detail than what is needed to pass the exam. The real challenge is knowing when you should pull back and when you should go deeper in order to understand a certain product or concept.

AWS Preparation Guide from A Cloud Guru
In mid -July 2017, this 2.5-hour course became available which was a week or so before I took the exam. My first thought was, great, another 3 hours of training but at this point it was insignificant based on the number of hours I had racked up so far. The guide is really for any AWS certification that you are trying to obtain, and it does not cover any exam questions. This course was well worth the time and money. Any information that you can retain from Mattias Anderson is going to be helpful. This gentleman passed all AWS certifications within a five -month period and received a score of 91% or above on all five exams which is beyond my comprehension. If you are only able to retain 20% of the areas he discusses, it will be worth your time and money.

AWS Certified Solutions Architect Official Study Guide
I used this guide as an additional reference for specific areas that I needed to understand if the training videos or labs were not covering it in enough detail, or if I was having an issue in understanding something. It is a large book, and I feel it goes into more detail than what is required since the

purpose of the guide is only for the exam. It is good resource as well as the chapter summaries, and it includes about 250 questions within the 14 chapters.

AWS POD casts

The PODcasts "AWS TechChat" and "AWS PODcast" are good to listen to passively. As far as I was concerned, if I was on a 45 -minute walk, I could passively listen to topics about AWS; it was just another way to absorb information on AWS products. The AWS PODcast will sometimes have an interview with a AWS product manager on a specific AWS product. This ends up being a 30 minutes bare bones discussion on what the product is about at a high level. This is simply another way to soak in the information of an AWS product other than the AWS web page that might have more information and details than you really want to know. It is also a great way to learn about AWS products in comparison to what you obtained from the training videos.

AWS White Papers

AWS has suggested that the following five white papers should be reviewed and studied in order to prepare for the exam.

- Overview of Amazon Web Services
- Overview of Security Processes
- AWS Risk & Compliance Whitepaper
- Storage Options in the Cloud
- Architecting for the AWS Cloud: Best Practices

The five white papers entail a lot of information. I read all of them during the process of the training, but the AWS Overview is a good one to read continually until you have a good understand of all the key products. My guess is that about 80% of the products listed in the AWS Overview white paper is going to be in the training content from any learning partner.

Your Study Plan

As I mentioned earlier, you really need to draft out your study plan on how you are going to prepare for the exam. I am sure there are some students

who feel they are going to just watch the videos, complete the labs, do a few quiz's, take the exam and pass; if this works, congratulations!

I was tracking my hours since I was interested in knowing how many hours it would actually take before I was prepared to take the exam. Since I was still looking for a new job, I made a commitment up front to study at least 3 hours a day, while I was also looking for a new job. After the first week, I found myself spending more time than my 3- hour goal as I was simply very interested in learning the technology, and I am convinced this mindset is what helped me in the long run. Within another week or so, I made the decision to put the job search activity on the back burner so that I could dedicate all effort towards preparing for the AWS CSAA exam.

At the end of each day, I would make a plan for the following day on areas that I would be studying based on where I was in the training. I broke the training down into 48 minutes of studying and then a 12-minute break. A typical day might look like the following.

48 min- Video lecture
12-minute break.
48 min – Review flash cards
12-minute break.
48 min – Review FAQ's

60 min – Lunch & walk the dog while I listened to Linux Academy lectures on my IPhone

48 min- Review last practice exam
12-minute break.
48 min- Read SQS chapter in AWS Exam Prep guide
12-minute break.
48 min – Read Overview AWS services white paper

Exam Day!!!
What is on the exam? Great question but I really can't go into any detail on the exam due to the AWS NDA that I signed. Passing the exam is more than just remembering what CloudWatch does or if S3 has an availability of either 99.90% or 11 9's. The exam does not include lab exercises, only multiple-choice answers, but many questions are written in manner so that you need to understand how the services work in a real AWS environment.

Because of the number of training hours I had begun to accumulate, my goal was to pass the exam the first time even though I had heard that the pass rate was rather low. I was starting to feel the internal pressure of possibly not passing the exam and thinking to myself how much more studying time would be required if I did not pass the exam. I had heard that some students passed at 64%, but some failed at 67% since it is based on some kind of testing curve.

If you review the official AWS Certification Solutions Architect study guide, each chapter has review questions (about 250 in total if I recall). From what I understand, the team that wrote the book is the same team that wrote the official exam for the certification. I learned at the official AWS Certification Exam Readiness Workshop that the number of questions in the exam is in proportion to the percentage breakdown of the domain. In other words, domain 1.0 is "Designing highly available, cost-efficient, fault-tolerant, scalable systems" is 60% of the exam or around 33 questions and then the other 4 domains percentages are broken down from there. I used to work in the technical training business, and my guess is that there is a large pool of questions that are randomly picked by the domain percentages; therefore, each exam that is taken by a student is somewhat different from next exam.

For the most part, domain 1.0 is really about VPC (Virtual Private Cloud) and this is the area that I really focused on for the exam, which is why I obtained an 86% on this section and a lower score on the other areas. You really have to know VPC very well or you are not going to do well on the exam. I felt the questions on the exam were more difficult than the practice exam questions from Whizlabs, but perhaps not as difficult as the questions that A Cloud Guru and Linux Academy has for students.

I had the actual exam date and time (July 28, 2017, 11:00 AM) in the back of my mind about 30 days before taking the exam, but I was not going to take it until I knew that I was fully prepared. About a week before I took the exam I actually went to the testing facility to see what the office environment looked like. Mentally preparing myself for what the testing environment would look like before I took the exam was something that would remove some of the stress on the day of the exam.

As I mentioned earlier, I would sometimes get intimidated on long complex looking practice exam questions; I even typed up several positive affirmations during my meditation sessions which absolutely helped me. If you remember what I said earlier, I was going to do anything that I needed to do in order to pass the exam.

I took the official AWS practice exam ($20, 20 questions, 30 min) and I obtained 85%. I was really pleased, but by the end of the day I was worried that it might not be a good representation of the actual exam since none of the questions were at the level as what was reviewed at the AWS Certification Exam Readiness Workshop. That same day I decided to sign up for the actual exam the very next day. I really thought I had about a 65% chance in passing the exam, but I then thought to myself, wait, I have about 150 more hours of studying time than the average student! I said to myself there is no way I am not going to pass!

Without sounding like your mother, I believe that you should get at least an hour of extra sleep the night before the exam. Cramming the night before the exam at this stage of the training is not going to help. Any help that you receive from cramming will be negated by the lack of sleep you didn't receive the night before the exam.

The morning of the exam, I put aside about two hours of time to review about 100 or so pre-selected flash cards. I had also been practicing how to write out a few different diagrams, from memory, that were used from Linux Academy since I would be allowed to write these out prior to starting the exam. However, you can't bring anything else with you into the testing room.

The exam is 80 minutes, but for some reason the proctor said it was 90 minutes, and she even showed me on their internal screen where it said 90 minutes. However, when I took the exam, the count-down started at 80 minutes. When you get assigned to your desk, it is already prepared with your name on the screen, and it is up to you when you press the start button. They give wax board sheets to be used for scratch paper. Before I pushed the start button, I wrote down any notes and cheat sheets that I had memorized so that I could refer to them if needed. I even sketched out a full-page diagram that was used from Linux Academy (Availability zones, infrastructure container, VPC, internet gateway, Bastion host, EC2 instance, NACL, security group, route table, private and public subnets,

route lines going all over the place and a few notes on selected AWS products). Just being able to memorize this diagram and knowing how it all worked together increased my confidence regardless of whether or not I needed to refer to it during the exam.

A student who took the actual AWS exam mentioned on one of the AWS certification community sites that 30% of the AWS exam questions were the same questions from Whizlabs, but that was certainly nothing like the exam that I took. I don't think there were any questions that were the same, perhaps a few that looked similar but I am not certain.

Recommendations … In other words, what I would I do if I had to do it all over again.

Consider doing the following is this order:

- ✓ Review the AWS CSAA web page which list a lot of things that you will need to know. https://aws.amazon.com/certification/certified-solutions-architect-associate/

- ✓ Take AWS Preparation Guide training (2.5 hours) from A Cloud Guru now before for you do anything else regardless what training partner you plan on using for your training.

- ✓ Decide what training partner you want to use for the training. Perhaps chose one, and then use the other training partner for reference if needed. It can often be advantageous obtaining different views from two different learning partners on how a AWS product is explained.

- ✓ Check the upcoming dates now for the AWS Certification Exam Readiness Workshop. The dates don't appear to be consistent plus some are delivered by AWS and some are delivered by learning partners that charge as much as $225. I feel that taking it from AWS and as close to the exam date as possible would be ideal in order to obtain the latest updated information.

- ✓ Map out what your training plan is going to look like i.e. number of hours per week or per day that you are going to commit yourself to. The ideal situation would be to book your study time on your calendar

in advance. Track your hours based on your plan since it helps in keeping yourself honest. Keep in mind your plan on what you are going to study will change as you progress through the training.

✓ Make a list of all the training resources that you are going to use. At first it just going to be training videos and labs, but as you progress new resources will arise and you want to be able to keep track of them.

✓ Get involved in the student training community of the training partner that you are going to use. I was using A Cloud Guru and Linux Academy. At this point, disregard any student chatter you notice related to what students are asking and saying about what is going to be on the exam; at this point, this is just a distraction from your training.

✓ Read the AWS Overview white paper and continue rereading it though out the training process until you have a good understanding of all key AWS products. About 80% of the products mentioned in this white paper will be covered in your training.

✓ Start passively listening to the AWS POD casts. You don't have to listen to everyone; pick out a few each week that look interesting.

✓ Make flash cards of the key products that are in AWS Overview white paper. Personally, I think flash cards are a great learning tool since you are continually being tested on your knowledge. Consider making hand-made flash cards. Yes, you can make digital flash cards that sync up to your phone and computer, but I feel hand-written flash cards are more meaningful. As you continue through the training process, make new cards when you come across something that has been identified as something you need to remember for the exam. Linux Academy has several flash card decks, and they also give you the ability to make your own that will sync to your smart phone.

✓ Read all 14 Chapter summaries only of the AWS Certified Solutions Architect Official Study Guide. This is not going to be lot reading, you just want to get an idea of the big picture before you review the training videos.

- ✓ Now that you have decided what training partner that you are going to use, view the complete video training (lecture and labs) at 1.5 to 1.75 speed. This is most likely going to be 10-15 hours of total time just to review the videos. Don't take notes, and don't do the lab exercises or quizzes. You simply want to get a high level understand of the journey that you are going to go through.

- ✓ Take the Whizlabs diagnostic exam just to get an idea of your knowledge. Again, this exam is rather easy where the practice exams 1-7 will be more difficult.

- ✓ Review the training videos for the second time, and this is when you should do the lab exercises. Before you start watching the videos, decide what kind of process you are going use in order to remember the information that will discussed in the videos, hand-written notes? Typed notes? Screen shots of videos? I felt screen shots worked the best for me where I would then put them in folders so I could review them later. I would also take hand written notes when needed. For each product lecture and lab that you complete, switch over and review the FAQ's for the specific product that was just discussed. Take all the quizzes that the learning partner has available, and learn why you missed any questions. This might require you to read up on it again or review a video again. Don't take their simulated AWS 60 question exam at this stage.

- ✓ You have now completed the video training lectures, labs and quizzes. Consider spending several hours reviewing everything that you have, notes, FAQ's, flash cards, review training videos for the second or third time and perhaps doing some of labs again if needed. At this point I had over 300 flash cards and it would take me 1 hour to review them, and I reviewed them once or twice a day. For all areas that you still feel weak, consider reading selected parts of the AWS Certified Solutions Architect Official Study Guide, and review the questions at the end of the chapter.

- ✓ Take practice exam #1, and see how you do. If you obtained less than 70%, I would suggest continue reviewing all of your resources until you get at least 80% correct consistently on all of the other practice exams. Make sure you spend the time reviewing in detail your correct and incorrect exam questions, and take your time doing

this. There were several times where I would be reviewing an incorrect question that resulted in looking up additional information based on what Whizlabs provided with AWS links, and before I knew it 30 minutes had passed by. This is good since you are gaining knowledge, and it is a positive reinforcement when you start to notice this. This is now the time where you would take the practice exam that your learning partner has to offer.

✓ Three to four weeks before you take the real exam, start integrating the five AWS white papers in with the other resources of your training. Don't read all of them at the same time as it is simply too much information to process. The white papers are of little value up front in the beginning stages of your training, especially since most of the products are not yet familiar to you yet which is why you should read the white papers towards the end.

✓ Some students make a point of setting up the exam date months in advance which might be good idea in order to set a pace in your studying plan. I think you can cancel three days in advance if needed. As Mattias Anderson stated, you are never going to feel like you are 100% ready for the exam.

✓ Take the exam and pass it!!

Good luck, David Darrough

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