

AWS Certification, the How and Why?

By Jon Southby
Senior Cloud Consultant

Having worked with AWS for over 6 years, I've taken my fair share of AWS exams, this is for several reasons. I want to continually maintain and grow my knowledge around the AWS services, products and best practices. Furthermore, working for an [AWS Premier Consulting Partner](#) means we are targeted to learn and qualify across a variety of subjects and achieve a certain number of certifications. Finally, AWS exams simply expire after 3 years. Over the last few years, the number of available certifications has also increased, with the addition of the Specialty exams. In this blog post we will look at what AWS certifications are available, how to prepare and (in my opinion) what order they should be attempted.

The current AWS certifications are split into 4 categories

Foundational – for those who are new to AWS (or cloud computing in general)

Associate – base level for Architect, Operations and Developer roles

Speciality – in depth specialist topics and roles

Professional – top tier Architect, Operations and Developer roles

Professional

Two years of comprehensive experience designing, operating, and troubleshooting solutions using the AWS Cloud

Associate

One year of experience solving problems and implementing solutions using the AWS Cloud

Foundational

Six months of fundamental AWS Cloud and industry knowledge



Specialty

Technical AWS Cloud experience in the Specialty domain as specified in the exam guide



Figure 1 Available AWS Certifications

How & Where to start?

Depending on your prior experience (in both IT and/or cloud) I would recommend starting with the Cloud Practitioner or the Solutions Architect exam. The [Cloud Practitioner](#) is suitable for a non-technical role or background, and covers the basics of cloud computing, whereas the [Solutions Architect](#) covers all AWS services (at a high level) and requires some hands on and technical experience. For all exams, begin by reviewing the exam guide (or blueprint), which will highlight the type of questions you will be asked, as well as recommended AWS knowledge and experience, and the range of topics that will be covered by the exam.

You can then prepare for the certification using a combination of [Free AWS Digital Training](#) or a 3rd party paid training offering – I have used [A Cloud Guru](#) since I first started working with AWS and personally highly recommend and rate them. In addition, you will want to review [AWS Whitepapers](#), recordings of AWS re:Invent and AWS Summit talks (on the [AWS YouTube channel](#)) and the AWS services FAQ's, as well as getting plenty of hands on experience. [AWS Stash](#) is another great resource for finding AWS content and learning materials.

A majority of the sessions and talks on the AWS YouTube channel have a level associated with them (it maybe within the session ID e.g. [DAT401](#) is a deep dive level 400 session on the Database track)

Level 100-200: Introductory - Sessions are focused on providing an overview of AWS services or features, with the assumption that attendees are new to the topic. These sessions highlight basic use cases, features, functions, and benefits.

Level 300: Advanced - Sessions will dive deeper into the selected topic. Presenters assume the audience has some familiarity with the topic but may or may not have direct experience implementing a similar solution. Code may be shared however will not be the primary focus of the session.

Level 400: Expert - Sessions are for attendees who are deeply familiar with the topic, have implemented a solution on their own already, and are comfortable with how the technology works across multiple services, architectures, and implementations. Presenters will dive into code, cover advanced tricks, and explore future developments in the technology.

If your goal is to achieve one of the Speciality exams, I would recommend starting with the Solutions Architect and then the SysOps Administrator exams, as a minimum, before considering a Specialty exam.



What's next?

For me, once I passed my first AWS exam, I was hungry to learn and grow more. Here is the certification route I took (and passed within a year):

- AWS Certified Solutions Architect – Associate
- AWS Certified SysOps Administrator – Associate
- AWS Certified Solutions Architect – Professional (SA Pro)
- AWS Certified Developer – Associate
- AWS Certified DevOps Engineer – Professional (DevOps Pro)

Then when the Specialist exams were released, I again studied and worked through them, having already passed the Associate and Professional exams some of that knowledge and experience is recalled (and overlaps) for the various Specialist exams.

My key takeaway is that you need in-depth hands-on experience, especially for the Professional and Speciality exams, I was working with AWS as my day job and then studying and supplementing that with 2-3 hours study and reinforcement every evening. Personally, I found that making notes (the old fashioned way with a pen and paper!) whilst watching a video or reading a whitepaper, really helps to solidify my understanding of the topics. You can then review these notes in the days leading up to, and on the day of the exam, to again reinforce the material and key points.

In terms of what to expect, the exams range from 90mins with 65 questions for the Practitioner to 3hrs with 75 questions for the Professional exams. Until recently, all exams used questions that are multiple choice or multiple response, but the SysOps Administrator exam now in addition features a new format - an exam lab. AWS have said "Exam labs allow you to showcase your skills by building solutions using the AWS Management Console and AWS Command Line Interface (CLI)". There is no penalty for an incorrect answer and you can mark a question to review later, so if you are stuck on a question, select an answer and mark it for review. If time allows at the end of the exam, you can come back and see if any of the other questions has provided some information that may help you decide. For the Associate exams it could be that 3 of the 4 responses are obviously incorrect, but once you get to the Professional and Specialist exams, there may be 2 technically correct answers, but which one "requires the least administrative overhead"? You also only have approx. 2 mins to answer the question, so you need to be able to quickly identify the key information in the question, to allow you to eliminate incorrect or implausible answers. Time management is key in these exams and speaking of time, non-native English speakers can request an additional 30 mins **prior to booking an exam in English** (see [Requesting Accommodations](#)).

Once AWS certified, you can access [digital badges](#), as well as benefit from a free practice exam voucher and a 50% discount voucher toward your next AWS exam through the [AWS Certification](#) portal. You also get exclusive access to AWS Certification Lounges at AWS re:Invent and some other AWS Summit events.... and some cool swag!

At HeleCloud we require all Professional Services team members to achieve the Solution Architect within 3 months of joining and the Solution Architect Professional within a year. We're always looking for like-minded individuals to come and join us, see our open roles at <https://helecloud.com/careers/>