

TLIC PAPER

# How IBM Supercharges Its L&D Efforts by Building Communities of Learners

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## ABSTRACT

Learning and Development organizations (L&Ds) in the workplace face a challenge: Individual learners have at their fingertips a wide range of always-on, remotely accessible learning tools. When individuals come together to learn as a community, they improve their study habits and their results. So how do you meet learners where they are, and at the same time, encourage them to engage in a learning community to accelerate the outcome? IBM has expertise in creating community-oriented initiatives that help technology professionals improve the way they learn—and, ultimately, enhance the likelihood of success on IBM certification exams. Learners who engaged with the IBM community over an extended timeline have proven most likely to successfully complete learning assignments, earn industry-recognized credentials, and apply their new skills in their careers. This paper will share examples of some of the innovative, community-oriented initiatives that IBM has designed and implemented, with an emphasis on the “Study with Me” challenge—a community-building and support program created to complement IBM’s extant popular group study sessions.

## KEYWORDS

IBM, cloud, training, certification, community, learning, development, learning and development, L&D, learners, new hire skills initiative, study with me, flash jams

## 1 ESTABLISHING THE FOUNDATION FOR LEARNER SUCCESS

IBM Cloud Training is an award-winning training organization that delivers engaging curricula, certifications, and badges for the most sought-after cloud job roles and specialty areas. When it was established, IBM Cloud Training set the goal of meeting learners where they are by considering their diverse learning styles, geographies, and modalities, and providing tailored training solutions.

With this purpose in mind, it quickly became clear that there was a need for programming and resources that would create a strong community while aligning to IBM Cloud Training’s primary KPI—the number of credentials earned. This includes

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certification and knowledge badges earned as learners follow their certification learning paths. The created program needed to leverage:

**Collaborative Learning:** The creation of an environment that would foster collaboration and peer support, allowing learners to share knowledge, ideas, and experiences. This enhances understanding and encourages deeper engagement with the material.

**Motivation and Encouragement:** Learners are more likely to stay committed when they feel connected to others who share similar goals. Studying for a proctored certification exam can be challenging, but being part of a community provides support and motivation.

**Diverse Perspectives:** In a community, learners come from different backgrounds and bring unique viewpoints that enrich the learning experience.

**Shared Resources:** Sharing resources, tools, and strategies that benefit a community that strives toward a common goal can help learners by providing access to information they may not have found on their own/as individuals.

**Accountability:** Being a part of a community creates a sense of responsibility and accountability. Learners are more likely to stay on track and meet their goals when they are held accountable.

**Networking and Professional Growth:** A learning community can also serve as a network for professional development. Members can share opportunities, collaborate on projects, and build connections that extend beyond the learning environment.

**Lifelong Learning/Future Growth:** Another great aspect of creating a community is it fosters a culture of continuous learning in which learners can return and participate in future programs. Members are encouraged to keep growing, exploring new ideas and developing skills even after formal education ends.

With all of this in mind, the Study with Me program was created and put into practice as part of IBM Cloud Training's L&D activities.

## 2 HOW "STUDY WITH ME" ENHANCED FLASH JAMS IN 2023

Flash Jams are a streamlined support initiative that evolved from IBM's popular Study Jams—online exam preparatory programs, featuring IBM experts, videos, flashcards, Q&As, and more, streamlined into two hours a day over a three-day session. Flash Jams were developed as a response to learner feedback. Busy professionals wanted to get the same benefit from shorter, more intense study sessions. To further accommodate the community's needs, Flash Jams are live and in-person, bringing learners together where they can interact and encourage each other. These sessions were informative and engaging, as noted by one participant of the September 2023 Flash Jam that focused on IBM Cloud Technical Advocate certification. This participant enthused about "... a full classroom of amazing professionals ... It's a lively group! We are having fun in here!"

Flash Jams are scheduled to take place as part of larger gatherings, for example, at the IBM TechXchange Conference, which is the largest IBM learning event of the year that goes beyond theory and thought leadership, and dives into training, up-skilling, credentialing, and certification.

To increase awareness and attendance of the in-person Flash Jam, IBM created the Study with Me challenge, a month-long program that preceded the Flash Jam, preparing learners both for the Jam and the subsequent certification exam that many attendees would take.

The first Study with Me was a hybrid certification challenge, comprised of a 30-day study plan aimed at helping learners certify as IBM Cloud Technical Advocates. IBM Cloud Technical Advocate is an entry-level certification that underpins all subsequent cloud certifications, from role-based through specialties in security, finance, SAP, VMware, and more.

The key to the success of Study with Me was in creating a group of like-minded learners pursuing the same certification goal. The execution of the initiative included an e-nurture campaign, study aids and guides, and active leadership participation. It culminated in an on-site study session, called “Certify in a Flash,” which also provided participants with the opportunity to take their certification exams for free.

The community of Study with Me learners received daily emails from one of IBM’s L&D leaders, who had also enrolled to earn their certification. The fact that the leader was also enrolled in the certification created a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose. The name “Study with Me” was chosen to reflect how the leader was studying alongside the rest of the participants. The daily emails served as guidance, motivation, and provided resources for further learning assistance. They included notes of encouragement, status updates on the leader’s progress to help learners keep pace with their studies, and practical assistance such as learning prompts and study questions that might appear on the final exam.

A typical email included follow-ups on that day’s curriculum, including practice questions—the popular Question of the Day—as well as “facts you should know” and study tips. Participants in the challenge received guidance on how to schedule their exams and request exam vouchers. The IBM leader responded directly to learner replies, offering one-on-one motivation and encouragement. And learners were continually reminded that they could attend Certify in a Flash—the IBM Cloud Technical Advocate webinar—for “an extra dose of study prep to pass the Technical Advocate certification exam.”

The challenge culminated in a live, on-site Flash Jam that included Q&As with a subject matter expert. Participants entered to win prizes and received vouchers for free exams during the event.

The program was built to accommodate learners of all sorts and meet them where they were—the foundational goal of IBM Cloud Training. Learners were given the option of joining the challenge at any point during Study with Me. Or they could study on their own and at their own pace, in parallel with the program. Still others joined for the live Flash Jam’s question-and-answer session, skipping the challenge entirely. IBM’s flexible programming ensured access to whatever suited learners best as they made their journeys from coursework to certification.

Learners unable to attend the Flash Jam in person could follow the session live via an IBM TechXchange webinar. For those learning at their own pace who were not ready for the live event, the Jam was archived for anytime access; this access also benefits future challenge participants seeking similar certification.

The results of the initiative were exemplary: An overwhelming number of learners participated in the Study with Me program, 300x the learners who were anticipated.

Study with Me, with its focus on the foundational IBM Cloud Technical Advocate certification, was then reused with IBM’s New Hire Program—an example of IBM’s “Build it once; deploy it twice” strategy. This subsequent delivery of the Study with Me program and its various collateral contributed to an efficiency of hundreds of hours saved through the reuse of the study support materials.

### 3 THE STUDY WITH ME CERTIFICATION CHALLENGE: A DEEPER LOOK

Study with Me, the 30-day hybrid certification challenge, began as a social experiment using a social invite shared across the IBM community internally and externally, including LinkedIn and the IBM Training website. An initial blog post shared the value of obtaining an IBM Cloud certification, citing research published in the *2023 Value of IT Certification | Candidate Report*. This research showed that:

- 92% of professionals were more confident in their abilities after earning certifications
- 81% had more confidence to explore new job opportunities
- 37% received salary increases

Having established the value of earning their certifications, the next step was developing and disseminating effective messages and other elements that would ensure learners successfully completed their training. Below is a look into how the program operated and the additional tools and resources that were made available to participants.

Following a daily schedule, learners were prescribed one or more lessons from the IBM Cloud Technical Advocate curriculum. The Technical Advocate learning path provides an overview of the entire curriculum consisting of 17.2 hours of total learning that includes 31 courses and two articles (see Figure 1).

#### Learning Path

Total assets: **31 courses, 2 articles**  
Total time to completion: **17.2 hours**

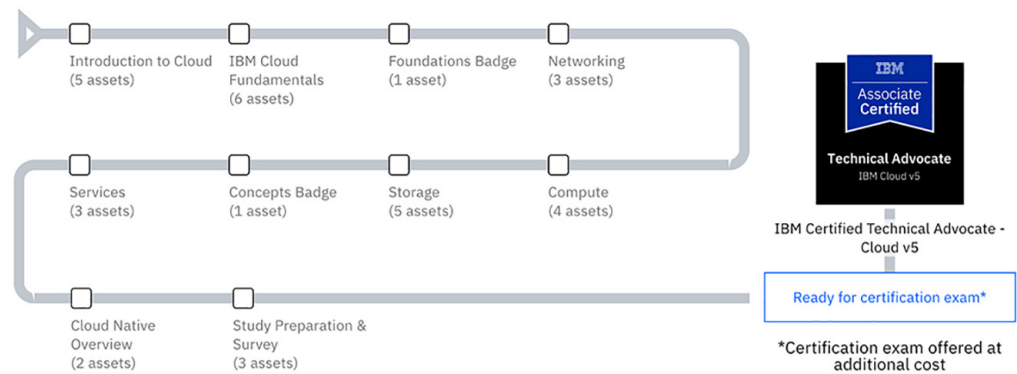


Fig. 1. IBM Cloud Technical Advocate Learning Path

An initial community-targeted blog post served as the Study with Me home, providing an outline of the plan learners could follow as they pursued the challenge. Subsequent posts (see Figure 2) included:

- An updated roadmap of where along the learning path participants should be as they followed along, including the courses covered most recently
- A link to the digital learning lesson from the curriculum
- A review of at least one study question based on the Technical Advocate curriculum
- Insights about various curriculum topics, with tips and tricks for studying

Learners who completed the coursework could sit their exams during the week of September 10 for free either remotely via the Flash Jam webinar or in person at the IBM TechXchange conference in Las Vegas.

Welcome to "Study with me", a new program from the IBM Center for Cloud Training (ICCT) designed to help you earn certification as an IBM Cloud Technical Advocate v4 during the week of September 11.

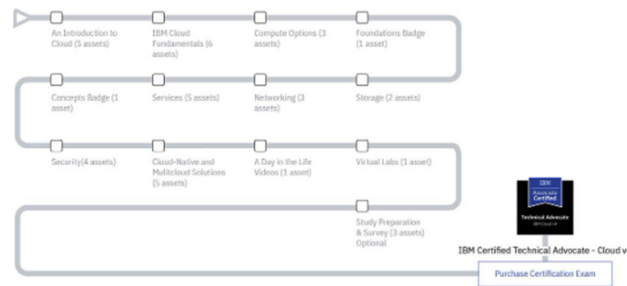
I'm Natalie Brooks Powell, ICCT's Strategy and Advocacy Leader, and I'm inviting you to "Study with me" as I prepare for the Technical Advocate exam.

Each day for 30 days, I'll be your inside source, studying alongside you. I'll use my direct access to our technical experts and study aides to help you earn your certification.

Here's how we'll do it:

- o Each day, I'll review a study question based on the Technical Advocate curriculum.
- o I'll share insights about the various curriculum topics, with tips and tricks for studying.
- o Then, if you're going to the IBM TechXchange Conference 2023 in Las Vegas, September 11-14, I'll lead you through a Flash Jam, a 1-hour review of the study material, including a preview of some of the exam questions.
- o Finally, we'll take the IBM Cloud Technical Advocate v4 exam together - for free - in Las Vegas.
- o But wait! Even if you're not going to Las Vegas, you can still take the certification exam remotely during conference week - also for free!
- o Then we celebrate!

Today is Day 1, so let's jump right in with a look at the [IBM Cloud Technical Advocate learning path](#). Launch the first training module to start tracking your progress!



Our first step is "An Introduction to Cloud. " Can you answer this question?

What is Cloud Computing?

- A. On-demand computer resources that can be quickly provisioned and are non-configurable
- B. On-demand network access to a shared pool of computer system resources
- C. A model for delivering computing resources on premises
- D. A model to provide dedicated network access, which can be provisioned in batch mode

Think about it and come back tomorrow for the answer! Then stay with me as we earn our Technical Advocate certifications - together. [Register here](#) to get study resources and a free exam directly to your inbox. Get more information about the [conference program here](#).

Earn credentials to prove to your peers and managers you have what it takes to keep your organization on a winning streak!

See you tomorrow,

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Natalie Brooks Powell  
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Fig. 2. Sample Study with Me Blog Post

Additionally, messages were posted daily on LinkedIn (see Figure 3). These included a teaser and duplication of the Question of the Day from the internal community post. Posting on LinkedIn served to attract more learners to the challenge, encouraging them to join the learning journey and study together to succeed.

Be a winner when you bet on Cloud. It's Day 27 and time for a question. IBM Cloud is comprised of a wide variety of services, which can be found in which of the following?  
A. IBM Cloud Catalog  
B. IBM Cloud Block Storage  
C. IBM Cloud Object Storage  
D. IBM Cloud File Storage  
Read today's study with me post for the answer. <https://lnkd.in/g/vrZau3f> It's not too late - Let's become a certified Cloud Technical Advocate together. #IBM #technicaladvocate #ibmtechxchange #studyfromhome #IBMCloudCertified #ibmcloud #ICCT #studywithme



Fig. 3. LinkedIn Post (from day 27)

Messaging was also shared and posted on the Web via digital flyers (see Figure 4).



Fig. 4. Sample Flyer

### 3.1 Incorporation of study support materials

The Study with Me program incorporated additional study support elements to aid learners along their journey. Among the most positively received by learners was the IBM Cloud Prep app—a study-on-the-go resource that enables learning on

any device (phone, tablet, laptop) anywhere a learner happens to be (see Figure 5). The app includes flashcards with sample certification exam questions, detailed study guides to help with exam prep, and practice quizzes to test mastery of the subject matter prior to the exam.

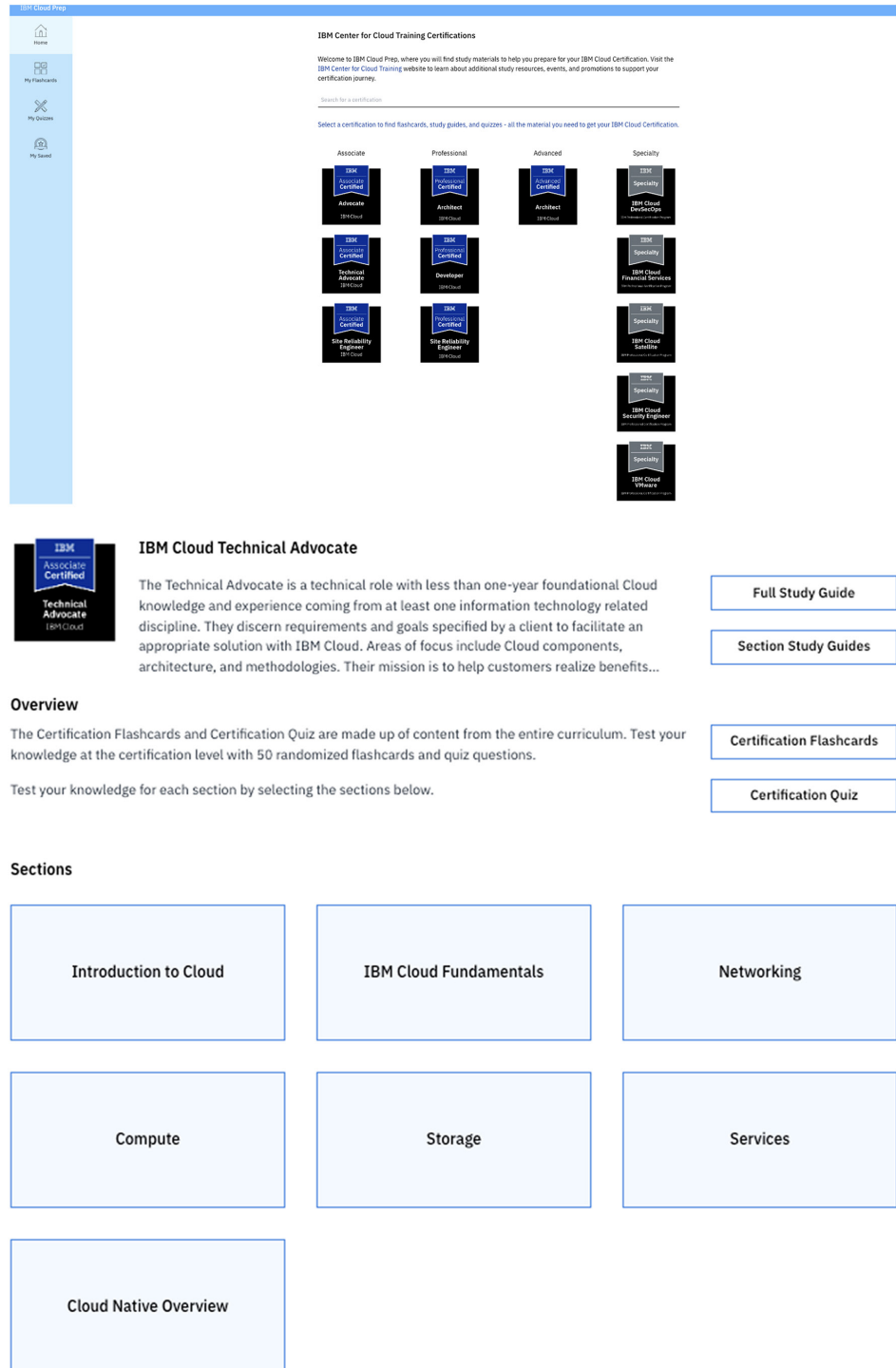


Fig. 5. IBM Cloud Prep App

Motivation is another key support element that has helped ensure the success of Study with Me and underpins IBM’s learner support initiatives in general.

Two examples of motivational tools and programs that have proven popular with learners are:

- Badges: As learners work through the training, they earn displayable, industry-recognized badges. This motivates them to continue along the certification learning path, where they may earn additional badges.
- Second Chance promotion: A collaboration with exam proctor Pearson VUE, this program offers learners the opportunity to retake their certification exams for free if they do not earn a passing grade on the first attempt.

### 3.2 Study with Me KPIs

The IBM Cloud Technical Advocate Study with Me certification challenge that culminated in the on-site Flash Jam at IBM TechXchange conference in Las Vegas in September 2023 resulted in 3,114 certification completions.

### 3.3 Additional community-oriented connections available to learners

As noted above, creating communities of learners has proven to be paramount in ensuring successful learner outcomes. This is largely because the learners themselves comprise a hyper-competitive set that wants to succeed and be seen by their peers as succeeding. The motivational effect this community has on its own members is one of the key strengths of the Study with Me challenge, and of nearly all of IBM Cloud Training's learner support initiatives.

In addition to community-oriented, group-centered initiatives, like Study with Me and the related Study Jams and Flash Jams, allowed the division to grow and nurture a global audience of learners (see Figure 6).

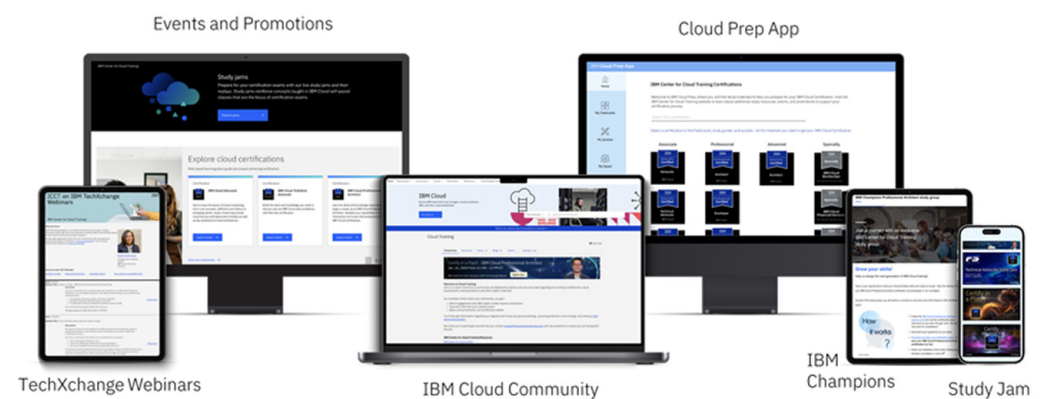


Fig. 6. Additional community-oriented support initiatives that aid learner success

## 4 COMMUNITY-ORIENTED PRACTICES INSPIRED BY THE STUDY WITH ME CHALLENGE

Community-based learning experiences have always been part of the IBM Training experience. IBM Cloud Training has seen how successful learner support initiatives, like Study with Me, work best when they are part of a supportive and self-motivating learning community, no matter how dispersed geographically

community members are or how experienced they may be with the cloud curricula. Indeed, feedback from learners around the world indicated they favored increasing the number of community-based learning experiences—and delivering them in smaller, daily doses.

In 2023, this resulted in the development and delivery of 14 community-based learning experiences that focused on bringing individuals together into supportive learning communities. Flash Jams and study groups afforded learners the opportunity to learn new skills and earn certifications, as well as improve the all-around learner experience. Additionally, Study with Me inspired two other initiatives that sought to bring communities together: IBM's New Hire Initiative and Põe Tempero (in Brazil).

#### 4.1 Expanding the Study with Me challenge to IBM's new hire skills initiative

IBM's commitment to upskilling global learners of all backgrounds is matched by the company's significant focus on its employees. The need for upskilling these professionals resulted in a new program, the New Hire skills initiative. This initiative sought both to upskill employees and encourage them to complete their training by earning IBM Cloud certifications. Through targeted engagement strategies, including peer support and leadership encouragement, the program fostered a culture of continuous learning. Figure 7 below includes an example of motivation posted in the Slack channel for the New Hire Initiative, reinforcing the importance of skill development and certification as a key milestone in professional growth.

All new hires across IBM Cloud divisions (technical, sales, and others) were tasked with earning IBM Cloud certifications. The New Hire initiative was designed to assist learners from start to finish as they trained and earned those certifications. To ensure successful certification completions among the group, the following objectives were put in place:

- Create a sense of community and engagement
- Assist new hires in completing their training
- Answer learners' questions and remove obstacles in order to ensure successful outcomes

The key measurable, successful outcome was raising the IBM Cloud certification completion rate for new hires—with the additional effect of transitioning new hires to the broader IBM Cloud community where they could continue building their connections and opportunities.

The target audiences for this program included new hires who had begun their coursework but not yet completed certification, as well as any employee who had yet to start their training and earn their certification.

Among the most important community-building deliverables was the repeat roll-out of the successful Study with Me challenge. This re-purposed version of the IBM Cloud Technical Advocate program from earlier in the year was once again based on a 30-day study plan and e-nurture campaign.

As with the previous challenge, one of the essential success factors was the engagement by leadership—from upper management to line-level managers—who shared video welcomes, offered new hires encouragement, and publicized recognition for learners as they progressed through their learning milestones.

To engage the community, keep them on schedule to complete coursework, and prepare them for their certification exams, learners received email updates about their daily and weekly goals, as well as where to find anywhere, anytime

access to training resources and study materials. The Study with Me challenge once again engaged in encouragement tactics, connecting to the group as a whole and motivating learners by recognizing individual accomplishments and offering incentives (e.g., certification exam vouchers). The training team responded to online questions quickly to help new hires navigate their way to certifications, as well as sharing the array of IBM resources learners could use as they prepared for success.

The Study with Me e-nurture campaign helped the New Hire initiative achieve its certification target: an approximately 250% full-year increase in IBM Cloud certifications.

Further, IBM saw how the community thrived when learners were put in a positive spotlight, as noted by the high user engagement to recognition posts. Learners clearly desired to experience their own successes to what they saw when shared by their peers. The motivational support of the Study with Me challenge played a large part in fostering this positive, competitive, successful community.

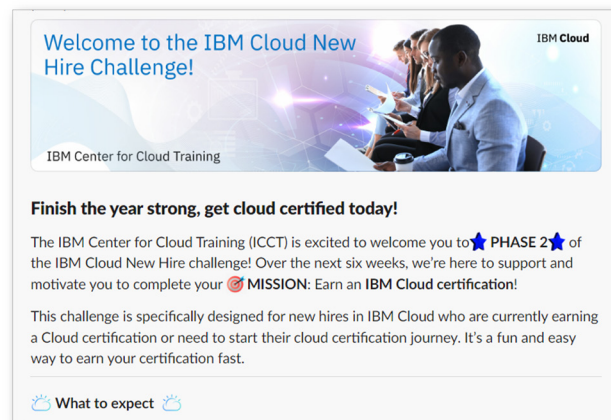


Fig. 7. Example motivational Slack Channel post for the New Hire initiative

## 4.2 Põe Tempero: An unexpected, successful learning community in Brazil

The community-building tactics used by IBM to motivate learners to certification success—as seen in the Study with Me challenge—had an unexpected and exciting spinoff. As a result of the community experience that they had been a part of during their own successful certification journeys, a number of certified IBM Client Engineering leaders in Brazil created a community-based learning experience for their colleagues.

The Brazil team engaged this newly formed community of 900 colleagues through nine online sessions, where they shared their certification experiences and supported learners on their own journeys to certification. Because each IBM Cloud certification has a specific profile and objective, the Brazil team defined the differences among the available certifications. Through their community nurturing and motivation efforts, the team prepared learners by explaining the requirements of each certification and sharing how best to prepare for the exams. They even helped learners consider their futures by offering advice on how to choose the best paths for career development.

This group of Brazilians has learned—together—that earning their IBM Cloud certifications has had a significant impact on both their individual careers and their work with clients. Offered one participant, “Põe Tempero is one of IBM’s best training initiatives ... You must have this initiative for all other IBM certifications.”

## 5 LEARNING THROUGH COMMUNITY—NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

In conclusion, community-oriented learning offers L&D leaders an opportunity to harness the power of the group to spur all participants to achieve. To make the most of this, IBM Cloud Training is building in support and motivation as foundations for all of its learning programs. The division's learning and certification initiatives are based on the belief that when programs are designed thoughtfully and participants are nurtured carefully, learners will want to succeed—and are more likely to succeed.

Initiatives like the Study with Me challenge are designed to excite learners. But when the day's workload grows heavy or personal responsibilities limit time, learners may have difficulty keeping up. In these cases, a community setting can increase self-motivation and necessary support. Once in a program, participants are keen to help one another. This internalized motivation is at the root of success for IBM Cloud Training programs.

All of which points to an optimistic future for IBM Cloud Training's learning initiatives. The Study with Me challenge and the New Hire initiative were further enhanced in 2024 with additional innovations. Study with Me is planned for expansion to include training for new and more demanding certifications (see Figure 8). And all programming will continue to make use of IBM Cloud Training's proven performance support initiatives.

The next New Hire Challenge will focus on a different audience to include IBM Sales personnel beyond the Cloud division as part of a focus to upskill sellers and better connect them with their customers. Studies have shown that training that benefits the sales team also benefits their customers and improves the return on investment for both.

Of course, any person could continue professional education on their own. But as IBM Cloud Training has experienced, when people come together to learn, they build a supported and supportive self-motivating community, resulting in learners who are empowered to learn faster, have a desire to help their fellow learners, and ultimately achieve better outcomes for everyone involved.

### Take the Study with Me challenge

Earn your IBM Cloud for Financial Services certification by signing up for our 30-day blog challenge, starting April 8. Exam prep that's fast, easy, and free.

[Sign up today](#) →



Fig. 8. Invitation to take the Study with Me challenge

## 6 AUTHOR

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