

Chapter

1

Certifying Human Resource Professionals



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Human resources. Ask ten different people what human resources is or does, and you'll get at least eight different answers. Management advisor, recruiter, talent manager, employee advocate, paper pusher, union negotiator, counselor, policy police, coach, mediator, administrative expert, corporate conscience, strategic business partner, and the dreaded "party planner"—these are just a few of the roles that those both inside and outside of the profession think we play. Some of these descriptions are based on misperceptions from nonpractitioners, others describe the roles we aspire to attain within our organizations, and some describe what we do each day. The HR body of knowledge (BOK) provides the means by which we define ourselves to the larger business community and communicates to them what roles are appropriate for the human resource function in an organization. This chapter provides you with an overview of HR certification: the growth of human resources as a profession, a little history about the certification process, a discussion of the types of professional HR certification (there are three), and the required and recommended eligibility standards for each. You'll also learn about the HR body of knowledge and obtain a few tips to assist you in preparing for the PHR and SPHR exams.



For up-to-the-minute updates for this chapter, please see my website at starhronline.com or www.sybex.com/go/phrstudyguide3rdedition.

The Human Resource Profession

By the end of the nineteenth century, the industrial revolution had changed the nature of work—businesses were no longer small organizations that could be managed by a single owner with a few trusted supervisors. As a result, many support functions were delegated to individuals who began to specialize in specific areas. One of these functions became known as *industrial relations* or *personnel* and evolved into what we know today as *human resources*. As businesses continued to become even larger entities, standards began to develop as practitioners met and shared information about the ways they did their jobs. The need for more formal training standards in various aspects of this new function became apparent, and colleges began to develop courses of study in the field. By the middle of the twentieth century, the personnel function was part of almost every business, and numerous individuals worked in the field. A small group of these individuals got together in 1948 and determined that personnel was developing into a profession and was in need of a national organization to define it, represent practitioners, and promote its interests in the larger business community. Thus, the American Society for Personnel Administration (ASPA) was born.

For the first 16 years of its existence, ASPA was strictly a volunteer organization. By 1964, membership had grown from the small group of charter members in 1948 to more than 3,100 members—enough to support a small staff to serve the members. With membership growing,

the discussion quite naturally turned to the topic of defining the practice of personnel as a profession. Although there are similarities in the characteristics of established professions, such as a code of ethics, a specific and unique body of knowledge, and an education specific to the profession, there are aspects to most professions that set them apart from each other, and personnel was no different. To solicit the contribution of practitioners in this process, ASPA cosponsored a conference with Cornell University's School of Industrial Relations to determine how best to define the characteristics that made personnel a profession. This conference spawned a year of consideration and debate among ASPA members.

The culmination of this process was an agreement on five characteristics that would set personnel/HR apart as a profession:

- HR would need to require full-time practice.
- The HR profession must be defined by a common body of knowledge that defines a course of study at educational institutions.
- There must be a national professional association that represents the views of practitioners in the larger business community and in the legislative process.
- There must be a certification program for HR professionals.
- There must be a code of ethics for the HR profession.

Once ASPA had a clear definition of what was required for the practice of personnel to be considered a profession, the members knew what needed to be done to make this a reality: develop a body of knowledge and a certification program to evaluate the competence of practitioners.

Development of the Human Resource Body of Knowledge

With its goal clearly set, ASPA went about the process of developing a body of knowledge for the profession. ASPA created a task force to study and report on the issues involved and recommended a course of action. The ASPA Accreditation Institute (AAI) was formed in 1975 with a mandate to define a national body of knowledge for the profession and develop a program to measure the knowledge of its practitioners.

As a first step in the process, AAI created six functional areas for the BOK:

- Employment, Placement, and Personnel Planning
- Training and Development
- Compensation and Benefits
- Health, Safety, and Security
- Employee and Labor Relations
- Personnel Research (later replaced by Management Practices)

Over time, as personnel evolved into human resources, ASPA changed its name to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) to reflect changes in the profession. At that point, AAI became the Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI) for the same reason. These associations exist today to represent and certify the profession.

HRCI ensures the continued relevance of the BOK to actual practice with periodic codification studies. The first of these occurred in 1979; subsequent studies were conducted in 1988, 1993, 1997, 2000, and 2005. These reviews enlisted the participation of thousands of human resource experts in ongoing assessments of what a human resource generalist needs to know to be fully competent.

As with all previous codification studies, HRCI began the most current review in January 2005 with the question, “What should a human resource practitioner know and be able to apply to be considered a competent HR generalist?” HRCI commissioned the Professional Examination Service (PES) to conduct a *practice analysis study* to obtain information from a variety of sources on the existing state of human resource practices as well as trends predicted for future needs of the profession. Under the guidance of PES, additional information was collected through the use of critical incident interviews and focus groups. Finally, approximately 6,000 certified professionals were surveyed to obtain their views on the current and future needs of the human resource profession.

In 2006, HRCI announced a major revision to the BOK, based on the results of the 2005 practice analysis study. The resulting six functional areas constitute the current human resource body of knowledge:

- Strategic Management
- Workforce Planning and Employment
- Human Resource Development
- Total Rewards
- Employee and Labor Relations
- Risk Management

Clearly, the nomenclature has changed over the past 30 years, yet the basic functional areas of HR have remained fairly stable. Significant changes have occurred, however, within the six functional areas, ensuring the relevance of human resource practice to the changing needs of business in the twenty-first century. A major change occurred with the 2001 practice analysis to ensure that HR professionals understand, and are conversant in, the language of business when Strategic Management replaced Management Practices as a functional area. This change reflects the increasing need for practitioners to not only fully understand the traditional operational and administrative requirements of human resources but to also have a broad understanding of other functional areas in business organizations. The 2005 practice analysis resulted in two more changes to the BOK: Total Rewards replaced Compensation and Benefits and Risk Management replaced Occupational Health, Safety, and Security.

Initially, the certification process was a series of exams, one for each level of certification in each of the six functional areas that was identified by the AAI task force. A few years later, HRCI added a generalist exam. The intent of the process in this early stage was to serve the needs of both specialists and generalists. Because there were two levels of certification for

each functional area, the process was quite cumbersome and a little confusing. Eventually the popularity of the generalist exam led to elimination of the specialist certifications, which left just two: Professional in Human Resources (PHR) and Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR). These are the generalist certification levels in existence today.

As the practice of human resources continues to evolve to meet the needs of international business operations, more emphasis is being placed on the area of global human resources. In response, HRCI developed a new certification, the Global Professional in Human Resources (GPHR). The first GPHR exam was administered in Spring 2004. As of April 2008, more than 1,000 practitioners have been certified in global practices.

In 2007, HRCI implemented the first state certification examination for California. As of March 31, 2008, 196 California practitioners have earned the SPHR-CA or PHR-CA certification.

Defining the Functional Areas of the BOK

Once HRCI collated the information from the practice analysis study, test specifications were developed to define each functional area. The test specifications have two parts: responsibilities and knowledge requirements. The *responsibilities* describe areas of practice with which a fully qualified generalist must be familiar. For example, one of the areas of responsibility for Risk Management is “Develop and monitor business continuity and disaster recovery plans.” The *knowledge requirements* describe the information needed to master the responsibilities. Continuing the example from Risk Management, knowledge of “Business continuity and disaster recovery plans (for example, data storage and backup, alternative work locations and procedures)” is needed for full understanding of the Risk Management functional area.

For the 2007 BOK, HRCI has identified some responsibilities as “PHR Only” or “SPHR Only” within the functional areas. As you are reading Chapters 2–8, look for these icons in the margins:



Although the body of knowledge is the same for both exam levels (PHR and SPHR), the functional areas in each test are weighted differently to distinguish the different experience requirements of candidates for each level. To understand how this works, let’s take a look at what each functional area covers:

Strategic Management Looks at the “big picture” of the organization and requires an understanding of overall business operations, basic knowledge of other functional areas in the organization, and the ability to interact and work effectively with those functions. Strategic Management ensures that traditional HR activities contribute to and support organization goals through the HR planning process, incorporating change initiatives when needed to move the organization forward and providing tools to measure HR effectiveness.

Workforce Planning and Employment Covers activities related to planning for and managing entry into and exit from the organization to meet changing business needs. This includes

practices for evaluating workforce requirements, recruitment and selection, developing an employer brand, managing records, establishing a succession plan, and exiting employees from the organization.

Human Resource Development Utilizes training, development, change, and performance management programs to ensure that individuals with the required knowledge, skills, and abilities are available when needed to accomplish organization goals.

Total Rewards Focuses on the development, implementation, and maintenance of all forms of compensation and benefit systems. This includes the use of employee relations programs (such as recognition and work-life balance) and development programs (such as performance and career growth opportunities) to drive employee engagement and satisfaction, leading to superior business results.

Employee and Labor Relations Addresses the practices for building positive employment relationships in both union and nonunion environments. This includes employee relations programs, workplace policies and procedures, dispute resolution programs, and collective bargaining activities.

Risk Management As the name change of this functional area implies, the scope is broadening from traditional programs that reduce or eliminate organizational risks from health, safety, and security issues to encompass other company risks related to programs in other functional areas. This includes risks such as those arising from the failure to train effectively, high turnover issues, the failure to provide for succession planning, and legal noncompliance.

Core Knowledge Requirements of the BOK

In addition to the six functional areas of the BOK, HRCI identified 23 core knowledge requirements for the HR body of knowledge, all of which have implications in all six of the functional areas. Among the core knowledge requirements are topics such as needs assessment and analysis, liability and risk analysis, and motivation concepts and applications to name just a few. I'll discuss each core knowledge topic in more detail in Chapter 2, "Core Knowledge Requirements for HR Professionals."

In the meantime, as an example, let's take a look at how one of the core requirements, "Communication skills and strategies," applies in each of the six functional areas:

- In the Strategic Management functional area, it means building consensus among senior managers for communicating a reorganization to the workforce.
- In the Workforce Planning and Employment functional area, it means communicating a sexual harassment policy to new hires.
- In the Human Resource Development functional area, it means introducing a new performance management process to the workforce.
- In the Total Rewards functional area, it means communicating company benefit plan changes to employees affected by the changes.

- In the Employee and Labor Relations functional area, it means advising management on appropriate responses to a union-organizing campaign.
- In the Risk Management functional area, it means introducing an emergency response plan to the workforce.

As you can see, each of these scenarios requires a different strategy in order to effectively communicate necessary information to the intended audience. These core knowledge requirements can be the basis for exam questions in any of the functional areas, so it is important to be familiar with them in general terms and understand how they apply to each area.

Now that I've introduced the six functional areas in broad terms, let's look at what each exam is intended to measure and how the weightings reflect this in each exam.



HRCI's functional areas, test specifications, and functional area weightings are subject to change at any time and at the Human Resource Certification Institute's sole discretion. Please visit HRCI's website (www.hrci.org) for the most current information on the exams' content. On the HRCI website, you'll find the *PHR/SPHR/GPHR Certification Handbook*, HRCI's authoritative publication for PHR/SPHR/GPHR certification and requirements, containing the most current version of the test specifications. California practitioners can find information about state certifications in the *California Certification Handbook*, also available on the HRCI website.

Certification Levels

The questions asked most often by those considering taking the step toward certification are, "Which level should I choose? Is the PHR easier than the SPHR? What is the difference?" Choosing an exam level is an individual choice—if you meet the eligibility requirements (which will be discussed in the next section), the choice is really up to you. As to whether one is easier than another, I doubt that anyone who has taken them would say that either test is easy. They are equally difficult but in different ways. Let's take a look now at what each of the certifications is intended to measure.

Professional in Human Resources (PHR) The PHR certification measures a candidate's ability to apply HR knowledge at an operational or technical level, according to the HRCI website. This exam tests a candidate's ability to apply HR knowledge to situations occurring on a day-to-day basis. PHR candidates are skilled in implementing processes and procedures and are knowledgeable in the requirements of employment legislation for problems or situations with a narrow organizational impact. They are able to develop solutions by drawing on a variety of sources and knowledge that apply to a particular situation.

The functional areas in the PHR exam are weighted to reflect its emphasis on the operational, administrative, and tactical application of the elements of the body of knowledge. Table 1.1 shows the functional area weightings for the PHR exam.

TABLE 1.1 PHR Functional Area Weighting

Functional Area	Exam Weight
Strategic Management	12%
Workforce Planning and Employment	26%
Human Resource Development	17%
Total Rewards	16%
Employee and Labor Relations	22%
Risk Management	7%

In the PHR exam, then, the bulk of the questions (48 percent) are related to operational and tactical application of the responsibilities and knowledge for Workforce Planning and Employment and Employee and Labor Relations.

Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) The SPHR certification measures a candidate’s strategic perspective and ability to pull information from a variety of sources to address issues with organization-wide impact. This exam measures the candidate’s ability to apply HR knowledge and experience in developing policies that will meet the organization’s long-term strategic objectives and impact the entire organization.

The SPHR exam measures a senior-level candidate’s strategic ability to integrate HR processes into the “big picture” of an organization’s needs and to develop policies to support the achievement of business goals. Table 1.2 demonstrates how the weightings for the functional areas reflect this.

TABLE 1.2 SPHR Functional Area Weighting

Functional Area	Exam Weight
Strategic Management	29%
Workforce Planning and Employment	17%
Human Resource Development	17%
Total Rewards	12%
Employee and Labor Relations	18%
Risk Management	7%

From the weightings in Table 1.2, you see that 47 percent of the questions on the SPHR exam are related to the senior candidate's ability to develop effective strategic plans for successful business operations (Strategic Management) and policies to guide employment relationships in the organization (Employee and Labor Relations).

The *PHR/SPHR/GPHR Certification Handbook* contains the most current listing of the HRCI test specs. Because both the PHR and SPHR exams are built around them, I strongly urge those preparing for the test to review the handbook and familiarize themselves with the test specs for each functional area prior to reading the related chapter. The HRCI website (www.hrci.org) provides information on downloading or ordering this free publication.

Eligibility Requirements

As I've mentioned, complete information on eligibility requirements for the exams is available in the *PHR/SPHR/GPHR Certification Handbook*, and HRCI, of course, makes the final decision as to whether or not a candidate meets them. In this section, I will provide a broad overview of the requirements, along with some suggestions based on the experience of successful candidates.

Any individual with 2 years of experience in human resource management at the exempt level meets the minimum requirement for either exam. (If you are unsure what this means, see Chapter 6, "Total Rewards," in which exemption status is discussed in some detail.) In order to meet the 2-year experience requirements, candidates must spend 51 percent of their work time on exempt-level human resource activities. It's important to note that almost all supervisors and managers perform some HR functions as part of their daily requirements, but because these activities are not usually the major function of the position and constitute less than 51 percent of their time at work, this experience most likely would not meet the requirements established by HRCI.

So, the minimum requirements are pretty simple. Let's be realistic for a moment, though. The PHR and SPHR exams do not measure just book knowledge. They measure your ability to apply that knowledge in work situations. The more experience you have in applying knowledge at work, the greater your chances of passing the test. To give candidates an idea of what is needed to be successful (as opposed to what is minimally required), HRCI recommends PHR candidates have 2–4 years of experience prior to taking the exam; for SPHR candidates, they recommend 6–8 years. HRCI provides profiles of the ideal candidate for each of the exams, which can be found in the *PHR/SPHR/GPHR Certification Handbook*.

Recommendations for PHR candidates To summarize the ideal PHR profile, HRCI suggests that candidates have 2–4 years of professional-level, generalist HR experience before they sit for the exam. PHR candidates generally report to a more senior HR professional within the organization and during the course of their daily work focus on implementation of programs and processes that have already been developed. PHR experience focuses on providing direct services to HR customers within the organization.

Recommendations for SPHR candidates According to HRCI, the ideal SPHR candidate has 6–8 years of increasingly responsible HR experience. An SPHR needs to be able to see the "big picture" for the entire organization, not just what works best for the human

resource department. This requires the ability to anticipate the impact of policies and decisions on the achievement of organizational goals. SPHR candidates are business focused and understand that HR policies and processes must integrate with and serve the needs of the larger organization. While a PHR's decisions and activities have a more limited effect within narrow segments of the organization, decisions made by SPHR candidates will have organization-wide impact.

Student or recent graduate requirements HRCI has a program that allows college students who will graduate in a year or less and those who have graduated less than a year ago to take the PHR exam without having met the experience requirement. However, students or recent graduates who pass the exam may not use the PHR designation until they provide documentation of having met the 2-year minimum experience requirement.



In 2008, HRCI solicited comments from stakeholders on proposed changes to eligibility requirements for the PHR, SPHR, and GPHR certifications. The process used to develop the changes was based on benchmarks for comparable credentialing programs, information gathered during the practice analysis studies for the certifications, and focus groups with certified HR professionals. More than 13,000 certified professionals provided their input on the proposal; HRCI is assessing the results and announced that any changes will not go into effect before March 2011.

Recertification

Up until 1996, HRCI awarded lifetime certification to individuals who successfully recertified twice. At that time the policy was changed to reflect the need for professionals to remain current with developments in the field. As a result, the lifetime certification program ended, and, with the exception of those who were awarded lifetime certification prior to 1996, all PHRs and SPHRs are now required to recertify every 3 years.

There are a number of ways to be recertified; they fall into two basic categories:

Recertification by exam HR professionals may retake either exam to maintain certification at that level. Information on recertifying by exam is available in the *PHR/SPHR/GPHR Certification Handbook*.

Professional development To recertify on this basis, PHRs and SPHRs must complete 60 hours of professional development during the 3-year period. These 60 hours may be accomplished in a variety of ways. One of the more common is through attending continuing education courses, including workshops and seminars related to HR functions. Another way to earn recertification credit is by developing and/or presenting HR courses, seminars, or workshops. Recertification credit for teaching a specific course is awarded only for the first time it is taught.

On-the-job experience can also be the basis for recertification credit: the first time you perform a new task or project that adds to your mastery of the HR BOK, you may earn credits for the work if it meets the criteria established by HRCI.

Professionals who take on leadership roles in HR organizations or on government boards or commissions may earn certification for those activities if they meet the criteria established by HRCI.

Finally, certified professionals receive credit for membership in SHRM and other national professional associations or societies. HRCI publishes the *PHR/SPHR/GPHR Recertification Guide* to provide detailed information on the various methods of recertifying and the amount of credit that can be earned for the different activities. You can download this guide at www.hrci.org, or you can request a copy by calling HRCI at (866) 898-4724.

The Test

Now, just a little bit of information about the test.

One question asked of me frequently by candidates preparing for the exam is, “What are the questions like?” The HRCI website provides a very detailed explanation of testing theory and question development. In this section, I’ve summarized what I think is the most practical information for those preparing to take the exams. If you are interested in the details, you will find more than you ever wanted to know about it on the HRCI website. Click the Certification tab, and then click “How Exams are Developed” in the menu on the left; you’ll see several sections explaining how HRCI builds the tests.

The questions in these tests are designed to measure whether candidates meet the objectives established by HRCI as the standard required for a minimally qualified human resource professional to achieve certification. The exam questions are designed to assess the depth and breadth of candidates’ knowledge and their ability to apply it in practice. Questions at the basic level examine a candidate’s ability to not only recall information but to comprehend it as well. Questions designed to measure knowledge and comprehension constitute the smallest percentage of questions on both the exams, but there are slightly more of them on the PHR exam. Questions at the next level, application, are more complex and require the candidate to apply their knowledge in practical situations that require the ability to differentiate which information is most relevant to the situation and will solve the problem. Questions of this type are the ones most prevalent on both the exams. Questions at the highest level of complexity, synthesis, require candidates to use their knowledge in multifaceted situations by drawing upon information from different areas of the body of knowledge to create the best possible result. They require the ability to review actions taken in a variety of situations and evaluate whether or not the best solution was implemented. This type of question appears on both the exams but is more prevalent on the SPHR.

The exam questions, which HRCI refers to as *items*, are developed by two panels of volunteers, all of whom are SPHR-certified professionals trained to write test items for the exams. These panels meet twice a year to review items that each member has written between meetings. Each volunteer generates about 50 questions annually that are then reviewed by the whole panel. Questions that make it through the item-writing panel process

move to an item-review panel for additional consideration. As a question travels through either panel, one of three things can happen to it:

- The item can be rejected as not meeting the criteria for the exam.
- The item can be returned to the writer for additional work.
- The item can be forwarded to the next step in the process.

When an item is accepted by the review panel, it moves on to the pretest process for inclusion as an unscored pretest question.

Each item consists of the *stem*, or premise, and four possible answers: one of these is the correct or best possible answer, and three others are known as *distractors*. There may be two answers that could be technically correct, but one of them is the best possible answer. As part of the item development process, HRCI requires that the correct answers are documented, and they take great care to ensure that the best possible answer is one that is legally defensible.

Each of the exams consists of 200 multiple-choice test questions (which are used to determine your score) and 25 pretest items (which are not scored), for a total of 225 test items. The exams are 4 hours long. This means you will have 1.07 minutes to answer each question. You'll be surprised at how much time this gives you to consider your answers if you are well prepared by your experience and have taken sufficient time to study the test specifications. As you answer practice questions in preparation for the exam, be sure to time yourself so you can get a feel for how much time it takes you to answer each question.

Test candidates often ask why the pretest questions are included on the exam, and the answer is simple: these items are included to validate them prior to inclusion on future exams as scored questions. Although the 25 pretest items are not scored, you will not know which questions are the pretest questions while taking the exam, so it's important to treat every question as though it will be scored.

The more you know about how the questions are designed, the better able you will be to focus your study, which leads us to the next section: some tips on preparing for the exam and what to expect on test day.



If you are anything like the tens of thousands of HR professionals who have taken the certification exam since 1976, you are probably a little nervous about how you will do and what is the best way to prepare. In this section, I will provide you with some hints and tips gathered from my experiences as well as from others who have generously shared their experiences in taking these exams.

It's Experiential and Federal

The most important thing to keep in mind, and this can't be stressed enough, is that these exams are *experiential*. That means they test your ability to *apply* knowledge, not just that you *have* knowledge. For this reason, memorizing facts is not all that helpful. With a few

exceptions, it is far more important to understand the *concepts* behind laws and practices and how they are best applied in real-life situations.

Another crucial factor to keep in mind is that these exams test your ability to apply knowledge of *federal* requirements, so you should be aware of legislation and significant case law that has developed since the 1960s. As experienced professionals are aware, federal law is very often different from the requirements of a particular state. This brings us to our first bit of advice from previous test candidates:

Do not rely on your past experiences too heavily. Just because you have done it that way at one company doesn't mean it is the right (or legal!) way.

—*Becky Rasmussen, PHR*

Don't necessarily think of how you would do it at work. It is possible the way your company is doing it is wrong, so you will answer the question wrong. Look for the most correct answer, and take plenty of practice tests. The more you take, the more familiar you will become with test taking.

—*Susan K. Craft, MS, PHR*

These tips apply to several situations: your state requirements may be different from the federal requirements that are the subject of the test, your company practice may not be up-to-date with current requirements, and, in some cases, you may be operating on the basis of a common myth about legal requirements or HR practices that is not, in fact, accurate. One way that HRCI tests the depth of knowledge of candidates is to provide one of those commonly held myths as one of the distractors for a question. It's not really a trick question, but a candidate with minimal experience may not know the difference. As you study, think about why you do things in a particular way, how you got that information, and how sure you are that it is the most current and up-to-date. If it is current, great! You're a step ahead of the study game. If you aren't sure it's the most current, do a little research to find out whether it will apply on the exam, whether it's a state requirement, or whether it's possibly some misinformation you picked up somewhere along the way.

What the Questions Look Like

As mentioned earlier, the HRCI website goes into a fair amount of detail on the technical aspects of test development. Much of that technical information won't help you in developing a study plan. However, you may find it useful to know the types of questions that the item-writing panels are trained to develop.

In the previous section, I discussed the different parts that make up a test item. Each item begins with a stem, which presents a statement or a question requiring a response. The stems will either ask a question or present an unfinished statement to be completed. Within that context, the stem can be categorized in one of the following ways:

Purpose To answer these questions, you need to demonstrate that you know the objective of a particular law, regulation, or HR practice.

Ordering These questions require that you know the sequence of a multipart process or practice. A question may require that you are able to identify what needs to happen before or after any step in the process.

Recognition of error These questions require you to be familiar with HR practices and federal laws in order to identify practices or actions that are incorrect and to understand why they are.

Cause and effect To answer a question phrased in this way, you will need to understand the consequences of a practice or action.

Similarity To correctly answer these questions, you must be able to identify the common elements of two or more practices, ideas, or concepts.

Association These questions require candidates to form a connection between two concepts or ideas.

Definition These questions may provide a definition and require that you select the correct term, or they may provide a term and provide four possible definitions.

Finally, SPHR candidates in particular should prepare themselves for scenario-type test items. These items are preceded by a short description of a typical HR situation and are followed by two or more questions that relate to the same scenario. These items are well suited to test concepts at the synthesis level of complexity.

My experience was that the actual test differed from any of the prep materials or sample tests that I had seen. The exam questions were differentiated by nuance rather than clear distinctions. Studying from multiple sources helped me be better prepared for this unexpected approach.

—*Lyman Black, SPHR*

Preparing for the Exam

A number of options are available to assist candidates in preparing for the exams. One option is a self-study program that you put together for yourself based on the test specifications. Another option, depending on your location, is to attend a formal preparation course. In the past few years, informal online study groups have become popular and effective ways to prepare for the exam. Regardless of the option you choose, the most important step is to know what you already know. Then figure out what you need to learn, and develop a study plan to help you learn it.

Develop a Study Plan

While many are tempted to jump in and immediately start reading books or taking classes, the best thing you can do for yourself at the outset is to identify where you are

right now and what study methods have worked for you in the past, then develop a study plan for yourself.

The study technique that worked best for me was simply making preparation for the test a priority! I outlined a realistic study schedule for myself and stuck to it as much as possible. Plus, I studied away from my everyday environment in order to avoid distractions. For me this was a local bookstore cafe, a table covered with notes, a latte in one hand, and a pack of flashcards in the other...and it worked!

—*Julie O'Brien, PHR*

Where are you right now? The best way to answer this question is to take the self-assessment test immediately following the introduction to this book. This will help you to see where your strengths and weaknesses lie. Based on the assessment test and on your work experience, make a list of areas in which you will need to spend the bulk of your time studying (your weaknesses) and the areas you simply need a refresher review (your strengths).

What study methods have worked for you in the past? This may be easy or hard to determine, depending on how long it has been since you took a class. List study methods you have used successfully in the past.

Develop a study plan. With your list of strengths and weaknesses and the study methods that work for you, create a study plan:

Develop a timeline. Decide how much time you need to spend on each functional area of the body of knowledge.

Working back from the test date, schedule your study time according to your strengths and weaknesses. You may want to leave time close to the test date for an overall review—be reasonable with yourself! Be sure to factor in work commitments, family events, vacations, and holidays so you don't set yourself up for failure.

Get organized! Set up folders or a binder with dividers to collect information for each functional area so you know where to find it when you are reviewing the material.

Plan the work, and then work the plan. Make sure you keep up with the plan you have set for yourself.

Keep up with the reading; do it every week, faithfully. Take notes on what you don't understand, then ask someone about them.

—*Becky Rasmussen, PHR*

Make sure you don't cram; at least a week before the test, take some days off or make extra time available to study so that you're not cramming the night before.

—*Rose Chang, PHR*

When creating your study plan, did you do the following?

- Assess your strengths and weaknesses by taking the assessment test at the beginning of this book?
- Review the HRCI test specifications?
- Identify study methods that will work for you such as self-study, working with a study partner, using a virtual (online) study group, or taking a formal preparation class?
- Identify useful study materials such as this study guide and CD contents, online HR bulletin boards, current HR books and magazines?
- Develop a study time line?
- Plan to start studying three to four months before the test?
- Allow more time to study weaker areas?
- Allow “refresher” time for stronger areas?
- Schedule weekly meetings with a study partner?
- Set up a file or a binder with space for each functional area to store all your study materials, questions, and practice tests?
- Allow time 2 to 3 weeks before the test for a final review of everything you’ve studied?
- Simulate the test experience by finding a place to study that is free from distractions and giving yourself 1.07 minutes to answer each bonus exam question from this book? Challenge yourself further by setting a timer to see how well you do?



Stop studying 2 days before the test. Rest. Relax. You’ve done everything you can. Now it’s time to prepare mentally and physically for test day.

Study Options

Several study options are available for exam candidates: study partners, self-study, and formal preparation courses are the most common. Whichever option you choose, be sure to review the *PHR/SPHR/GPHR Certification Handbook*, specifically Appendix A, to ensure that you cover all areas of the test specifications.

Study partners No matter which study option works best for you, many have found that partnering with someone else is a critical part of the process. Find one or two others who are studying, develop a group study plan, and meet each week to review the material for that week. Working with a reliable study partner makes the process more enjoyable and helps you stay focused. The ideal study partner is one whose areas of strength coincide with your areas of weakness, and vice versa. One effective technique is to prepare the material and “teach” it to your study partner. Teaching your partner one of your weaker areas results in a deeper understanding than just reading or listening to someone else talk about it.

Online study groups If there is no one local for you to partner with, try an online study group. If you are a member of SHRM, you can find others interested in forming an online study group on the HRCI/Certification bulletin board at www.shrm.org/forums. There are also a number of other online communities where you may find study partners, such as www.workforce.com, www.ahipubs.com, and others.

I'd advise anyone to form a study group and meet on a regular basis to read, compare notes, quiz each other, and lend moral support! Not only did I learn a lot from my study partners, I gained some wonderful professional friendships—*and we all passed!*

—Julie O'Brien, PHR

Present the material yourself! Don't just listen—*participate*. *If you teach it, you think of it much differently than if you are sitting passively and listening.*

—Alicia Chatman, SPHR

I set up a very small study group: three people. We met once a week until a month before the test, when we met twice a week. It was good to have someone say, "Listen to the question." This made me slow down and review the phrasing and some key words like *most*, *not*, *least*, etc.

—Patricia Kelleher, SPHR

Preparation materials Several publications are designed to prepare candidates for the exams. This book (of course!) is an intense, very focused overview of material you may find on the exam.

Other helpful publications include the SHRM Learning System, available online from the SHRM Store at www.shrm.org, and the Human Resource Certification Program (HRCP), available at www.hrcp.com.

In Appendix C of this book, "Resources," you'll find a list of additional materials that focus on specific functional areas, and many other excellent sources are available.

I think there was a synergistic benefit from applying several approaches rather than using just one technique or single source of information. I used several approaches to prepare: two study guides, a review course, and flash cards. I also found that my kids enjoyed quizzing me during our times driving to school, sports, etc.

—Lyman Black, SPHR

Self-study Self-study provides you with the greatest flexibility in deciding what areas to focus on. If you go this route, developing a study plan is crucial in keeping you focused (and be sure to use Appendix A of the *PHR/SPHR/GPHR Certification Guide* when you

set up your plan). Equally important to this method is finding a study partner to share questions and ideas.

Capitalize on your resources. Look to guidance from peers, bosses, consultants, subject-matter experts, textbooks, white papers, and articles, and anyone/anything else you can find that will complement your knowledge. I made my own flash cards on specific topics where my knowledge was weaker. Those helped a lot, too.

—*Shirley Pincus, SPHR*

Formal preparation courses A number of organizations sponsor formal preparation courses designed specifically for the exam. These are offered by colleges and universities and by local SHRM chapters in some cases. Contact your local SHRM chapter for information on courses in your area.

Preparation Techniques

To begin with, the best preparation for the exam is solid knowledge of human resource practices and federal employment law combined with broad generalist experience. Because it is experiential in nature, your ability to use HR knowledge in practical situations is the key to success. This is not a test you can “cram” for, regardless of the materials you use.

Rewrite the book in your words! Use your experiences to explain the lesson. It will help you remember the lesson.

—*Alicia Chatman, SPHR*

Preparation materials can help provide an organized way of approaching the material. In many cases, you already have the information; you just need a refresher of where it came from and the reason it is appropriate for a particular situation.

A friend of mine used the practice tests to give me oral exams on the material. This was very helpful because I was not reading the questions, just listening to them and answering them, marking, of course, the ones that I answered wrong to emphasize my study on that specific topic.

—*Marcela Echeverria*

I found an “SQ3R” technique (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review) effective in studying the materials.

—*Lyman Black, SPHR*

Possibly the best advice to give you is this: don't rely on a single source of information in your preparation. If you have a limited budget, check out books about the various functional areas from your public library. If you are financially able and so inclined, take the opportunity to build your personal HR library (and don't forget to read the books while you're at it!). Take a preparation course. Form a study group. Ask questions of your peers

at work. Find a mentor willing to answer your questions. Make use of online HR bulletin boards to ask questions and to observe what others ask and the responses they receive.



A word of caution about HR bulletin boards: although they can be a great source of information and provide a wide range of responses, in some cases, the answers provided are *not correct*. If you make these bulletin boards part of your preparation, make sure you verify the information you receive with other sources.

None of the people who create the preparation materials for the PHR/SPHR exams have special access to the test. The best any preparation materials can do is to provide you with a review of HRCI's test specifications. It is to your advantage to utilize as many sources of information as you can to obtain the broadest possible review of the HR body of knowledge.

Answer as many questions as possible! Whether or not they are the same format as the questions on the exam, they will assist you in recalling information, and that will benefit you during the exam. Aside from the practice questions provided with this book, a great source of questions is the *PHR and SPHR Certification Guide* by Raymond B. Weinberg (SHRM, 2007)—not to be confused with the *PHR/SPHR/GPHR Certification Handbook*—which provides 125 practice questions and answers and is available from online booksellers.

Knowing the material isn't always enough. Many people sitting for the exam have been away from test taking for a long time. I think it helped me a lot to practice taking tests with time limits. Practice evaluating similar answers and identifying the best of the lot (not always the very best answer, but the best one presented).

—Judy Wiens, SPHR

HRCI now also provides a sample test online. There is a fee to take this test, but it does include questions that have been retired from HRCI's test item pool, so it will give you an idea of what to expect.

Taking the Exam

One of the comments heard most often by candidates as they leave the test site is that the information in their preparation materials did not bear any resemblance to what was on the test. None of the questions in this book or in any other preparation materials will be exactly like the questions on the exam. The broader your preparation and experience, the greater will be your ability to successfully answer the exam questions.

Knowing the kinds of questions that may be asked, as described earlier in this chapter, can help you focus your study and be as prepared as possible.

One of the best pieces of advice I've heard about getting ready for test day is to stop studying 2 or 3 days before the test. By then, if you've been diligent about your study plan,

you will be well prepared. The night before, get a good night's sleep. Allow yourself plenty of time to get to the test site.

Go to bed early the night before and have a light breakfast the morning before the test, so you are alert...unlike me who kept falling asleep during the test!

—*Rose Chang, PHR*

On Test Day

The PHR/SPHR exams are administered as a computer-based test (CBT) by Prometric. This provides candidates with greater flexibility in scheduling the test and has other benefits as well.

Here are some time-tested hints and tips for exam day gathered from many who have gone before you and were willing to share some of what they learned in the process. For the day of the exam, do the following:

- Get a good night's sleep the night before the test.
- Plan to arrive at least 15 minutes before your scheduled test time.
- Bring your ID (your driver's license, passport, or any other unexpired government-issued photo ID with a signature) and the test admission letter, along with any other required documents.
- Bring only items you must have with you. You will not be able to take anything into the testing area except your ID.
- Don't overeat in the morning or drink a lot of caffeine before the exam.

While taking the exam, do the following:

- Read the entire question carefully; don't skim it. Taking the time to do this can make the difference between a correct and an incorrect answer.

I am a speed-reader, and missing one little word could change the entire question. Slow down and read every word.

—*Marie Atchley, SPHR*

- Read all of the answer choices carefully; don't skim them or select an answer before you've read them all.
- If you are unsure of the answer, eliminate as many "wrong" answers as you can to narrow down your choices. Remember: one of them is the correct one!
- Very often your "gut" instinct about the correct answer is right, so go with it.
- Don't overanalyze the questions and answers.
- Don't look for patterns in the answers. A myth has been circulating for a number of years that the longest answer was the correct one—it's just not true.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, *guess*. If you don't answer it, it will be counted as incorrect, so you have nothing to lose, and you might get it right.

I was not surprised by the test at all. Everyone said it was hard; it was! Everyone said that it was subjective; it was! Everyone said that you will feel like you flunked; I did! (But I actually passed.)

—*Patricia Kelleher, SPHR*

The Aftermath

The best thing about CBTs is that you will have a preliminary test result before you leave the test center. If you pass, knowing immediately relieves you of the anxiety of worrying and wondering about the results for 4–6 weeks until they arrive in the mail. If you don't pass the test, knowing immediately will probably not make you feel any better about it, but there are a couple of consolations:

- The time and work you put into studying has already benefited you by increasing your knowledge about your chosen profession—congratulate yourself for investing in your career.
- Although the test is important to you, put it in its proper perspective—it's only a test about HR; it's not your life. People take tests every day, and not all of them pass on the first attempt.

If you plan to take the test again, review HRCI's advice on retaking the exam at www.hrci.org. Click the Certification tab, then click “How Exams are Developed,” and then click “Retaking an Exam.” Browse through the entire HRCI website—there is a lot of information about how the test is constructed and scored that may help you refine your study plan for better success.

Summary

Certification for HR professionals is a process that has been evolving for more than 50 years. The HR BOK was first developed in 1975 to define the profession and provide the basis for certification. Over the years, HRCI has updated the BOK to reflect current business needs and trends to ensure its viability in business. Both the PHR and SPHR exams are based on federal legislation and case law and are experiential, meaning that in order to pass them, candidates need to have exempt-level experience in the field.

Questions on the exams are developed by certified HR professionals who volunteer their time to produce 50 questions per year. The questions go through two levels of review prior to inclusion as unscored pretest questions on an exam. A question that is validated in this process goes into the pool of questions that are available for testing purposes. Questions that do not pass this rigorous process are either discarded or returned to the writer for additional work.

A number of methods can be used to prepare for the exam. The most important preparation methods are to use as many sources of information as possible and to study with a partner or group.

