

- » Looking at the certification process
- » Figuring out which test you need to take and signing up
- » Seeing how the exam is structured and scored
- » Getting ready to start
- » Perusing core exam content

Chapter **1**

Introducing the PHR/SPHR Exam: Just the Basics, Please

Preparing to sit for either the Professional in Human Resources (PHR) or the Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) exam means that you're investing in yourself through professional certification to differentiate your talent from the rest of the pack. It indicates a professional curiosity and commitment to excellence that characterizes the human resources (HR) profession. In fact, the PHR and the SPHR remain two of the most sought-after designations in the HR industry. This is demonstrated by a Dow Jones/Inc. Magazine study that found that 93 percent of Fortune 500 companies employ HRCI certification holders.

The reasons to become certified are many. Personally, you may be seeking validation of your knowledge and competencies. Professionally, you may desire more job responsibilities or pay increases. Regardless of your reasons, earning the designatory letters (PHR or SPHR) to place next to your name is the mark of a skilled and competent professional. This chapter serves as your launch pad to the rest of the book and your journey toward the title.

Summarizing the Certification Process

Sitting for the exam is but one step in your journey toward demonstrating professional excellence. There are several steps before (and recertifying after) that must be part of your planning process. The Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI) defines the six steps that are required for successful certification:

1. **Meet the exam eligibility requirements.**
2. **Complete the application process.**
3. **Schedule your exam appointment at an approved testing center.**
4. **Prepare for the exam using the Exam Content Outline (ECO).**
5. **Follow the strict procedures on exam day.**
6. **Apply for recertification through continuing education and other means.**

I explore each of these steps throughout this book.

PHR or SPHR: Which Exam Is Right for You

One of the first decisions you'll have to make is which exam to take. The Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI) offers eight accredited designations in the field of human resources. For purposes of this study guide, I discuss the institute's flagship (and most popular) accreditations: the Professional in Human Resources (PHR) and the Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR). Before selecting the proper exam, you must first determine your eligibility.

Exam eligibility

The PHR and the SPHR are both knowledge- and competency-based, and thus require you to complete a certain number of professional-level years of work before being eligible to sit for the exam. The PHR exam is recommended for individuals with a broad knowledge of the operational side of the HR house, and those with at least one to four years of related experience (dependent upon level of education completed). The SPHR exam is better suited for individuals with a background in strategic HR management, validated by four to seven years of professional level experience or education. HRCI defines *professional-level* experience as roles that include

- » The ability to use independent judgment and discretion in performing work duties.
- » A level of specialized knowledge in the HR field with some authority for decision-making.
- » In-depth work requirements, such as data gathering, analysis and interpretation.
- » Interaction with a broad range of individuals, including key personnel.
- » Individual accountability for results.



REMEMBER

You don't need a college degree in human resources to be eligible to take the PHR and SPHR exams.

HRCI's *Certification Handbook* identifies the full eligibility requirements for the PHR and SPHR exams. It's definitely worth reviewing while you're making your decision. Table 1-1 gives you a summary of that information.

TABLE 1-1 Figuring Out Which Exam Is Right

PHR	SPHR
A minimum of one year of experience in a professional-level HR position with a master's degree or higher	A minimum of four years of experience in a professional-level HR position with a master's degree or higher.
or	or
A minimum of two years of experience in a professional-level HR position with a bachelor's degree	A minimum of five years of experience in a professional-level HR position with a bachelor's degree
or	or
A minimum of four years of experience in a professional-level HR position with less than a bachelor's degree	A minimum of seven years of experience in a professional-level HR position with less than a bachelor's degree

The Cheat Sheet found at www.dummies.com is your go-to resource to help you pick the right test (Just type “PHR/SPHR Exam For Dummies cheat sheet” in the search box). It includes information related to all the exam eligibility requirements and assessing the amount of time you have available to study.



TIP

If neither of these exams seems right for you, don't forget about the six other certifications available from HRCI. For example, the Associate in Human Resources (aPHR) is a great choice for those just beginning their career in the human resource field. It is ideal for those with no previous HR experience, as it does not require professional-level experience to be eligible for the exam. Many students use the same preparation material for the PHR exam, and report great success — not to mention a significant knowledge boost and jump start for their next certification!

Comparing the two exams

Taking the right exam has an effect on more than simply making the preparation process less stressful. Choosing the appropriate test also can impact your future job performance and earnings potential. Think about applying for an upper-level HR job that requires exposure, experience, and problem-solving in business management and strategy that may be validated by the SPHR credential. Suppose that you squeak by the SPHR exam and are successfully certified. If you get the job based on an SPHR credential but don't have the depth and breadth of practical experience that goes along with it, more than likely you'll struggle in the role. Taking the right exam also allows you to engage in the proper recertification activities.

The professional certification process is an investment in your career, not a one-time shot at a credential. Starting with the PHR is perfectly reasonable (it's what I did). You can get the baseline under your belt and then, assuming you meet the eligibility requirements, chase after the SPHR in the following year or two. The knowledge gained by studying and recertifying has served many HR professionals well time and time again, opening doors that would have remained closed without the credentials.

HRCI defines the ideal candidate for each exam. Table 1-2 provides this insight to help you make the right choice.

Just because you can doesn't mean that you should. For example, just because you have 20 years of experience as a recruiter doesn't necessarily mean that you're ready to take the SPHR exam. For this reason, you should consider the *breadth* of your experience, not just your specialties, and plan accordingly.

TABLE 1-2 Ideal Traits for PHR and SPHR Candidates

PHR	SPHR
The candidate reports to another HR professional.	The candidate is responsible for the HR function at the company, either independently or with staff.
The candidate's job responsibilities impact the function of HR rather than the company as a whole.	The candidate manages the relationships necessary to achieve organizational outcomes, including with employees and within departments.
The candidate doesn't have progressive HR experience due to length of time in the industry.	The candidate understands both general business principles and industry-specific conventions (both HR and their company industries).

**REMEMBER**

A general rule: Use HRCI's years of experience qualifier and apply it to the top two areas of exam content, which looks something like this:

- » **PHR:** For the PHR, about 60 percent of the exam content is in the areas of Employee & Labor Relations (39 percent) and Business Management (20 percent). Aim for the minimum years of experience requirements in *each* of these top areas. For example, if you have a master's degree, you should be fine if you have one year of applied experience in Employee & Labor Relations and 1 year of experience in Business Management (assuming you are otherwise eligible).
- » **SPHR:** For the SPHR, more than half the exam content is built from the functional areas of Leadership and Strategy (40 percent) and Employee Relations & Engagement (20 percent). For someone with less than a bachelor's degree, this information translates to seven years of experience in *each* of these top functional areas.

These tips are for study purposes only — remember, everyone is different, and each exam has its own eligibility requirements. For the time-pressed professional, spend a larger percentage of your available study time in these top two functional areas.

**WARNING**

Don't quickly dismiss these percentages as overkill. Take a moment and look at the exam pass rates (69 percent PHR and 60 percent SPHR in 2019) or read the online forums of failed exam takers condemning HRCI for exam level difficulty. Consider just for a moment that *diluting the exam value* by making it easier is less effective than individuals simply *choosing the right exam* and *properly preparing* the first time. It's also worth noting that professional exams for Information Technicians and Paralegals share similar levels of difficulty. Would you hire one of these professionals if a novice could pass their certification exam with little prep or demonstrated experience? Of course not. If we as HR professionals are to be credible business partners our exams must be thorough and demonstrate excellence. Do the preparation work — you will be better for it.

Making your decision: Certification is a journey, not an event

Many individuals believe that if they meet the SPHR exam eligibility requirements, then they should start there. However, this assumption should be carefully considered for three reasons:

- » If you take the SPHR and fail it the first time around, you'll have to pay a second exam fee to take it again (unless you buy insurance). If you're not sure, start with the PHR. You will benefit from gathering a baseline of knowledge and then can go round two with the SPHR on firm ground. Passing the PHR first and then taking the SPHR is a much better use of your exam fee dollars, and most importantly, it spreads your learning out over an extended period of time.

This impacts long-term retention for career application. At the end of the day, career progression and mastery really is the point of putting you through the process.

- » Depending on the amount of time that you have available to study, reaching for the SPHR first may make for an unnecessarily stressful exam preparation process. Unless you have unlimited time to study and very few other obligations such as work and family, spreading your certification efforts over time is perfectly reasonable.
- » Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither is your career. Both exams require recertification credits with a goal of lifelong learning. Instead of recertifying your PHR exam with webinars and classes, take the time to study and successfully pass the SPHR exam. Renewal, refreshment, and most importantly, *relevance* are the keys to a successful career in HR, and this path allows for all three.

Still undecided?

The best way to know where you stand is to invest in a couple of practice exams, which are designed to assess your level of knowledge before any studying or preparation has occurred. Don't worry if you don't pass the practice test; passing on your first or even second time isn't the goal. The purpose is to measure where you are at so you can anticipate what it will take to get you to a passing score and what subject materials you need to spend time studying.

If you're truly undecided, take both a PHR and an SPHR practice test and compare scores. This investment is worthwhile and may very well give you the answer that you're searching for. At the very least, you'll now be ready to create a study plan that targets your low scores.

If you are really worried, consider purchasing second chance insurance (SCI) when you submit your exam application. SCI is an optional, prepaid insurance policy that allow you to retake the same exam without any additional fees or having to reapply.



TIP

You can find a practice PHR test in Chapter 17 and an SPHR test in Chapter 19. (Chapter 18 provides the answer explanations for the practice PHR test, and the SPHR answer explanations are in Chapter 20.) You can also find PHR and SPHR practice tests online at www.dummies.com/go/getaccess. (See the Introduction for more info on the online practice tests.)

Applying for Your Exam

Now that you have made the tough decision on your exam-of-choice, it's time to complete the application process. It begins by creating an account at HRCI.org. This is important, as the account will be where all the details of your certification journey will be housed going forward — including where you log recertification credits after successful certification.

Completing your application online

The application process begins by inputting your certificant information. These are your personal details, but please note: The full name you enter here *must* match the name on your legal, unexpired, valid, government-issued identification documents, such as a driver's license or passport. Getting this step right is *critical* to avoid a hassle on exam day when you are required to present proof of ID before being allowed to test.

Logging your education and experience comes next. This step will be used to determine your eligibility to sit for your chosen exam and will be subject to audit and verification. Failure to accurately input this data could result in your application being rejected or nullified.

Remember to log experience that is related to human resources, even if you did not hold an HR title when performing the tasks. Think about it — how many “supervisors” do you know that are required to hire, discipline, and make decisions about pay? This is all credible, additional experience for purposes of determining whether you have the experiential chops to master the exam.



REMEMBER

If you don't qualify based on number of years of experience or education, apply for the aPHR! It's perfect for managers with job functions other than HR and entry-level HR, and it doesn't have the same professional-level experience requirements as the PHR and SPHR.

From here, it's about the money! While the fees can change, as of 2020 the application fee for both exams was \$100. The exam fees are

» \$395 USD for the PHR

» \$495 USD for the SPHR



TIP

A couple of times a year, HRCI offers discounts on the application fee (not the exam fee). Consider following them on social media such as Twitter (@HRCI_Official) and LinkedIn (HRCI in Alexandria, VA), where they advertise these specials. I also retweet their stuff regularly along with other nuggets of exam preparation resources. Find me on Twitter at @mat_schwartz.

Once your application has been submitted, you will receive a confirmation of receipt from HRCI within one business day. You will receive a separate email with your application status. You must wait until you receive your “authorization to test” email, which is the green light to go ahead and schedule your exam date.



REMEMBER

Approved exam eligibility is valid for 120 calendar days. This means the exam must be scheduled and taken within those four months or the candidate will have to reapply — and pay the fees again!

Scheduling the exam online

As of 2020, HRCI partners with Pearson VUE to deliver the PHR and SPHR exam (more on this in Chapter 4). Go to pearsonvue.com/hrci to schedule your test-day appointment using the same legal name from your HRCI registration, the HRCI 9-digit eligibility ID found on your HRCI application summary, your phone number, the exam type, and finally, your preferred date, time, and location.

Any exam rescheduling must be done with Pearson VUE, and there is a nonrefundable rescheduling fee.



REMEMBER

During the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, HRCI received temporary approval to offer remote-proctored exams. It is unclear whether this practice will be continued. Prior to the pandemic, both the PHR and SPHR had to be taken at a proctored Pearson VUE physical location.

Knowing What to Expect on the Exams

Anticipation is often worse than the actual experience, which seems to hold particularly true for both the PHR and SPHR exam day. The chapters in Part 1 are all about sharing with you what to expect on the big day. The following sections give you a quick overview.

Looking at the exams' structure and types of questions

Both exams have questions that are written by certified HR professionals who are not necessarily academics. In fact, exam item writers go through a series of stem/option (answers) iterations in order to come to a “best answer” consensus by those actively practicing in the field of HR. This is actually what makes these exams fairly difficult, as each question may have what looks like to be multiple correct answers. HRCI correlates exam scores to the years of experience that are required for the tests, which is in part to justify the need for practical work experience for a successful test. Furthermore, as part of the accreditation process, the exam content is built from the exam bodies of knowledge (BOK). The exam's BOK are based on an analysis of the HR field as a whole.

Chapter 3 discusses the exam structure, including a review of the different types of test questions. Each question may be worded differently and include traditional multiple choice, multiple choice/multiple response, fill in the blank, drag and drop and scenario-based questions. Each exam item may be phrased as a question, an open-ended statement, or a statement. For all question types, you will be asked to select the best answer. This is an attempt to measure your response based on a “real-world” situation. Some options are written as distractors, looking correct but not the best decision in the context of the scenario given.

HRCI's *Certification Handbook* notes that each question will focus on one of the following three areas:

- » **Knowledge/comprehension:** Recalling factual material, such as definitions
- » **Application/problem solving:** Applying familiar principles or generalizations to solve real-life problems
- » **Synthesis/evaluation:** Combining different elements and using critical thinking skills to solve a complex problem

To become familiar with these question types, practice exams (such as the ones included in this book) are highly recommended.

Grasping how the exams are scored

Many test takers are really only concerned with passing or failing, which is fine. Students must have a total scaled score of 500 to pass these exams.

However, the exams have two types of scores that affect what you need to pass:

- » **Raw:** The *raw score* is the actual number of items answered correctly on your test.
- » **Scaled:** The *scaled score* represents the difficulty level of the random exam you received.

There are thousands of PHR and SPHR test questions. You only have to answer 175 of them. You may receive 175 of the questions that are rated as difficult, whereas the person next to you may receive 175 of the fairly easy ones. That means that you'll be allowed some wiggle room while still needing to achieve the scaled score of 500 in order to pass. It's an exercise in fairness.



REMEMBER

Don't leave a question unanswered. Scoring is based on the number of correct answers, so leaving an item blank — even if it's an educated guess — eliminates the possibility of that item counting in your scaled score. Refer to Chapter 3 for some strategies about guessing on the PHR and SPHR exams.

Preparing to Tackle the Exam

Very few individuals take this test with no preparation. The degree to which you prepare is based on your unique work experience and education. Preparation tactics include the following (Chapter 2 discusses these factors in greater detail):

- » **Study plans:** A study plan is a tool that you design. It's a written plan of attack that addresses the things that make you unique — your specific strengths and weaknesses and the amount of time you have available to study — which means that you'll need to have a general idea of your exam date and assessment scores. I'm not a fan of absolute statements, but I make an exception here: Successful test takers *must* have a written plan of attack. Get organized and stay organized to ensure that you don't miss studying critical exam content.
- » **Assessment and practice exams:** You can't possibly know the extent of your strengths and weaknesses without taking an initial assessment test. Additionally, you may be as knowledgeable as any other successful candidate, but applying that knowledge takes preparation. Many individuals report suffering from severe test anxiety or have not taken a formal test in many years. Practice exams help with training your brain to think through how to apply your working knowledge while becoming familiar with a time-based, difficult exam.
- » **Study groups:** Another option for getting ready for the exam is to join a study group. You can join a group either through a college campus or independently. Chapter 2 discusses the pros and cons of this support option.



TIP

HRCI does not endorse one prep product over another, instead recommending that you use multiple preparation resources to study for the exam. They do, however, partner with preparation providers (some that offer money-back guarantees if you don't pass) to offer bundled pricing, and this is a cost-effective way to get started!

Tackling the 24 Hours before, during, and after the Exam

Regardless of how long you prepare for the exam, nothing is quite like the trio — the day before, the day of, and the day after the exam day.

- » **Before the test:** You'll need to make many decisions to prepare for the 24 hours before test day. For example, some individuals prefer to book a hotel room near the exam facility, which minimizes the possibility of heavy traffic and allows for a quiet evening before to review. I actually drove the route to the testing center the day before so that I could minimize my tendency to get lost while driving! Regardless of your decision, in the 24 hours before your test, turn off the cell phone, TV, and other distractions, and concentrate on a relaxed state of mind. Make sure that you get a good night's rest.
- » **On exam day:** Exam-day basics should focus on stamina. Sitting in a small room for a few hours while your brain is drained isn't an easy task. Distractors such as nerves, fatigue, and hunger are real threats to success. For this reason, having a plan of attack before you're faced with the conditions is helpful. Chapter 4 discusses more strategies on taking breaks and eating snacks to keep you focused.
- » **After the test:** I'm confident that you'll feel a sense of relief as you answer the last question. In some cases, you may have marked questions for review and will need to go back and finish them before you cross the finish line. You will be given the choice to take a quick survey while

the results are calculated. The good news is, you will know before you leave the desk if you pass or fail! If you fail the exam, a more detailed score report will be mailed to you so you can see how close you were and in what functional areas you didn't pass. Regardless of a pass or fail score, you have just spent several weeks immersing yourself in the world of HR — go home and celebrate! Chapter 5 gives you some ideas on how to begin to apply this new knowledge on your job.

At the end of the day, you are a unique individual with individual needs, and no one-size-fits-all solution exists to how well you manage before, during, and after the test. Some students swear by cramming the night before, whereas others say doing so confused them. Eating a large meal before the test was impossible for some, whereas others knew that low blood sugar during the exam would sink them. Others believe that only a successful exam is reason to be proud of themselves — which is just not true. The preparation process will make you stronger regardless of the outcome of your first attempt. Knowing your needs and extracting advice that meets those needs is the purpose of these discussions so that you can be at maximum mental performance level when it counts.



TIP

On exam day, you don't need to bring a calculator. Most math-related questions are written to be easily calculated. Don't worry, though. If you prefer a calculator, one is available on the desktop computer from which you take your exam.

Examining the Core Subject Areas on the Exam

Both exams have unique functional areas in terms of content, and you need to know what to do with this information in order for it to serve you. Similar to the test questions, you must be able to apply the knowledge from a workplace perspective to be successful. Each exam has five functional areas. These sections provide a brief overview of what you can expect about the functional areas of the PHR and SPHR exams. I include chapter references to continue the discovery.



REMEMBER

A note about Federal Employment Law: As seasoned practitioners, we all know that employment law changes from year to year. However, the exam content outlines are only updated every five to seven years or so. HRCI tells us that exam candidates are responsible for knowing the HR laws that are in place at the time of their exam. For this reason, regardless of the exam prep resource you use, you may need some additional research to ensure your knowledge of best legal practices is up-to-date. Final note: The exam includes questions related to federal laws and regulations, not state laws.

PHR

PHR test questions are designed for the operational practitioner of human resources. The exam goes beyond the foundations of an entry-level performer and bumps right up against the strategic skills required of their human resource bosses. While the functional area titles of the PHR and SPHR exams are similar, the content weight and focus are different.

Functional area 01 — Business Management

Second only to functional area 05 in exam content, Business Management makes up 20 percent of PHR exam questions. The focus is heavily weighted toward executing HR activities in alignment with the business, such as industry best practices, the company mission and vision, as well as taking care to avoid litigation related to employment law violations. Discover more about this important content in Chapter 7.

Functional area 02 — Talent Planning and Acquisition

At 16 percent, the Talent Planning and Acquisition area of the PHR should not give you (too much) trouble. Take care to study concepts such as federal labor law and its impact on hiring practices; creative candidate sourcing techniques; and the cycle of acquiring talent within the organization, from recruitment to negotiating employment offers. You can read more about this subject area in Chapter 8.

Functional area 03 — Learning and Development

Learning & Development (L & D) has evolved from a strict focus on training design and delivery. In today's world, it relates to a generalist's ability to advise managers and team members on professional growth, career plans and replacement planning efforts that support business strategies. At only 10 percent of the exam content, focus on how L & D supports the larger scope of the Business Management and Talent Planning and Acquisition functional areas. See what this might look like in Chapter 9.

Functional area 04 — Total Rewards

Implementing and managing total rewards programs provides 15 percent of the PHR exam content. It starts with the critical function of managing employee payroll, and rounds out with the ability to understand and administer effective employee benefit programs. Chapter 10 includes an overview of content related to this functional area.

Functional area 05 — Employee Relations and Engagement

HRCI saved the most comprehensive section of the PHR exam for last. This section deals with matters related to HR functions throughout the employee life cycle and collecting/interpreting data related to employee engagement levels at each stage. It makes up a whopping 39 percent of the total exam, so PHR hopefuls must pay particular attention. Federal requirements related to diversity, inclusion, health and safety, employee policies, discipline, and separations are all measured here in the functional area of Employee and Labor Relations. From previous versions of the PHR Exam Content Outline, you will find content related to employee performance management migrated to this section as well. Begin your studying with the content review found in Chapter 11.

SPHR

SPHR test questions are highly scenario-based and require the ability to integrate information from *all* functional areas in your analysis. This exam is designed for senior leaders who help shape business strategy and position their companies to successfully navigate the business landscape — inside the workplace and out.

Functional area 01 — Leadership and Strategy

Formerly called Business Management and Strategy, the Leadership and Strategy functional area of the SPHR exam makes up 40 percent of total exam content. It focuses on developing HR strategies that are in alignment with business strategy, and draws heavily from the domains of Business Management (such as business metrics and operations) and Organizational Development (such as managing change and behavior). Chapter 12 summarizes this, along with the other people-management elements present in this content area.

Functional area 02 — Talent Planning and Acquisition

The functional area of Talent Planning and Acquisition carries the same punch on both exams, coming in at 16 percent. For the SPHR, this content is derived from strategies designed to plan for, attract, and retain talent. Look for questions about workforce planning (such as expansion and downsizing) and cultural integration (such as onboarding and socialization). As with all content on the SPHR, pay special attention to measuring the results of these activities, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 13.

Functional area 03 — Learning and Development

Learning and Development (L & D) is about more than just training workers. At 12 percent of the SPHR exam content, it is tied closely to organizational development and expands upon the idea that training and performance management can help organizations meet both current and future needs. For this reason (as in practice), L & D activities cascade out from Talent Planning and Acquisition functions. Among the exam objectives, expect to see HR behaviors such as evaluating training strategies and succession planning. You can read more about this subject area in Chapter 14.

Functional area 04 — Total Rewards

Similar to L & D, content in the Total Rewards function on the SPHR exam makes up about 12 percent. Labor costs are often the top expense for organizations, so oversight of this function — and the measurement of results — is critical for senior HR leaders. This includes heavy emphasis on the design of creative compensation strategies, such as incentives and executive pay, as well as analyzing the effectiveness of employee benefit plans. Check out Chapter 15 to get a good feel for what you need to know about this subject area for the SPHR exam.

Functional area 05 — Employee Relations and Engagement

Not just about union management anymore, this functional area has evolved to include the management of all relationships in the workplace. From an exam perspective, it makes up the second highest amount of content, 20 percent. This includes factors related to measuring and improving employee satisfaction, building diversity and inclusion initiatives, and of course, the original concepts of managing a union/management relationship. In 2018, the content from the former Risk Management functional area was migrated here as well. Head to Chapter 16 for more information about this subject area.

Remembering the Core Knowledge Requirements

One of the major changes of the 2018 exam content updates was the absorption of the core knowledge requirements within each functional area. Prior to 2018, it was a separate section that was not directly tied to specific exam areas. In 2018, HRCI moved this content into its relevant functional areas, further sorted by exam. This may be in part because the HRCI exams seek to measure competencies (skills, abilities, practices) as opposed to only book knowledge.

Found at the end of each section with the heading “Knowledge of:” you will find a numeric listing of the data required for successful application of the HR responsibilities being measured on each exam. The Knowledge and Responsibilities of the exam content outlines form the full framework for the PHR and SPHR exams — you must know them well. Chapter 2 provides a more in-depth perspective on this content.

Understanding That You Can’t Be Taught the Exam

HRCI makes no secret that these exams can’t be taught. Yet individuals who fail the exams gnash their teeth and wail loudly, wondering how they’re supposed to prepare for an exam that has no precise preparation resource. Thinking such as this is unfair and takes an unrealistic perspective, for the following reasons:

- » **The exam is deeply experience based.** Writing an exam (or study guide) that gauges every exam taker’s level of experience and breaks down the content into the right-size piece for every person’s palette is impossible. Having the right number of years of experience doesn’t guarantee that you’ll pass. The quality, depth, and breadth of the experience get you an invitation to the certified members’ lounge.
- » **The exam isn’t about rote memorization and to suggest that it must become so is diluting the value for those professionals who are certified and the profession as a whole.** Dumbing it down into memorizable pieces mocks the profession because it doesn’t translate into practice. Imagine binding HR professionals to textbook answers and one-size-fits-all strategies. C-suite executives would take one cross-eyed look at that approach and go rogue, exposing businesses to risk and devaluing an HR professional’s role. Talk about why executives avoid HR! This approach damages HR’s credibility and effectiveness.
- » **The homework, research, and creative studying methods make you a better HR practitioner.** You’ll come out of the preparation trial-by-fire well-seasoned and tempered to be the business partner that your enterprise needs. Unless you hope to go back to party planning and payroll, jump on the bandwagon and dig deep. These exams aren’t for the faint at heart.
- » **Just because you fail doesn’t mean that you aren’t good at your job.** You may not be a good test taker. The testing room may have been too hot. Perhaps you aced one area, but you need more rounding out in others. Toughen up and try again. As an HR professional, you need to be the model of resilience for those impacted by your talent, and inflating your ability or transferring blame serves no one. Having a do-over is okay. Review how far you came in terms of knowledge before you began preparing compared to test day. Honor your growth and how far you have come by believing in yourself and trying again. And guess what — you’ll have earned the certification.

MY EXAM JOURNEY

Making the decision to become professionally certified certainly helps your career, but the decision is also highly personal. Fear of failure, fear of success, and worry about the exam level difficulty are a host of pitfalls that may keep you from being successful. I hope my own journey can help you in your journey.

I left the world of full-time HR the day my son was born and began teaching classes at night. I realized that to be credible, I needed to get my PHR certification. Back in the days of the pencil-and-paper test, I self-studied with a group, sat for the exam, and passed after waiting six weeks for the results.

Fast-forward several years. Now with two children, I found out that I was being laid off from my teaching position. I worried a bit at the time because I didn't have any sort of college degree, and I felt that I wouldn't be a competitive candidate in the market. I remembered that the process of getting certified the first time renewed my interest and taught me so much more about HR, so I decided to go the SPHR route while my final students were finishing their program. I self-studied again, this time with the internet and several preparation books. My exam date was right around Christmas, and I remember how nervous I was while listening to my audio recordings as I drove to the hotel in the city where my testing center was located. I crammed the night before and remember sitting on the bed surrounded by my books, papers, and flash cards. I felt guilty for being away from home and completely unprepared, despite my studying efforts over the last 12 weeks. I had my "ah-ha" moment right then and there, when suddenly the processes began to make sense. The common denominators declared themselves, and the information linking functional area to functional area took shape. I sat for the SPHR exam the next morning, finishing an hour early and passing on the first try. Now I just needed to do something with the credential.

Although I had a strong desire to stay home with my kids, I wanted and needed to put my newfound knowledge to use. So when I found that the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) accepted proposals for case studies and learning modules, I jumped on it, having three projects accepted and published. I began HR consulting as a sideline and soon started writing test-prep books about the exams.

The PHR and SPHR certifications allowed me to pursue my passion while still living the life that I loved with my children, who are now 19 and 15 years old. Certification has validated my talent and opened doors that would have firmly remained closed without it — it gave me options. Try not to worry about the pass rates and the time commitment. Accept that a career of passion and excellence is an important piece of the puzzle to finding fulfillment. Seize the tiger by the tail and go for it.

