

Chapter

1

Certifying Human Resource Professionals



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Human resources. Ask 10 different people what human resources (HR) is or does, and you'll get many different answers. Business partner, engagement officer, change agents, minister of culture, management adviser, recruiter, talent manager, employee advocate, event planner, union negotiator, counselor, policy police, coach, mediator, administrative expert, corporate conscience, and even "chief happiness officers"—these are just a few of the roles that we play, or that others within and outside of the organization think we should 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 actually do each day. The HR Certification Institute (HRCI) provides the *HRBoK™* (*A Guide to the Human Resource Body of Knowledge*), which is the means by which we define ourselves to the larger business community and that communicates to them what roles are appropriate for the human resource function in an organization. The *HRBoK™* reflects the most current competencies of an HR professional.

HRCI, the agency responsible for the PHR/PHRi, SPHR/SPHRi, and many other human resource certifications, and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) had a very large, and very public, split back in 2014. The stated reason for the separation was the need for a more competency-based exam. While HRCI was adamant that their exam suite was sufficiently competency based, the split represented a major shift in how HR is perceived in the field. It is under no dispute that HR professionals need a wide variety of knowledge, skills, abilities, and practical competencies in order to drive organizational performance. As David Ulrich, author of *Victory Through Organization* (McGraw-Hill Education), put it, "HR is not about HR. HR begins and ends with the business" (Ulrich, 2017, p. 3). In order to be credible business partners and an official management practice, we have to have a way to measure said competencies.

The benefits of professional human resource certification are many. The Academy to Innovate HR (AIHR) found that HR certifications improve lifetime earnings potential by as much as 44 percent,¹ and cite other studies showing that successful certification holders are more likely to get promoted. These promotions perpetuate the learning opportunities provided by on-the-job experience, creating even more opportunities for those without a formal college degree to compete.

HRCI certification holders report better employment prospects, higher annual salaries, faster income growth, and higher levels of career satisfaction. Additionally, businesses benefit from hiring certification holders, a point made clear by the fact that over 95 percent of Fortune 500 companies have HRCI-certified professionals among their leadership ranks.²

¹www.aihr.com/blog/best-hr-certifications.

²www.hrci.org/amy-dufrane#:~:text=Over%2095%20percent%20of%20Fortune,professionals%20among%20their%20leadership%20ranks.

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, and a discussion of the types of professional HR certification. (There are eight—PHR, SPHR, GPHR, PHRca, PHRi, SPHRi, aPHR, and the aPHRi.) This chapter will also review the required eligibility standards for the PHR/i and SPHR/i, updated in March 2024 for the first time since 2018. Additionally, you'll learn about the HR body of knowledge and get a few tips to assist you in preparing for the PHR/i and SPHR/i exams.

The Human Resource Profession

By the end of the 19th 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 certain 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 performed 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 20th 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 the personnel function 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—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 established professions have similar characteristics, such as a code of ethics, a specific and unique body of knowledge, and an education specific to the profession, there are aspects of most professions that set them apart from one another—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 recommend 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.

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 HR Certification Institute (HRCI) for the same reason. These associations exist today to represent and certify the profession.

As with all previous exam content outline updates, HRCI began the 2024 review with the question, “What should a human resource practitioner know and be able to apply to be considered a competent HR generalist?” To answer this, every 5 or so years HRCI conducts a *practice analysis study* to obtain information from a variety of sources, including subject matter experts, journal articles, meta-analysis of job descriptions, one-on-one interviews with practitioners, and eventually, an in-depth focus group to identify field content. The culmination of this data collection is a comprehensive look at how HR is being practiced in the field and a relevant picture of what the business climate needs from its HR representatives. From this, exam content is developed.

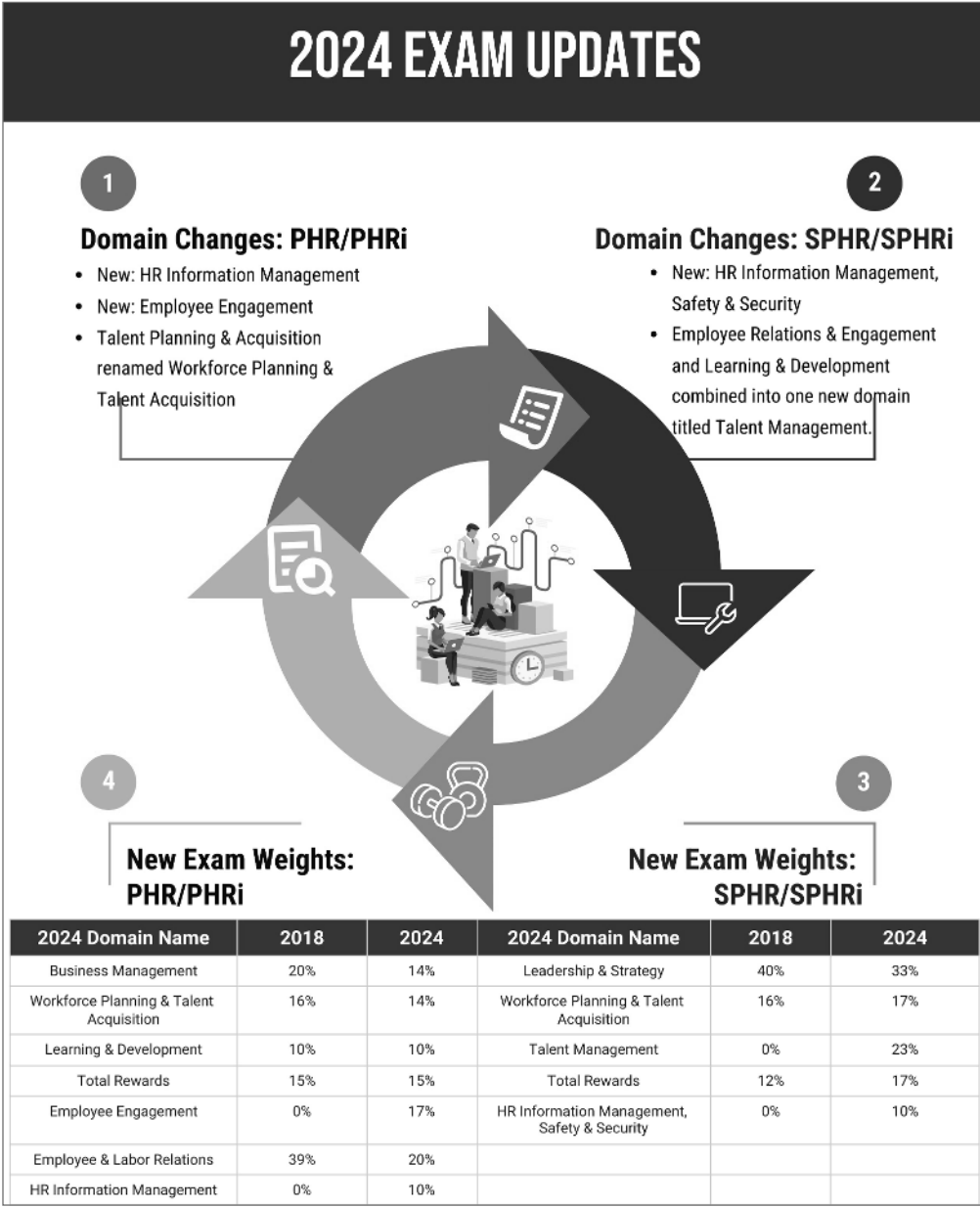
Clearly, the nomenclature has changed over the past 30 years, yet the basic functional areas of HR have remained fairly stable. Significant changes have occurred to ensure the relevance of human resource practice to the changing needs of business in the 21st century.

In early 2024, HRCI announced a revision to the PHR, PHR International (PHRi) SPHR and SPHR International (SPHRi) Exam Content Outlines based on the results of the regularly scheduled practice-analysis study. The major change was the combination of the international exams with the generalist exam content. The PHR and PHRi (PHR/i) exams now share near identical content with the exception of the knowledge of U.S. labor laws. The SPHR and SPHRi (SPHR/i) exams also now share exam content, with minor differences in U.S. labor laws as well. Other highlights include:

- Elimination of the “Core Knowledge” requirements from the exam content outlines.
- Two new domains were added to the PHR/i, HR Information Management and Employee Engagement.

- Two new domains were added to the SPHR/i exams, HR Information Management, Safety and Security and Total Rewards.
 - HRCI updated the exam content weights to be more reflective of a current HR practitioner.
- Figure 1.1 presents a complete look at the 2024 changes.

FIGURE 1.1 The 2024 changes



What hasn't changed is the expectation that PHR/i candidates should continue to understand the operational nature of human resources. This is reflected in the addition of two new domains, bringing the total from five to seven on the PHR/i exam:

- Functional Area 1—Business Management
- Functional Area 2—Workforce Planning and Talent Acquisition
- Functional Area 3—Learning and Development
- Functional Area 4—Total Rewards
- Functional Area 5—Employee Engagement
- Functional Area 6—Employee and Labor Relations
- Functional Area 7—HR Information Management

SPHR/i exam preparers will need to focus their preparation activities on workforce strategies that are aligned to clear business outcomes. The five functional areas for this exam are:

- Functional Area 1—Leadership and Strategy
- Functional Area 2—Workforce Planning and Talent Acquisition
- Functional Area 3—Talent Management
- Functional Area 4—Total Rewards
- Functional Area 5—HR Information Management, Safety, and Security

HRCI noted that their primary purpose of the changes was to better align the PHR/i and SPHR/i exams and streamline terminology. All exams will have enhanced focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout the functional areas, and paired, parallel tasks to address the differences between U.S. and international HR practices.

It is very important that you use the appropriate exam content outline to prepare for your exam. It should be the primary tool you use to identify where to focus your preparation resources. You can find the updated exam content outlines (ECOs) at www.hrci.org/certifications/exam-preparation-resources/exam-content-outlines.

Currently, and with more and more employers recognizing the value of this exam and the preparation process, more than 500,000 HR professionals in over 125 countries have earned a certification as a mark of high professional distinction.³

Professional in Human Resources (PHR) and Professional in Human Resources International (PHRi)

The PHR/i certifications measure a candidate's ability to apply HR knowledge at an operational or technical level. These exams test a candidate's ability to apply HR knowledge to situations occurring on a day-to-day basis. PHR/i 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're able to develop solutions by drawing on a variety of sources and knowledge that apply to a particular situation.

³Human Resource Certification Institute. *Certification Policies and Procedures Handbook*. HRCI, 2022, sourced at www.hrci.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/cert-handbook.pdf?sfvrsn=5ffa4d61_34.

The functional areas in the PHR/i exams are weighted to reflect the 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/i exams. Here is a brief overview of the seven functional areas of the PHR/i:

TABLE 1.1 PHR/i functional area weighting

Functional area	Exam weight
Business Management	14%
Workforce Planning and Talent Acquisition	14%
Learning and Development	10%
Total Rewards	15%
Employee Engagement	17%
Employee and Labor Relations	20%
HR Information Management	10%

Business Management—14% of Exam Content This content area asks candidates to apply their knowledge and skill to help reinforce employee expectations; make quality, data-driven decisions; and help avoid or manage organizational risk. It is here you will find content related to a company’s mission, vision, and values; ideas about corporate governance and ethical behaviors; and how HR strategy cascades down from business strategy.

Workforce Planning and Talent Acquisition—14% of Exam Content Formerly known as Talent Planning and Acquisition, this functional area of the PHR/i exams focuses on the recruiting and selection stage of the employee lifecycle. Prepare for content related to all types of workforce plans; the availability, recruitment, and selection of qualified talent; and assessing/managing the talent once onboard.

Learning and Development—10% of Exam Content Learning and Development focuses on employee professional growth. Prepare to apply your skills toward questions related to learning and development theories, organizational development concepts and practices, coaching and mentoring techniques, and the need to upskill and reskill team members in response to changing organizational needs.

Total Rewards—15% of Exam Content Total Rewards continues to combine compensation and employee benefits as one functional area. New to the 2024 exams is content related to the impact of hybrid work schedules and how to use Total Rewards systems to enhance the employee experience. This means that you can expect to find questions related to compensation and benefits, labor laws, employee payroll processing, job analysis, and the application of non-monetary rewards.

Employee Engagement—17% of Exam Content Added as its own functional area in the 2024 update, PHR/i candidates can expect to see questions about designing HR programs that support the employee experience throughout the lifecycle. These systems include measuring engagement at all phases and stages of the employee experience, from communicating the employer brand to navigating separations.

Employee and Labor Relations—20% of Exam Content This functional area continues to hold the greatest amount of exam content for PHR/i candidates. You'll want to prepare accordingly on topics such as union organization and management, administration of collective bargaining agreements, employee health and safety, discipline, and the development of tools such as the employee handbook and standard operating procedures (SOPs) to ensure compliance with performance expectations.

HR Information Management—10% of Exam Content New for the 2024 exams, this content is all about data management and its use to support organizational results. This includes the use of human resource information systems (HRISs) as well as data collection on a macro scale to be used in evidenced-based decision making. Issues such as confidentiality, privacy, and cybersecurity are also covered in this section of the exams.

Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) and Senior Professional in Human Resources International (SPHRi)

The SPHR and SPHRi certifications measure a candidate's strategic perspective and ability to pull information from a variety of sources to address issues with organizationwide impact. These exams measure 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 senior-level exams measure a 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. Here is a brief overview of the 2024 updates to the five functional areas of the SPHR/i exam:

TABLE 1.2 SPHR/i functional area weighting

Functional area	Exam weight
Leadership and Strategy	33%
Workforce Planning and Talent Acquisition	17%
Talent Management	23%
Total Rewards	17%
HR Information Management, Safety, and Security	10%

Leadership and Strategy—33% of Exam Content For SPHR/i candidates, this should be the primary focus for exam preparation as it makes up the most exam content. Questions will include heavy emphasis on strategy, such as strategic planning, risk management strategies, change management strategies, and efficacy measurements. This area also includes knowledge of management functions, corporate governance procedures, project management, and aligning HR strategy with business strategy to ultimately drive results.

Workforce Planning and Talent Acquisition—17% of Exam Content This functional area has a bit more content weight than the PHR/i exam, but with a slightly different focus. Workforce planning strategies, including forecasting to address talent shortages and surpluses, will most likely be found in this area, as will content related to sourcing, onboarding, and managing cultural integrations, the design of separation practices that address downsizing, mergers and acquisitions, divestitures, and global expansion.

Talent Management—23% of Exam Content Talent Management is a new functional area of the SPHR/i exam, and it combines the previously titled domains of Employee Relations and Engagement and Learning and Development. In 2012 the title of this domain was Human Resource Development and in 2018 it was Learning and Development; the title changes suggest practical shifts in this function over time. Expect to find questions about designing and supporting organizational learning and HR systems that engage employees to maximize individual, team, and organizational performance. This includes diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and other strategic interventions around business strategy.

Total Rewards—17% of Exam Content SPHR/i candidates must be able to analyze and evaluate strategies related to compensation and benefits programs—a total rewards system. In the context of study plans, it may be helpful to use the term “analyze” to address activities such as identifying the company compensation philosophy and conducting job evaluation to properly price jobs. The term “evaluate” in the exam objectives relates to identifying how well a company’s total rewards program is attracting, rewarding, and retaining talent. Both compensation and benefits strategies at the SPHR/i level will involve making decisions and managing risks associated with this practice.

HR Information Management, Safety and Security—10% of Exam Content Another new functional category, HR Information Management, Safety, and Security is interesting. For the PHR/i exams, this domain was also added in 2024 and titled HR Information Management, without the added *Safety and Security* as it’s titled here. From this we can surmise that in addition to the fundamental aspects of HR information management, senior leaders are responsible for data protection strategies that address cybersecurity, social engineering, and the ethical use of data within the workplace.



HRCI’s *Certification Policies and Procedures Handbook* (aPHR, aPHRi, PHR, PHRca, SPHR, GPHR, PHRi, and SPHRi) contains the most current listing of the HRCI exam requirements. Because the exams are built around these policies and procedures, we strongly urge you to review the handbook and familiarize yourself with the test specs for each functional area before reading the related chapter. The HRCI website (www.hrci.org) provides information on downloading or ordering this free publication.

Eligibility Requirements

As we’ve mentioned, complete information on eligibility requirements for the exams is available in the *Certification Policies and Procedures Handbook* (*aPHR*, *aPHRi*, *PHR*, *PHRca*, *SPHR*, *GPHR*, *PHRi*, and *SPHRi*), and HRCI, of course, makes the final decision as to whether or not a candidate meets them. In this section, we’ll provide a broad overview of the requirements, along with some suggestions based on the experience of successful candidates.

The current eligibility requirements reflect a candidate’s education and experience. According to HRCI, “professional-level experience” means that candidates have the following:

- The ability to use independent judgment and discretion in performing work duties
- Some authority for decision making
- In-depth work requirements, such as data gathering, analysis, and interpretation
- Interaction with people at multiple levels, including decision makers
- Individual accountability for results

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 aren’t 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. See Table 1.3 for the exam eligibility requirements.

TABLE 1.3 PHR/i and SPHR/i eligibility

	Professional-level experience	Education
PHR/i	1 year	Master’s degree or global equivalent
	2 years	Bachelor’s degree or global equivalent
	4 years	None
SPHR/i	4 years	Master’s degree or global equivalent
	5 years	Bachelor’s degree or global equivalent
	7 years	None

The minimum requirements are pretty simple, but let’s be realistic for a moment. The PHR/i and SPHR/i exams don’t 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.

Professional Level Experience vs. Exempt Level Experience

“Professional-level experience” no longer means work that is exempt from overtime and other wage and hour requirements, although that is a common misperception. It is, however, a safe bet that if the work performed falls within at least one of the functional areas *and* is exempt level, it will likely meet the “professional” requirement.

Recommendations for PHR/i Candidates

To summarize the ideal PHR/i profile, HRCI suggests that candidates have 2–4 years of professional-level, generalist HR experience before they sit for the exam. These 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/i experience focuses on providing direct services to HR customers within the organization.

Recommendations for SPHR/i Candidates

The ideal SPHR/i candidate has 6–8 years of increasingly responsible HR experience. An SPHR/i 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/i candidates are business-focused and understand that HR policies and processes must integrate with and serve the needs of the larger organization. Whereas a PHR’s decisions and activities have a more limited effect within the operations of the organization, decisions made by SPHR/i candidates will have organizationwide impact.

Recommendations for New HR Professionals and Students

For new HR professionals such as recent graduates or individuals transitioning into human resources, HRCI offers the aPHR and aPHRi exams. These are strictly knowledge-based credentials and thus no previous HR experience is required. Candidates with a high school diploma or global equivalent are eligible to sit for the aPHR/i.

SPHRi Candidates Only

When applying for the SPHRi exam, you will have an additional question related to your knowledge of local employment laws. The criteria may be met by holding another HR certification (such as the PHR or the GPHR), holding a bachelor’s degree or global equivalent in an HR field, or having successfully completed a course in employment law. Refer to the *Certification Handbook* for a complete list of how you can confirm this step in your knowledge.

Recertification

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 by:

- Earning 45 hours of HR-related professional activities for the aPHR/i.
- Earning 60 hours of HR-related professional development activities for all other exams, including the PHR/i and SPHR/i. SPHR/i candidates must fulfill their 60 credit hours with at least 15 specified credits in business. From the *Recertification Handbook*, this can be done by the pursuit of results-focused experiences that enhance business strategy and HR expertise. This can also be achieved by logging activities with measurable business outcomes (such as driving revenue) or by engagement in experiential learning activities such as coaching or building strategy.

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 *Certification Policies and Procedures Handbook*, but the process is similar to registering for the exam the first time—apply, pay the fees, schedule and sit for the test. Most individuals don’t wish to sit for the exam again, and so they opt to recertify by completing professional development activities.

Professional Development To recertify on this basis, PHRs and SPHRs must complete 60 credit hours of professional development during the 3-year period. These 60 hours may be accomplished in a variety of ways. One of the most common is by attending continuing education courses, including workshops and seminars related to HR functions. These courses are often preapproved for credit, although you can submit a non-preapproved course for credit with proper documentation if requested. In 2021, HRCI required that all recertification applicants fulfill at least one credit in ethics.

Be sure to take a look at HRCI’s *Recertification Policies and Procedures Handbook* for the most up-to-date recertification information. It can be found at www.hrci.org/docs/default-source/document-control-2023/2023-hrci-recertification-handbook.pdf?sfvrsn=991c3f11_3.

Another way to earn recertification credit is by developing and/or presenting HR-related courses, seminars, or workshops, or creating educational videos or writing blogs. Recertification credit for teaching a specific course is awarded only for the first time it’s 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 *HRBoK™*, 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. Certified professionals may also earn credits by volunteering in an HR-related group.

Finally, certified professionals may also choose to recertify their credentials by being a member of a professional association and reading HR or business-related books. Recommended books and associations that can fulfill the recertify requirements are found in Appendix D, “Resources.”

The Test

Now, a little information about the test.

One question frequently asked by candidates preparing for the exam is, “What are the questions like?” The HRCI website provides a detailed explanation of testing theory and question development. In this section, we’ve summarized what we think is the most practical information for those preparing to take the exams. If you’re interested in the details, you’ll find more than you ever wanted to know about it on the HRCI website.

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 comprehend it as well. Questions designed to measure knowledge and comprehension (such as recalling facts) constitute the smallest percentage of questions on both the exams, but there are slightly more of them on the PHR/i exam. Questions at the next level, application and problem-solving, are more complex and require candidates to apply their knowledge in practical situations that require the ability to differentiate which information is most relevant to real-life situations. Questions of this type are prevalent on all the exams. Questions at the highest level of complexity, synthesis, and evaluation require candidates to use their knowledge in multifaceted situations by drawing on 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 use critical thinking skills to solve a complex problem. This type of question appears on all exams but is more prevalent on the SPHR/i.

The exam questions, which HRCI refers to as *items*, are developed by subject matter experts (SMEs), all of whom are SPHR-certified professionals trained to write test items for the exams. These SME panels meet to review items that each member has written between meetings. Each volunteer generates about 50 questions annually, which are then reviewed by the entire 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 the panels, 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 takes great care to ensure that the best possible answer is one that is legally defensible.

The PHR/i have 90 questions each, along with 25 pretest questions that are not included in your scaled score. You will have 2 hours to complete the PHR exam, and 2 hours, 15 minutes to complete the PHRi exam. The SPHR/i exams have 115 scored questions, and 25 pretest questions. You will have 2 hours and 30 minutes to complete the SPHR exams, and 2 hours and 45 minutes to complete the SPHRi exam. All exams also include 30 minutes for administrative tasks to get set up. This means you'll have just about one to two minutes to answer each question. You'll be surprised how much time this gives you to consider your answers if you're 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 aren't scored, you won't 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're anything like the tens of thousands of HR professionals who have taken the certification exam since 1976, you're probably a little nervous about how you will do and the best way to prepare. In this section, we'll provide you with some hints and tips gathered from our 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 isn't all that helpful. With a few exceptions, it's far more important to understand the *concepts* behind laws and practices and how they're 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 candidates' depth of knowledge is to provide one of those commonly held myths as a distractor 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's the most current and up-to-date approach. 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 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 about 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, we 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:

Additionally, the item (question) structure has been updated to include all of the following:

- **Traditional Multiple Choice:** These items contain a stem (or premise) and four answer choices, including only one correct answer.
- **Multiple Choice, Multiple Response:** These are like multiple-choice items except there are two or more correct answers. The item will tell you how many correct options there are.
- **Fill in the Blank:** You will be asked to provide a numeral, word, or phrase to complete the sentence.
- **Drag and Drop:** You will be asked to click on certain pieces of information and drag them with your cursor to place them in the correct position.
- **Scenarios:** Scenario questions present typical HR situations, followed by a series of exam items based on the scenario. These scenarios require you to integrate facts from different subject areas.

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.

Study Options

Several study options are available for exam candidates. Here are the most common:

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. Join groups dedicated to the PHR/i SPHR/i exams such as those found on LinkedIn .com or GoConqr .com, and see if there are offerings for online study groups to help keep your efforts on track.

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, focused overview of material you may find on the exam.

In preparing for these exams, a best practice is to take advantage of multiple preparation resources to ensure you get a full view of the exam content. HRCI.org dedicates a special section of their website to a list of preparation resources and offers bundled packages that include prep materials and exam fees.

In Appendix D of this book, “Resources,” you’ll find a list of additional materials that focus on specific functional areas, as well as many other excellent sources.

If I felt it was beneficial I would look at it, listen to it, or read it. Anything from LinkedIn, to YouTube, to podcasts. I was determined that I was going to pass. I really got serious about studying when HRCI sent an email with a coupon code for FREE Second Chance Insurance . . . So, I jumped on the train and rode it all the way to success.

—*Demetrius Q. Russell, PHR, SHRM CP*

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. Equally important for this method is finding a study partner to share questions and ideas. There are lots of self-study online options as well, including companion courses to this book at the author’s website, <https://catalog.mindedge.com/sandrareed>.

Studying for the PHR is exactly like taking a final exam, you really need to read, apply and practice the material. Once you do this and pass the exam it is thrilling to be certified and solidify your knowledge of HR.

—*Marcie Carleton, aPHR, PHR*

Formal Preparation Courses A number of organizations sponsor formal preparation courses designed specifically for the exam. These are offered by colleges and universities, local network affiliations, and independent exam preparers.

Developing a Study Plan

Although you may be 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, and 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*

Don't be discouraged if your first few practice test results are poor. A low practice score is SUCCESS—it means you've discovered gaps in your knowledge, and now you can fill them ahead of the real test!

—*Ben Opp, SPHR*

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 you will need to spend the bulk of your time studying (your weaknesses) and the areas in which you simply need a refresher review (your strengths).

I'm glad I took the PHR exam first because it helped to divide my studying plan into the disciplines of HR and commit the tactical pieces to memory. It's important to have a recollection of those facts as you move on to the strategic questions that are a heavy portion of the SPHR and SHRM exams.

—*Hannah Vest, PHR, SHRM CP*

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. Using 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 that you know where to find it when you're 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 website content, online HR bulletin boards, and current HR books and magazines?
- Develop a study timeline?
- Plan to start studying 12–16 weeks 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 digital file or a binder with space for each functional area to store all your study materials, questions, and practice tests?
- Allow two to three 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?
- Challenge yourself further by setting a timer to see how well you do?

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's experiential in nature, your ability to use HR knowledge in practical situations is the key to success. This isn't 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's 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're 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.

None of the people who create the preparation materials for the 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's 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 practice questions as possible! Whether or not they're 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 HRCI's online assessment exams. Because the questions used are retired from actual exams, HR professionals have the opportunity to prepare for the style and types of questions they're likely to encounter when taking the actual exam. Additionally, the assessment content is weighted in accordance with the exam requirements, allowing you the opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses by functional area, resulting in a more meaningful study plan. Purchase the two-exam package and take one at the beginning of the study period and one before the exam itself for maximum value.

I have worked in startup environments predominantly through my career, so it was nice to be able to hone in on the more tactical parts of HR that are less sought after in a startup environment to sharpen my skills. So many of us HR folks are self-taught!

—*Kaylei Harkness, PHR*

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 we've heard about getting ready for test day is to stop studying two or three 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/i and SPHR/i exams are administered as a computer-based test (CBT) by Pearson VUE. This approach 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 who 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 30 minutes before your scheduled test time. This is part of the 30 minutes of admin time that is in addition to your test time.
- Bring your ID (your driver's license, your passport, or any other unexpired government-issued photo ID with a signature) and the test admission letter, along with any other required documents. Your ID must *exactly* match the exam application.
- Bring only items you must have with you. You won't be able to take anything into the testing area except your ID.
- Minor comfort aids such as tissues, cough drops, or eyeglasses are generally allowed, provided they are inspected by the greeter before you enter the exam room. Other accommodations must be approved in advance, usually when the application to test is submitted.
- Don't overeat in the morning or drink a lot of caffeine before the exam.

In certain geographic locations, a live-proctored, virtual, online exam administration is also available, where you can schedule your test 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and 365 days a year.

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're unsure of the answer, eliminate as many wrong answers as you can to narrow down your choices. Remember: One of them is correct!
- 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 is the correct one—it's just not true.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, *guess*. If you don't answer, the question will be counted as incorrect, so you have nothing to lose, and you might get it right.

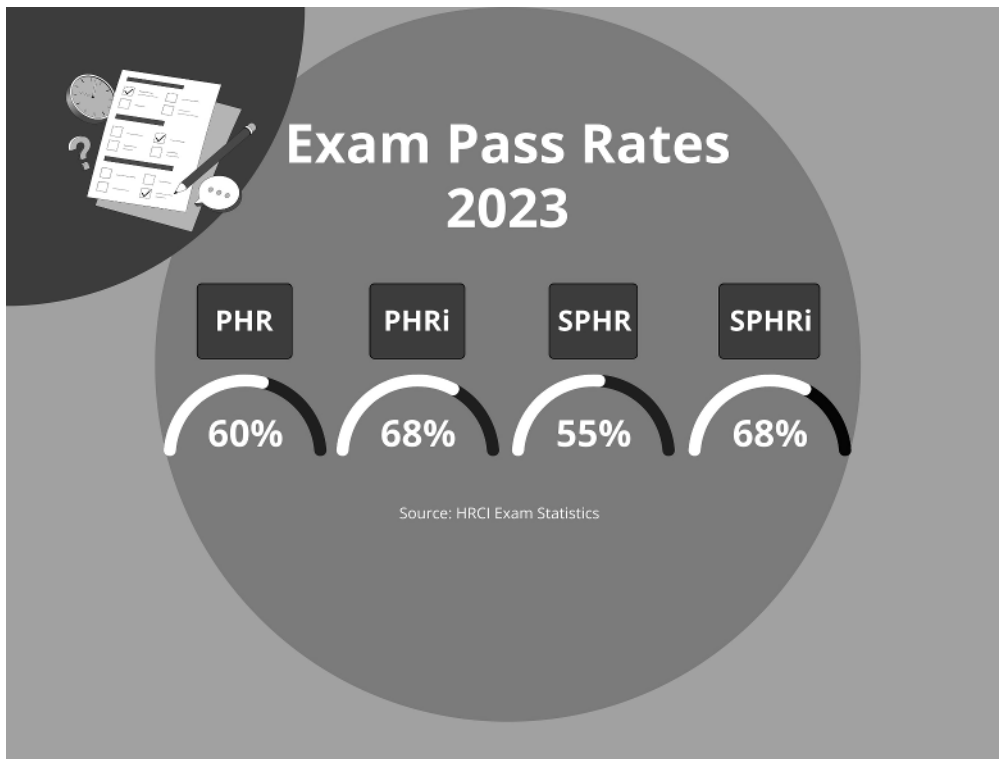
I was not surprised by the test at all. Everyone said it was hard; it was!
Everyone said that it was subjective; it was! Everyone said that you will
feel like you flunked; I did! (But I actually passed.)

—Patricia Kelleher, SPHR

The Aftermath

The best thing about CBTs is that you will have a preliminary test result before you leave the test site. If testing at a physical exam center, you will receive the results right then and there, with official online results available in a few business days. If testing through an online proctor, you will not have the benefit of immediate notification, but rather will receive an email within 24–48 hours with your results. A little trick here is that you usually can log into your HRCI account (the one you used to register for the exam) and see your results within an hour after testing. See Figure 1.2 for the most recent exam pass rates available from HRCI.

FIGURE 1.2 Exam pass rates



A Passing Score

Congratulations, you've passed! For many that sense of elation is accompanied by a strong sense of relief that the nerves and sleepless nights are finally over! Now for the fun part! Communicate your success by claiming a digital badge that confirms your new certification. This badge can be used to display the credential on your social media sites and other places with digital signatures. HRCI will send successful candidates an email with how to claim the badge. You can also order a paper copy of the certificate from HRCI's online store.

Be proud of this success! The time you spent studying, not to mention the years of your practical experience, have culminated in this career milestone.

Visualizing Success

Eighty-two-time PGA winner Tiger Woods described a visualization technique he used when he was nervous in a match. He would take a mental picture of the ball—its position from above and around—and then visualize himself putting it into the cup. Later, when under pressure, he would remind himself to just “putt to the picture.” This is an example of visualizing success before a major performance to help stay focused on game day.

If you're reading this book right now, chances are you have not yet sat for the exam. This is the perfect time to engage in your own visualization technique that sets you up for success as you begin the next 10–12 weeks of studying. Do this now and as a regular part of your study efforts so that the imagery is embedded in your mind before the big day.

Take a moment to close your eyes, breathing deeply in and out. Feel your heartbeat slow, your shoulders drop, and your mind quiet. Visualize the following:

It's the early morning of test day and you are entering the exam room, focused amidst other candidates. You are calm, determined, and prepared. With each breath, you gather confidence. As the exam unfolds, questions emerge like puzzles waiting to be solved. You navigate each challenge with clarity and precision, drawing upon your diligent study. With every correct answer, a sense of accomplishment fills you, reaffirming your readiness. For those questions that you're unsure of, you mark for review and calmly focus on the next question, smiling to yourself knowing that the answer is in there, waiting to be recalled. After submitting your final answer, you feel satisfied knowing you've given your best effort. Stepping out, you feel successful, a result of your hard work and dedication. You carry yourself proudly, recognizing your achievements and the path you've paved for others.

A Non-passing Score

A scaled score of 500 is necessary to pass these exams. If you don't pass the test, you will receive a report that shows the areas where you underperformed so that you can use this as a guide for future study. I encourage you to retake the exam as soon as possible after the 90-day cooling-off period has passed. This is because it is best to test again while the

information and the experience is fresh. I especially recommend this if your scaled score was close to 500—get back in there and try again; it absolutely can and will happen for you!

If you don't pass the test, knowing immediately probably won't 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 snapshot of your capabilities in the context of the 90–115 questions you happened to receive—it is not a measure of your performance or dedication to our industry. 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. Browse the entire HRCI website—you'll find a lot of information about how the test is constructed and scored that may help you refine your study plan for better success.



If you are really anxious about your ability to pass this exam on the first try, purchase the second-chance insurance offered by HRCI. This insurance allows candidates to prepurchase the ability to retake an exam if they are unsuccessful the first time. The insurance must be purchased when you first apply to take the exam, and it is nonrefundable.

Summary

Certification for HR professionals is a process that has been evolving for more than 50 years. The *HRBoK*TM 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. The PHR/i and SPHR/i 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 with oversight from test professionals. The questions go through 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 available for testing purposes. Questions that don't 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.