Case Study of an On-line HRCI Exam Prep Course for HR Professionals

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ABSTRACT

Preparing for the professional certification exam can be a daunting challenge for HR professionals. Two major aspects of exam preparation are the mastery of HR content and the enhancement of test-taking skills. This case study describes an on-line course designed to address both aspects of exam prep for participants preparing for the PHR and SPHR exams. Using a combination of andragogical techniques, course participants interacted with course materials and with each other to increase their HR knowledge. Participant performance on the HRCI exam confirms course effectiveness. Recommendations are provided for those considering offering such a course.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON HR PROFESSION AND CERTIFICATION

The human resource management discipline encompasses a broad range of topics and areas of focus within the body of knowledge. Some HR practitioners are generalists who handle the entire scope of HR tasks: from acquiring talent to overseeing safety and health initiatives. Others are specialists whose duties focus on one major domain of the HR discipline, such as compensation or talent development. It is difficult to ascertain the number of individuals in the U.S. that are employed in the field of HR. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2010) indicates that in 2009 between 500,000 and 900,000 people were employed in HR and allied fields (i.e. compensation, training and development). The Society for Human Resource Management claims 250,000 members, all ostensibly working in the field of HR (SHRM, 2010). Therefore, the profession represents a significant number of U.S. workers. More importantly, HR practices can impact operational and financial outcomes for firms (Wright, Gardner, Moynihan, & Allen, 2005). Implementation of effective HR practices delivered by credible, qualified HR professionals thus benefits organizations and their employees.

Subject matter expertise and professional credibility are critical to the success of HR professionals. Over three decades ago, the professional HR community recognized the need for professional standards and established an accreditation process to denote HR practitioners that master the comprehensive body of knowledge needed for effective practice in the field (HRCI, 2010a). The Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI) develops and administers credentialing examinations for the Professional in Human Resources (PHR), Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR), Global Professional in Human Resources (GPHR) and the California Certification exams (PHR-CA and SPHR-CA). Since the inception of the testing process, 106,000 HR practitioners have earned the designation as certified either PHR (60,800)

or SPHR (45,200) (HRCI, 2010b). While not required to call oneself a human resources professional, the endorsement from HRCI should enhance the quality of HR professional performance and serve as a mechanism to differentiate qualified from unqualified practitioners.

The scope of this article is limited to exam preparation for the PHR and SPHR exams because of their common exam content and the high percentage of test-takers studying for those exams (98 percent of HRCI certified professionals hold either the PHR or SPHR designation). The GPHR body of knowledge is distinct as is the body of knowledge for the California certification exams. Individuals preparing for the PHR and SPHR exams can utilize the same study materials and can study together. Individuals preparing for the GPHR or California exams require specific materials and course content.

The certification exams are administered twice annually during a two-month testing window. The exams are based on the HR body of knowledge that is created and validated by practicing HR professionals. Items are written and reviewed by trained, qualified HR practitioners and scholars. Exams are comprised of 225 pre-equated questions which are presented in several different exam versions. Examinees are randomly assigned a version of the exam during the administration. Because each question has been assigned a level of difficulty, each version of the exam has a particular passing score. However, consistency is ensured with appropriate test design procedures and scaled scores on all test versions are essentially equivalent. A passing score on any version of the exam represents sufficient mastery of the HR body of knowledge by the examinee (HRCI, 2010c).

The HR body of knowledge is broadly divided into six major content areas: strategic management, workforce planning and employment, human resource development, total rewards, employee and labor relations, and risk management. The content areas are weighted differently for the PHR and SPHR exams; but both exams are based on examinee competence in all areas. Examination pass rates have not varied considerably in the past decade. Pass rates for the PHR have ranged from 59% to 67% ($\mu = 63.50$; s.d. = 2.921). Pass rates for the SPHR have ranged from 52% to 60% ($\mu = 56.20$; s.d. = 2.401) (HRCI, 2010). The lower pass rate for the SPHR reflects the emphasis on "big picture" issues with a strategic perspective gained over a longer career and the correspondingly more difficult test items (HRCI, 2010b).

CERTIFICATION PREPARATION METHODS

Preparing for the exam can be a formidable undertaking; particularly for individuals whose HR work experience has been primarily focused in one or two content areas. The comprehensive nature of the exam can be challenging even for seasoned veterans in the profession. HR professionals getting ready for the exam can choose from a variety of study options. Two major determinants of preparation method are time and cost. Group study options frequently entail regularly scheduled meeting times or intensive three- or four-day programs. The volume of content to be reviewed during the study period is significant and programs typically run for 30 to 35 contact hours over two to three months' duration. Each individual must determine how much time is needed to either learn or remediate on core content. Cost is also a consideration. Investment in materials and instruction can range from a few hundred dollars for a textbook and self-study materials to over $1,000 for an instructor-facilitated

program. Many organizations provide financial support to employees aspiring to earn this credential.

Many SHRM local chapters host study groups at a relatively low cost as a service to their members. Universities can partner with SHRM and offer courses using SHRM's study materials. This option can be more costly than chapter study groups but is frequently eligible for company tuition reimbursement programs. Individuals can undertake a self-study program utilizing a wide variety of available materials: HR textbooks, SHRM materials, and alternate providers of certification study programs. In addition to time and cost considerations, individuals need a realistic estimate of their pre-study level of HR knowledge. Those individuals that need to simply "brush up" on the body of knowledge might select a different study option than individuals that are relatively new to the field or have only experience as a HR specialist.

Effective exam preparation methods should address two basic elements: the exam content or HR body of knowledge and test-taking skills. Failure to include both elements can reduce participant success. One might be expert at the content but have text anxiety, poor time management, or lack of familiarity with the timed, multiple choice format of the exam. Many individuals preparing for the exam have no recent experience in a testing environment, having completed formal education several years prior to studying for the certification exam. Likewise, a skilled test-taker must still have a good base of knowledge to select the appropriate (correct) answer on the exam. The certification exam offers four multiple choice answers with more than one answer often being technically "correct". Only individuals with sufficient subject matter expertise, however, can identify the "best" answer among the choices. When preparing for the exam it is important to spend time on both content and test-taking techniques.

CASE STUDY OF ON-LINE COURSE OFFERING

Despite the fact that Omaha, NE is home to a mega-chapter of SHRM (with over 1,000 members), no local university offered a certification preparation course. I had previous experience teaching this course in various formats (classroom, on-line, and distance learning) and suggested to our university's continuing education staff that we might capitalize on this dearth of options in the local area. Being a public university, our mission is to provide educational opportunities for residents across the entire State of Nebraska, not just residents in the Omaha MSMA. There are a number of mid-size cities in the western region of the State that are traditionally overlooked because of the significant population in Omaha. Therefore, an on-line option was the best delivery method as we could reach out to HR professionals across the entire State and provide the course to a seriously underserved segment of the community.

Based on my previous positive experience using the SHRM Learning System, we partnered with SHRM to offer the program in the spring, 2010. The SHRM Learning System includes multiple components that address both the HR content and test-taking skill enhancement. Further, the alliance with SHRM affords the university a marketing opportunity via the SHRM website and the availability of member mailing lists. We launched the marketing in late 2009 for the course commencing in February, 2010.

Fifteen individuals enrolled in the course. The average participant was 43 years old (s.d. = 10.095); with an average of 8.64 (s.d. = 6.181) years of HR work experience. Eight participants were female and seven were male. The course would be totally internet mediated with no face-to-face meetings after the optional orientation. We kicked off the course with a 90-minute hands-on demonstration and orientation. During the kick-off, I distributed study materials, explained the HRCI testing process, tried to allay their fears and boost their self-efficacy. We spent the majority of the session visiting the course website (hosted on the university's Blackboard server) and the Learning System companion website. Several participants were unable to attend because they lived too far from Omaha to make the trip worthwhile. I talked each of the non-attendees through the course website via a personal telephone conversation.

A pre-course survey was administered to collect demographic information and to determine participant work experience and goals for the course. Fourteen participants completed the pre-course survey. Eleven stated that their main goal was to prepare for the PHR exam while three stated that their goal was to prepare for the SPHR exam. Six participants had previously taken an on-line course, although I did not ask when or what they studied. Ten participants had either a baccalaureate or graduate degree in human resource management, management, or business administration. Three participants had no degree; while one participant had a degree in a non-related field.

When asked about their concerns regarding the course, comments ranged from "no concerns" to concerns about the technology and/or volume of content. Representative comments from participants are provided below:

"I am just old enough to not know how online classes work. As everyone else is - probably - I'm concerned about failure of the class or test or both!"

"Definitely study time. I would consider myself somewhat of a slow reader, and this seems to be entirely all reading. I work about 50 to 60 hours a week, and when I get home, reading seems hard to get done. I will make it work though."

"One concern I have is being able to find time to study and complete homework assignments. I also am a little intimated by learning labor law, unions, etc. My background has mostly been staffing and retirement planning/administration."

"I am concerned that there are times I read the material and it does not sink in. I am better at listening and learning, or interacting. I am not good a visual learner."

COURSE CONTENT AND ADMINISTRATION

The course was scheduled for 11 weeks with a completion date just prior to the May-June testing window. While an on-line course offers greater participant flexibility regarding the pace and scheduling of particular activities, I provided a weekly schedule and required participants to track as a cohort through the course. The university's Blackboard course website was used to administer the course. Course content consisted of PowerPoint presentations that I had

developed. Although the SHRM Learning System includes PowerPoint slides, I felt that including my own content added a different perspective and alternative content. I had video-taped lectures that accompanied each of my PowerPoint slide presentations. The video lectures were hosted on Adobe Connect and were delivered as streaming video when accessed by the participants. Each video lecture lasted for approximately 60 to 75 minutes. Participants were free to watch at their leisure, could start and stop when they wanted, and could watch each lecture multiple times if they wanted to.

The majority of interaction among course participants was to be accomplished via asynchronous threaded discussions. An introductory threaded discussion was held in the first week of the course to get participants used to chatting on-line and to provide the opportunity for them to get to know each other. Including all fifteen participants was too unwieldy for ongoing threaded discussions with the entire group. I split the group into three smaller 5-person groups for the module-focused threaded discussions throughout the course.

Participants were asked to complete the Learning System pre-test prior to beginning the course. The pre-test results provide an overall score as well as a score for each major content area of the body of knowledge. This helps participants identify their strong and weak areas and should guide their study plan during the course. A feature of the Learning System is the instructor's ability to access the student activity and test results. Participants knew that I was able to track their progress and see their test scores. PHR pre-test scores ranged from 44 to 74 (μ = 61.85; s.d = 9.433). SPHR pre-test scores ranged from 56 to 80 (μ = 63.5; s.d = 11.121). In my experience, the results were typical of participants in an exam prep course. Participants were encouraged to look at the specific content areas in which they scored the lowest and to focus greater study effort on those topics.

The course content was divided over 11 weeks with two weeks devoted to each of the first five content areas (or modules) and one week devoted to Risk Management as it represents only 7% of both the PHR and SPHR exams. During the first week of each module, participants were to post at least twice to the threaded discussion board for their group. I posted five to six broad questions that covered the full spectrum of content for each module. Participants were asked to post to the threaded discussion early in the week and to post a second "reflective" post after reading other participants' entries. The objective was for each participant to answer each of the posted questions. I did not actively participate in the discussions unless there was inaccurate information being disseminated.

During the second week of each module, participants responded to a case study/scenario relative to the key points in the module. I posted an extensive exemplar response at the end of the week so that participants could evaluate their own response and confirm their understanding. Lastly, within a week of the conclusion of each module, participants were required to complete the module post-test on the Learning System website.

I made it a practice to post an announcement on the Blackboard website each Sunday afternoon listing the deliverables for the upcoming week. This insured that everyone knew what they needed to accomplish during the week. I reminded participants to either post to their threaded discussions or to submit the case assignment for the module. I also posted case

feedback via the announcements function during the course. I typically updated the "gradebook" to reflect completed assignments. Participants were kept apprised of their outstanding assignments and I emailed notes of support and praise when module review tests were completed.

RESULTS

At the conclusion of the 11-week course, participants completed the comprehensive Learning System post-test. PHR post-test scores ranged from 55 to 100 (μ = 71.70; s.d = 14.765). SPHR post-test scores ranged from 57 to 62 (μ = 59.50; s.d = 3.536). Clearly the goal of the exam prep course is to improve the performance of participants from the pre-test to the post-test. Table One shows the results of the pre- and post-tests as well as the HRCI exam results.

Table 1. Results of Learning System Pre-test and Post-test and HRCI Exams

	Pre-test results:		Post-test results:		Change pre-post		HRCI Exam
	PHR	SPHR	PHR	SPHR	PHR	SPHR	
Participant 1	60	89	95		35		Pass PHR
Participant 2		56	71				Pass PHR
Participant 3	56	60		62		2	Unknown
Participant 4	62		64		2		Pass PHR
Participant 5	68	58					Attrition
Participant 6	68	58	66		-2		Pass PHR
Participant 7	44						Attrition
Participant 8	74		76		2		Pass PHR
Participant 9		80		57		-23	Pass SPHR
Participant 10	50		66		16		Fall 2010
Participant 11	74		64		-10		Unknown
Participant 12	56		55		-1		Pass PHR
Participant 13	54		100		46		Fall 2010
Participant 14	68		60		-8		Unknown
Participant 15	70						Attrition
Avg.	61.846	66.833	71.700	59.500	8.889	-10.500	
s.d.	9.433	14.034	14.765	3.536	19.567	17.678	

As there are only eleven participants that completed both pre- and post-tests at the same level, statistical significance of results cannot be determined. Of particular concern is the fact that approximately half of the participants performed worse on the post-test than on the pre-test. However, of those participants that have advised me of their status on the HRCI exam, seven out of seven have successfully passed their HRCI exams. Three participants did not complete the course and two participants have not shared their exam results. Two participants indicated that

they would be taking the HRCI exam during the December-January testing window. So, despite results on the post-test, participants seem to be performing well when it really counts.

A post-course survey was conducted (on the Blackboard website) to obtain evaluations of the course and to solicit recommendations for improvements that could be made. Eight participants completed the survey. The average participant spent approximately six hours each week studying during the course (including Blackboard activities, reading, and completing assignments). The majority of participants felt that the amount of time required for study was in line with their expectations coming in to the course. When asked about how effective various elements of the course were in mastering HR knowledge, module reviews got the highest marks, followed by video lectures, case assignments, and threaded discussions (in that order). There were 13 video lectures embedded in the course. On average, participants viewed 8.75 lectures (s.d. = 5.625). On a 5-point scale (1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree), participants felt that their HR knowledge increased as a result of the course (μ = 1.50; s.d. = 0.756). While most participants enrolled in the course specifically because it utilized the SHRM Learning System, only about half enrolled specifically because the course was offered on line.

When asked about positive aspects of the course, participants addressed instructor support and feedback as well as challenges that they faced during the course. Representative comments from participants are provided below:

"The course was great. In my case, the real effects of my job had a negative impact on the level of attention I could give to the course."

"I used printouts of PowerPoint presentations as study guide. I liked being able to apply 'book' knowledge to case studies."

"Instructor was very positive support (difficult course)."

When asked for suggestions to improve the course, participants provided some useful ideas and identified elements in the course that were less effective. In particular, the threaded discussions seemed to be problematic. Representative comments from participants are provided below:

"The threaded discussions were not a favorite for me. I don't believe that I gained a great deal from them although it was interesting to hear other ideas and company practices. Participation was limited in my group, and I must say sometimes on my part also. I think I would have preferred to have a case assignment each week, or a quiz after each lecture in place of the threaded discussions."

"I enjoyed the course, but I was disappointed in the discussion questions. I tried to answer all of the questions, but did not want to be the first one to answer every question so I tried to answer one each day. Others were not participating until later in the week, and it was too late to get a good discussion going. I would have

benefited from more of a self paced course as I travel often and was sometimes rushed to meet the deadlines."

"The course is so fast paced and there is such a volume of reading that it is extremely difficult to absorb the material."

Effective exam preparation depends on many factors. The preparatory course provided a number of elements that ideally reinforced each other. Reading of course materials was supplemented with PowerPoint slide presentations. Video lectures highlighted key concepts in each module and further explained major topics. The module reviews helped participants to gauge their level of knowledge as they progressed through the course. In the following discussion, I will reflect on techniques used in the course and offer some insights from my lessons learned.

LESSONS LEARNED

The following section provides my recommendations and suggestions based on feedback from the post-course surveys and my own observations. This on-line course involved several course elements that ideally worked together to reinforce and complement each other to address both content mastery and test-taking skill enhancement. Each element of the course will be discussed and I will share my experience and conclusions regarding the effective administration of an on-line exam prep course.

The practice exams provided by the module reviews were rated as a highly effective pedagogical technique. Use of the SHRM Learning System makes this quite easy for the instructor as multiple practice exams are included in the study package. For certification prep courses that do not use the SHRM Learning System, it is critical to find an alternate source for practice exams. Some HR textbooks have a companion study guide that would include test questions on the HR body of knowledge. Other providers of certification prep study materials may also include practice tests as part of the package. The key is to provide test questions in the multiple choice format to replicate the HRCI test layout. The SHRM Learning System delivers the practice tests via the companion website and course participants become very familiar with the look and feel of the HRCI computer-based test setting.

Video lectures were rated as the second-most effective pedagogical technique. The video lectures replaced the in-person lectures one might receive in a classroom environment. However, there was no two-way interaction as the video lectures were pre-recorded. A benefit of the video lectures was that participants could review portions multiple times if they didn't understand the content the first time. I also believe that the video lectures "personalized" me as the instructor. I added anecdotes, examples, and humor in explaining content. Perhaps this allowed participants to see me as a three-dimensional person; not just the written words in my case summaries and emails. As I mentioned earlier, the video lectures followed my own PowerPoint slide presentations. Thus, material was presented in a different way than what participants were reading in the Learning System modules. The fresh perspective may have reinforced content covered in their reading assignments.

Bi-weekly case studies were rated as the third-most effective pedagogical technique. The case study/scenarios that participants completed caused them to step back from the rote memorization of content and apply what they were learning. Many items on the HRCI exam require an application orientation that goes beyond simply "knowing" a concept. The case studies were designed to make participants think beyond a simple "yes-or-no" response and explain why their response was appropriate. I tried to provide fairly extensive exemplar responses covering the range of issues addressed by each case. The course was not being offered for credit and therefore grades were not determined based upon the participant responses. Completion of the case was sufficient. In the future, it might be better to critically analyze or "grade" the responses to insure that participants truly learn. However, without the threat of a course grade it can be difficult to hold participants accountable.

The threaded discussions were a real disappointment for both the participants and the instructor. The purpose was to build a community among members of the three small groups and provide an opportunity for interaction. However, most participants failed to actively join in the discussions or posted late in the week and then only to the minimum level required. In my previous experience, I had scheduled synchronous discussions but people prefer the flexibility of signing on to a course website at their own convenience. The asynchronous discussions were intended to allow for that flexibility while still serving as a forum for exchanging ideas and best practices among members. In the future I believe that a better approach is to hold an optional weekly discussion at a scheduled time. Participants could choose whether or not to join in and might attend discussions on their weak content areas. A course requirement might include a minimum number of discussions. The Virtual Classroom in Blackboard could be used to host the weekly open discussions. The instructor could pose a general open-ended question relative to the module content and participants could participate in a "round-robin" fashion. Alternatively, the instructor could hold virtual office hours in Blackboard and participants could pose questions or seek guidance regarding content or test-taking techniques. I believe that it is important to allow course participants to share ideas and learn from one another. The threaded discussions did not achieve that goal in this course and in the future I will have to find a better way to bring participants together.

A final issue that I have not resolved is how to manage both PHR and SPHR candidates in the same course. While the body of knowledge is universal, the focus for PHR is tactical and the SPHR is more strategic. Typically, the majority course participants are focused on the PHR exam. However, the SPHR candidates can feel less challenged by the course content. Perhaps a way to enhance learning outcomes for SPHR candidates would be to utilize them as discussion leaders, recognizing, however, that they are still in a learning mode and would not be expected to have the same level of expertise as the instructor.

Although 15 individuals enrolled in the course, only 12 completed all requirements to earn their certificates of completion. The three participants lost to attrition essentially disappeared early in the course. I sent several emails to each participant trying to re-engage them in the course. One stated that she had just lost her job and she was immersed in her job search. Another stated that job demands had increased, making it difficult for her to remain active in the course. I never heard from the third "at-risk" participant and do not know what caused her to drop out of the course. Attrition of on-line participants can be a concern due to the

lack of personal connection participants might feel. Instructors of on-line exam prep courses should make a special effort to identify at-risk participants early and correspond with them often to prevent failure to complete the course.

Overall, the on-line course was a success. While complete results of participants' HRCI exams are not available, those that shared their results performed quite well. The course met or exceeded most participants' expectations and those of the instructor. Striking the right balance between participant flexibility and maintaining a cohort-based schedule is not easy. Finding a way to foster discussion and sharing among participants while not over-burdening them is challenging and may require some mid-course adjustment. Remaining flexible and open to suggestions during the course can go a long way towards enhancing participant contributions and performance. Operating in the not-for-credit sector gives the instructor freedom to modify the course in real time in response to the needs or requests of participants. The dual focuses of increasing subject matter expertise and improving test-taking ability can be accomplished effectively in the on-line environment with the right tools and the right attitude.

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