

Is HR Certification Worth It?

By [Dave Rietsema](#)

To most it would seem that the HR certification tests (PHR, SPHR) through the [HR Certification Institute](#) are held in high regard. After all, can you browse through HR job postings without seeing the inevitable “PHR/SPHR Required” towards the end of the ad?

You might be asking yourself (as I did) whether or not the tests are worth it. After all, it **IS** an investment of your time and money. The certifications and tests are optional, so it’s not like you need to get them in order to get started in your HR career.

With all these things in mind, you might find yourself asking the same questions I did when I was considering HR certification:

Do HR people with certifications make more?

Yes they do.

Not only that, according to [Payscale.com](#), HR professionals who are certified also promote faster and tend to hold positions of higher authority compared to their non-certified counterparts. According to Payscale’s research report, the median pay for an HR professional with any certification was \$64,700 while those without certification made around \$45,600—a difference of nearly \$20,000!

The report showed that even when HR professionals carried exactly the same title, those with certifications tended to make more on average. For example, HR Directors with SPHR certifications made about \$98,600 on average, while HR Directors with no certifications made about \$76,500.

The numbers vary across different industries and parts of the country, but on average the certification pays off in terms of dollars.

Are they more respected than those without certifications?

I think it depends on where you work.

I’ve talked to plenty of HR professionals whose CEOs don’t even know what PHR or SPHR stands for...**P**retty **H**appy and **R**esourceful (PHR)?! However, in companies where executives are more in touch with the HR department, I think that certification sends a signal that the individual is committed to the profession and competent in the field.

Additionally, learning more about the field in which you work always comes in handy. Beyond simply acquiring the certification itself, training to pass the certification exams may give you

insights into situations that you will come across later in your career. This can be helpful for you and give you more street cred with your colleagues.

Do they have a better shot at getting a job than someone without a certification?

Absolutely.

Let's call a spade a spade—the primary reason people get their PHR or SPHR is to showcase it on their resume. It can be that slight edge that causes you to get hired over another HR professional with similar experience and education.

As previously mentioned, most mid to senior-level job ads make reference to having your HR certification. I've talked to some recruiters that literally throw your resume aside if you don't have those magical 3 or 4 letters. And that is if you ever make to a recruiter, many applicant tracking systems will automatically disqualify you if you don't have the certification.

Are they smarter?

I think this question goes in the same box as to whether college educated people are brighter than non-college educated. In some cases yes and some cases no.

Making sweeping judgments about people I've never met freaks me out so I'm pleading the 5th. However, it would be nice if HRCI had you take an IQ test on the way out of the exam so we'd be able to see some hard numbers here.

Should I go for the PHR or SPHR? Or Another Certification?

Before you even start debating this question, check out HRCI's [Eligibility Requirements](#)—there are unique education and years of experience requirements for each certification.

If you're like me you might be eligible to take both exams. If so, my advice is to take the pre-exam quizzes and do an assessment as to the strategic level of your HR knowledge. PHR questions are much more terminology and fact-based. SPHR is a 5-headed beast that weaves several concepts together in one question.

Ultimately, I decided to go with the PHR because I felt that it was more closely aligned to my experience level and honestly I feared failing the SPHR. However, this is a decision you'll need to wrestle with as you study. I don't recommend making a decision on which exam to go for until you've been studying for at least a few months.

While the PHR and the SPHR are the most recognized of the HRCI exams, there are now several other exams that may better fit your experience and goals.

- aPHR is geared towards recent college graduates and those just entering the HR field

- PHRca is specifically for HR professionals that expect to operate in the state of California
- GPHR is for HR professionals that work in a multinational or global setting
- PHRi is perfect for remote HR professionals that operate independent of a geographic region
- SPHRi is for senior HR professionals that operate remotely or internationally

Should I get a SHRM certification?

Maybe.

SHRM offers two certifications now. SHRM-CP for HR professionals early in their career and SHRM-SCP for senior HR professionals. The certifications have been offered since 2014, when SHRM split from HRCI. While they are accredited and SHRM is a well respected organization, the certifications don't have the years behind them that HRCI certifications boast.

Whether you decide upon a certification from HRCI or SHRM, however, the [SHRM Learning System](#) is definitely worth its weight in gold—I highly recommend it.

Final Thoughts

Certification is definitely worth it but before you go down the path of certification, understand that like most things we want, there are sacrifices. First, you'll spend money on study materials—maybe even pay for a prep course at a local community college. Second, the test itself costs money and if you fail they don't give you a free retry!

Third, you will sacrifice your time studying. I participated in my local SHRM chapter's HR certification study group which was very helpful but also a time commitment. For 3 months, once a week I met with others who were prepping for the certification exams and we reviewed key concepts. Furthermore, each Saturday I was married to my couch for five to six hours reading the materials in the different modules and taking practice tests.