

# HRCI SPHR exam prep: Where to start to ensure success

Having the SPHR (Senior Professional in Human Resources) credential on your resume can open doors to greater responsibilities and better pay. The certification demonstrates a high level of achievement and ongoing commitment to the industry. And because it is awarded by the Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI) — a long-standing, well-known organization — employers recognize and respect the title.

With a certification exam pass rate of 58%, however, obtaining HRCI SPHR certification is an endeavor, not a cakewalk. HR professionals seeking one must prepare.

## Prior to embarking on SPHR exam prep

HR certification involves a time commitment. It also costs money. Currently, the SPHR exam fee is \$495 plus a \$100 application fee. Thus, smart potential SPHR test takers think about a few things beforehand.

## Is SPHR certification the best credential for me?

From the aPHR for those just starting their HR careers to the GPHR for those with multinational HR responsibilities, HRCI offers a variety of certification options. Take a careful look at all eight of them. Which ones fit with your abilities and career interests? Does your employer prefer one over another?

The [SPHR](#) is designed for leaders responsible for planning rather than implementing HR policy. These professionals tend to be accountable for HR department goals and the business strategies necessary to achieve them. Roughly 40 percent of the questions on the SPHR exam deal with leadership and strategy.

HR professionals looking to demonstrate mastery of technical and operational (rather than strategic) aspects of HR management might find [PHR](#) certification (Professional in Human Resources) a better match. Subjects covered on the PHR exam include employee relations, labor relations, business management, talent planning and acquisition, total rewards, and learning and development.

Note, too, that the Society for Human Resource Management ([SHRM](#)) offers two popular HR certifications of its own. The SHRM Certified Professional ([SHRM-CP](#)) is much like the PHR in that it focuses on supporting everyday HR functions and implementing policies. The SHRM Senior Certified Professional ([SHRM-SCP](#)), much like the SPHR, demonstrates aptitude for strategic HR.

## Do I meet the criteria to sit for the SPHR test?



Each HRCI exam requires prospective applicants to meet certain education and/or experience requirements. For the SPHR, you must either have four years of experience in a professional-level HR position and a master's degree; have at least five years of experience in a professional-level HR position and a bachelor's degree; or have at least seven years of experience in a professional-level HR position. Those who lack the qualifications need to fill that gap first. Or, they could consider pursuing a different HR certification for which they match.

### **Am I ready to commit to exam preparation now and future recertification?**

The vast majority of people do not “wing” the SPHR. Rather, they take the time to learn what topics are covered and form a study plan. They read through study guides and take practice tests. Some even enroll in a formal preparation course. If unable to devote suitable effort to preparing for the SPHR certification exam at the present time, waiting might be advisable.

After passing the actual exam, maintaining HRCI certification requires recertification every three years. (SHRM certification does too.) During this time period, the certificant must earn a specified number of credits from activities involving professional development and professional achievement. Alternatively, someone can opt to take the exam again before the expiration date.

### **Learn about the SPHR exam**

A good first step for test prep is understanding the exam's format and coverage. Familiarity helps calm nerves on test day and provides direction about what to study.

The SPHR exam runs 2 hours and 30 minutes, plus 30 minutes of administration time. It consists of 115 scored questions (mostly multiple-choice) and 25 pretest questions. The computer-based exam can be taken at a Pearson VUE testing center or at your home or office using OnVUE.

Carefully read through the [SPHR Exam Content Outline](#). This document is used in creating exam questions. The outline details the five functional areas covered on the exam and the weighting of each:

#### **1. Leadership and Strategy (40%)**

2. Talent Planning and Acquisition (16%)
3. Learning and Development (12%)
4. Total Rewards (12%)
5. Employee Relations and Engagement (20%)

## Consider outside help

Many SPHR exam candidates turn to third-party services for test prep assistance. Prep courses familiarize test takers with the HR body of knowledge expected and the exam process itself.

“There is another layer of accountability with a prep course,” says Matthew W. Burr, owner of [Burr Consulting, LLC](#), and a human resources test prep instructor. “We normally have everything broken down in a syllabus to follow related to studying and working through the material.” He also cites learning how to study strategically and discussing material with the instructor and classmates as two top advantages of taking a class.

Some people find that a test prep course helps them focus and stay on track. They block out time in their schedule and feel committed to the cause. Many prospective test takers like the variety of targeted study materials such classes make available. In addition to books and study guides, these courses may offer lectures, PowerPoint slides, quizzes, flashcards, videos, games, and practice exams. Instructor-led courses often include “office hours” in which students can receive personal attention.

HRCI does not endorse any particular provider. Rather, it “encourages candidates to use a variety of tools and resources that will enhance their understanding of general HR principles and the Exam Content Outline for their exam.” To this end, HRCI offers a [certification prep provider database](#). Filters allow searching by delivery method, such as on-site classroom or virtual. Links to result websites provide further information.

Costs and course lengths vary, so explore your options. It is not uncommon for pricing to run more than \$1,000 for a 12- to 16-week instructor-led class. (Some places offer free preview webinars to provide a better idea of what to expect before committing to their program.) Less expensive choices exist, such as the popular [BenchPrep HR Learning System](#), which costs about \$400. Talk to colleagues and network contacts for recommendations and accounts of their experiences.

## Study independently



Learning on one's own certainly is another route to preparing for the SPHR. Some people choose self-study to reduce costs. Others feel sufficiently confident in constructing an individual study plan.

Josh Wood, CEO and founder of [Bloc](#), shares how he prepared. "I read the SPHR Exam Content Manual and took notes on all of the topics that were covered. I then made flashcards of key terms and definitions, and I studied these flashcards every day. I also practiced taking quizzes online to get an idea of what the test would be like. Finally, I took a practice test under realistic testing conditions to see how I would do. Based on my results, I identified areas where I needed to improve and focused my studying on those areas."

HRCI itself sells many [SPHR prep products](#) independent learners may find useful. Consider purchasing items such as timed and untimed practice exams, flashcards, and thousands of practice questions.

A good low-cost option is purchasing test preparation books written by HR experts. Authors you will likely encounter as you explore options are Sandra M. Reed, William Truesdell, Dory Willer, and Christina Nishiyama. Some books may be available for checkout at your local library. However, many learners find it convenient to have a personal copy in which they can write and highlight. Note that books often include access codes to electronic content such as practice questions and full-length practice exams.

Some providers of for-purchase online study products and services offer scaled-down versions for free. Their hope, of course, is that you will like what you see and want to buy. That choice is up to you, but taking advantage of what is out there for anyone can be part of your preparation course of action. A few to try include [TestPrep Training](#), [ProcessExam.com](#), and [Mometrix Test Preparation](#).

## Slow and steady

However you ultimately decide to prepare for the SPHR exam, realize that success will not come overnight.

"Don't cram all at once. It doesn't help," says Carol L. Kardas, founding partner at the HR and business consulting firm [KardasLarson](#). Before taking the exam herself, she notes that she focused on getting a good night's sleep, eating a proper breakfast, and limiting studying that morning to reviewing a couple of things she wanted to remember.

Above all, as you prepare, commit to hanging in there. As Burr notes, "The SPHR is a very challenging test. You

have to sacrifice for weeks when you study. Take practice questions and exams to build confidence, but expect to fail at times. Focus on effective testing strategies, and remain disciplined in your approach. Practice makes improvement.”