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Owner, EpochResources
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents at a Glance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Introduction** ................................................................................................. 1

**Part I: Getting Started with the PHR/SPHR Exam** ........................................... 5

Chapter 1: Introducing the PHR/SPHR Exams: Just the Basics, Please.................. 7
Chapter 2: Preparing for the Exam ......................................................................... 17
Chapter 3: Identifying the Question Types and Strategizing to Answer Them ........ 31
Chapter 4: Surviving Test Day............................................................................... 41

**Part II: Managing the Basics: Pre-Test Fundamentals** ........................................ 49

Chapter 5: Career Day: Life of a Certified HR Professional.................................. 51
Chapter 6: Examining the Core Areas of Knowledge.............................................. 59

**Part III: The Ins and Outs of the PHR/SPHR Exams** .......................................... 69

Chapter 7: The Key to Success: Business Management and Strategy (BMS)............. 71
Chapter 8: Perfecting Process: Workforce Planning and Employment.................. 87
Chapter 9: Sharpening Your Tools: Human Resource Development ....................... 101
Chapter 10: Paying Your Dues: Compensation and Benefits.................................. 115
Chapter 11: Connecting the Dots: Employee and Labor Relations.......................... 127
Chapter 12: Shrinking the Target: Risk Management.............................................. 143

**Part IV: Employing Your Knowledge: Practice Exams** ....................................... 155

Chapter 13: Facing the Challenge: PHR Practice Exam I....................................... 157
Chapter 14: Answers and Explanations to PHR Practice Exam I ............................ 187
Chapter 15: Using Your Skill Set: SPHR Practice Exam I....................................... 205
Chapter 16: Answers and Explanations to SPHR Practice Exam I ........................... 237

**Part V: The Part of Tens** ..................................................................................... 257

Chapter 17: Ten PHR/SPHR Exam Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them....................... 259
Chapter 18: Ten (or So) Study Tips for the Exam Bodies of Knowledge ................. 267

**Appendix: Federal Employment Law** ................................................................. 275

**Index** ............................................................................................................... 285
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ................................................................. 1
About This Book ................................................................. 1
Foolish Assumptions ......................................................... 2
Icons Used in This Book .................................................... 2
Beyond This Book ............................................................. 3
Where to Go from Here ....................................................... 4

## Part I: Getting Started with the PHR/SPHR Exam ................. 5

### Chapter 1: Introducing the PHR/SPHR Exams: Just the Basics, Please ....................... 7
PHR or SPHR: Which Exam Is Right for You ........................................... 7
Comparing the two exams ................................................................ 8
Making your decision: Certification is a journey, not an event .......... 9
Still undecided? Taking practice tests ........................................... 10
Knowing What to Expect on the Exams .......................................... 10
Looking at the exams' structure and types of questions ................. 10
Grasping how the exam are scored ............................................. 11
Preparing to Tackle the Exam .................................................... 11
Tackling the 24 Hours before, during, and after the Exam .......... 12
Examining the Core Subject Areas on the Exam ......................... 12
  - Functional area 01 — Business Management and Strategy .......... 13
  - Functional area 02 — Workforce Planning and Employment .......... 13
  - Functional area 03 — Human Resource Development .................. 13
  - Functional area 04 — Compensation and Benefits ...................... 13
  - Functional area 05 — Employee and Labor Relations .................. 13
  - Functional area 06 — Risk Management .................................... 14
Remembering the Core Knowledge Requirements ........................ 14
Understanding That You Can't Be Taught the Exam ..................... 14

### Chapter 2: Preparing for the Exam ........................................ 17
Considering Exam Weights by Functional Area .......................... 17
Practicing for Results .......................................................... 20
  - Reaping the benefits from practice exams ............................... 20
  - Making the right selection .................................................... 22
Building a Study Plan Strategy ............................................... 22
  - Planning before you prepare your study plan ......................... 22
  - Being organized keeps you focused ....................................... 23
  - Writing a study plan: The how-to ........................................ 24
  - Making a 90-day commitment ............................................. 25
Considering a Study Group: Yes or No? ..................................... 27
  - Noting the benefits of a study group .................................... 27
  - Identifying the challenges of a study group ............................ 28
  - Selecting the right group or exam prep class ......................... 28
  - Keeping your group on track .............................................. 28
Getting Your Employer To Pay For Certification ........................... 29
Part II: Managing the Basics: Pre-Test Fundamentals

Chapter 5: Career Day: Life of a Certified HR Professional

Tracking Trends in Human Resources
Understanding educational trends
Clarifying the role of HR
Using the Statistics
Identifying who is certified and why this information is important
Leveraging the impact of certification on salary
Applying Your Knowledge on the Job
Focusing on staying relevant: Continuing your education
Demonstrating knowledge: Positively impacting your employer
Constructively criticizing: What to do when you disagree

Chapter 6: Examining the Core Areas of Knowledge

Relating the Core Knowledge to Exam Objectives
Understanding the differences
Relying on experience
Applying the Core Knowledge Requirements to Your Study Plan
Business Management and Strategy
Workforce Planning and Employment
Human Resource Development
Compensation and Benefits
Employee and Labor Relations
Risk Management
Other knowledge requirements
### Table of Contents

Using the Core Knowledge to Study

HRCI's suggested authors

Online business journals

Employing the Principles: Going Deeper

**Part III: The Ins and Outs of the PHR/SPHR Exams**

#### Chapter 7: The Key to Success: Business Management and Strategy (BMS)

- Eyeing the BMS Exam Objectives
- Focusing on What You Need to Know about BMS
  - Exploring the strategic planning process
  - Working with other business functions
  - Establishing internal and external relationships
  - Managing metrics
  - Knowing common reports and tools
- Using the Internet for Additional Resources

#### Chapter 8: Perfecting Process: Workforce Planning and Employment

- Noting What’s Important about WPE
- Recognizing What Subjects to Study for WPE
  - Applying US labor law
  - Tackling executive orders
  - Looking at the life cycle of the employee
  - Comparing orientation versus onboarding
  - Creating a recruiting process
  - Selecting the right employees
  - Recognizing common reports and tools
- Going Online for Additional Resources

#### Chapter 9: Sharpening Your Tools: Human Resource Development

- Identifying What’s Essential About HRD
- Examining What You Need to Know for the Exam Related to HRD
  - Training as an intervention
  - Developing employees
  - Providing performance feedback
  - Making the most of common reports and tools
- Surfing the Web for More Information

#### Chapter 10: Paying Your Dues: Compensation and Benefits

- Identifying the Exam Objectives for C&B
- Tackling the Key Points about C&B
  - Packaging strategic compensation

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Table of Contents

Getting Tripped Up: The Perils of Overthinking ................................................................. 261
Playing the Guessing Game .............................................................................................. 262
Trusting Your Instinct ....................................................................................................... 262
Changing Answers ........................................................................................................... 262
Focusing Too Much on the Clock .................................................................................... 263
Managing Distractions ..................................................................................................... 264
Avoiding Mind Tricks ....................................................................................................... 264

Chapter 18: Ten (or So) Study Tips for the Exam Bodies of Knowledge .................... 267
Being Organized and Planning ......................................................................................... 267
Using Outlines .................................................................................................................. 268
Going Online .................................................................................................................... 270
Interviewing Subject Matter Experts .............................................................................. 270
Presenting Unfamiliar Exam Objectives ......................................................................... 271
Comparing HR Best Practices to Your Work Experience .............................................. 271
Discerning Action Objectives from Knowledge Objectives ....................................... 272
Space Practicing for Success ......................................................................................... 272
Knowing Where to Focus When Studying Labor Laws .............................................. 272

Appendix: Federal Employment Law .............................................................................. 275

Index ............................................................................................................................... 285
I wrote this book for the all HR professionals who are intent on leaving no stone unturned on their quest for the PHR or SPHR designation. It rounds out the edges of the preparation process, seeking to keep you on track and focused on the steps necessary to pass.

PHR/SPHR Exam For Dummies also is a reminder that it’s not about what you know at this stage in the process, but rather what you don’t know that requires your full attention.

This book is for the tenacious and the curious and the self-deprecating, possibly because I find humility an attractive trait in individuals getting ready for a tough test. Those traits can keep your mind open and eyes alert. Resolute curiosity can force you to grab a thread and follow it all the way to the end, which is the absolute best way to master and apply the information that you’re about to discover while getting ready for these exams.

About This Book

The focus of PHR/SPHR Exam For Dummies is to orient you, the experienced HR professional to the task at hand: getting ready to become professionally certified. With pass rates low and nerves high, this guidebook takes you on your preparation journey, serving as a resource to get you organized and introduce you to key elements of these tests. In no other preparation resource will you find

✓ An advanced discussion of the exam bodies of knowledge (BOK) and their importance
✓ A review of how the knowledge and objectives work together
✓ Information on how to use the Internet to enhance your efforts
✓ A study of the HR Certification Institute’s (HRCI) website (www.hrci.org) and the exam BOK for content markers

Furthermore, adult learners tend to do better when they understand how information applies to them. In this case, taking a 50,000-foot view of key exam concepts and exam preparation activities allows you to take control of the exam prep process. As with anything worth doing, a haphazard, unstructured approach to preparation won’t serve a positive outcome. Just as a true career isn’t an accident, neither is successful certification — it takes both planning and strategic execution.

The primary purpose of your exam preparation activities is to successfully pass a fairly difficult test. For this reason, I include two sample tests in this book — one for the PHR and one for the SPHR. Similar to the exam that you’ll see on test day, 175 questions and content are directly related to the content of the exams. Although I provide bubble sheets for easy use, consider also putting your answers on a blank piece of paper so you can use the tests again.
Foolish Assumptions

Assumptions are simply things that I think I already know about you, my dear reader, that guided my decisions on what to include in this book. For the PHR and SPHR exams, they are as follows:

✓✓ You’re an experienced HR professional. Because exam eligibility is based on years of practical experience, even with a bit of education, I know that you know the basics of HR.

✓✓ You’re preparing for an exam, not looking for HR in a jar. This book is about what you need to do to prepare to take a test about HR. It doesn’t teach you all you need to know about the field of human resources. In fact, the purpose of this book is to guide you to multiple resources for exam preparation.

✓✓ You have a baseline knowledge of business and management principles. Corporate America, small businesses, and nonprofits all have shared HR and business needs. I assume that you’re a working professional in one of these categories and understand business terms such as strategy and organizational structure.

✓✓ You know how to conduct an Internet research. So much of what you need to pass the tests can be found online, and I encourage you throughout the book to do so.

Probably the most impressive assumption I make about you is that you’re self-motivated, driven, and determined. Successful performers aren’t generally satisfied with the status quo. If you’re reaching out to take one of these tests, you’re among those individuals that demand more out of themselves and by extension, your preparation resources. For this reason in this book, I recommend adding study time, admonish you to take an expanded view of a topic, and encourage you to create other dimensions to the content. You must find it and touch it and interpret it yourself to fully grasp the nuances of the exam content. This process requires that you take control of your study time and resources. Leaving it to a single author or only your past work experience isn’t enough to get you through. I need you to tap into that drive and commit to doing what it takes to pass the first time around, or at least be a heck of a lot better for it after the process.

Icons Used in This Book

Consistent with the For Dummies series are the use of special icons. They serve as markers for information that may be of increased importance or interesting. I incorporate the following icons:

In general, I use this icon when you have a special opportunity to apply a behavior in its easiest form. In most cases, a tip can save you both time and energy, building upon the experience of those individuals who have gone before you.

I use this icon to reinforce an important principle. Pay attention to this information because it’s important.

This icon directs you to some examples of the types of questions that appear on the PHR and SPHR exams. It also gives you examples of how the content may be represented in the workplace.
Beyond This Book

In addition to the content of this book, you can access some related material online. You can access a free Cheat Sheet at www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/phrsphrexam that contains additional information about the exam. You can also access some additional helpful bits of information at www.dummies.com/extras/phrsphrexam. For example, you can read an online Part of Tens to whet your appetite. Find excellent information on the first ten days of your preparation activities or the top ten smartphone apps to help you prepare. Access the online articles giving you the perspectives of an exam prep author, or tips to selecting the right exam. Doing so helps you choose your starting place.

An added feature to the online content are two additional exams to support your learning. Taking multiple practice exams is an absolute must as you get ready for several reasons:

- The exam level of difficulty requires that you’re familiar with question phrasing and multiple choice setup. Keep in mind that these questions, also called items, can be highly situational. Taking practice exams can remove that element of surprise.
- Answer distractors are common obstacles to a passing score. My online practice exams help condition your brain to recognize and eliminate the obvious wrong answers, increasing your chance of making a correct selection.
- The online practice tests include a description of the right and wrong answers, which makes the practice exams extremely valuable, because they’re much more than another bank of questions. Taking these exams also helps you master content.

The general recommendation is that you can’t take too many practice assessments, and this book plus the online content is an excellent place to start. You can find the practice exams at www.dummies.com/go/phrsprhexam.

To gain access to additional tests and practice online, all you have to do is register. Just follow these simple steps:

1. **Find your PIN access code:**
   - **Print-book users:** If you purchased a print copy of this book, turn to the inside front cover of the book to find your access code.
   - **E-book users:** If you purchased this book as an e-book, you can get your access code by registering your e-book at www.dummies.com/go/getaccess. Go to this website, find your book and click it, and answer the security questions to verify your purchase. You’ll receive an email with your access code.

2. **Go to Dummies.com and click Activate Now.**

3. **Find your product** (PHR/SPHR Exam For Dummies) and then follow the on-screen prompts to activate your PIN.

Now you’re ready to go! You can come back to the program as often as you want — simply log on with the username and password you created during your initial login. No need to enter the access code a second time.

For Technical Support, please visit http://wiley.custhelp.com or call Wiley at 800-762-2974 (U.S.), 317-572-3994 (international).
Where to Go from Here

One of the reasons why preparing for this exam has been reported to be difficult is because of the sheer volume of reading that is required. This book can help a bit with all that reading. This book is modular in that you don’t have to read it in order from cover to cover. Feel free to pick and choose the bits that you think will serve you best.

I wrote it so that you can pick any chapter and begin reading. To the ordered mind, doing so may be an unusual prospect, so go ahead and proceed in chapter order — the content will bear up to the pressure. For those of you who are only interested in certain exam elements, you have come to the right place. Feel free to bounce around or even begin with the end by starting with a practice exam and simply see how you fare. That may highlight for you a correct starting point for your unique preparation needs.

If you need some help in finding somewhere to begin, scan the table of contents or the index, find a few topics that interest you, and jump in.

Regardless of where you begin, the absolute first and most important step is to build a study plan. This book is full of useful tips and information to fill in the blanks of a plan, so maximize your investment by taking heed and writing down your plans. What gets measured gets done, so strengthen your odds by getting organized.
Part I
Getting Started with the PHR/SPHR Exam

Visit www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/phrsphrexam for a free Cheat Sheet that provides more important reminders and tips about signing up for the PHR or SPHR.
In this part . . .

✓ Get a firm grasp of the structure for the PHR and SPHR so that you can begin to prepare a plan of attack to study for the exam.

✓ Figure out the exam eligibility to ensure that you’re qualified to take the right exam.

✓ Know how to talk to your boss about taking the test and how you may persuade her to pay for the test.

✓ Select proper resources so you maximize your study efforts and have access to what you need to know in preparing for a passing score.

✓ Identify the different types of questions on the PHR and SPHR in order to be able to figure out the best way to answer them.

✓ Familiarize yourself with the ins and outs of test day to make sure that you show up ready to go.
Preparing to sit for either the PHR or SPHR exam means that you’re investing in yourself through professional certification to differentiate your talent from the rest of the pack. It indicates a professional curiosity and commitment to excellence that characterizes the HR profession. In fact, the PHR and the SPHR remain two of the most sought-after designations in the HR industry.

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

**PHR or SPHR: Which Exam Is Right for You**

One of the first decisions you’ll have to make is which exam to take. The Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI) offers six accredited designations in the field of human resources. The institute’s generalist certificates are the Professional in Human Resources (PHR) and the Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR).

The PHR exam is recommend for individuals with a broad knowledge of the operational side of the HR house whereas the SPHR exam is more suited toward individuals with a background in strategic HR management. Possibly the most common eliminator is that you must have a minimum years of *exempt-level* experience in order to qualify to take the tests, which means that your HR roles have been qualified by job duties to be paid as a professional (non-hourly).

You don’t need a college degree in human resources to be exam eligible to take the PHR and SPHR.
Part I: Getting Started with the PHR/SPHR Exam

HRCI’s Certification Handbook identifies the ideal profile of a PHR and SPHR candidate, which is definitely worth a review while you’re making your decision. Table 1-1 gives you a sample of that information.

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

The Cheat Sheet at www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/phrsphrexam is your go-to resource to help you pick the right test. It includes information related to all the exam eligibility requirements and assessing the amount of time you have available to study.

Comparing the two exams

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

The professional certification process is an investment in your career, not a one-time shot at a credential. Starting with the PHR is perfectly reasonable. You can get the baseline under your belt and then chase after the SPHR in the following year or two over another period of 12 to 14 weeks of studying. The knowledge gained by studying has served many HR professionals well time and time again, opening doors that would have never opened without the credentials.

Each exam has its own eligibility requirements. Take a look at Table 1-2 to make sure you meet the minimum requirements for your exam of choice.

Just because you can doesn’t mean that you should. For example, just because you have 20 years of experience as a recruiter doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re ready to take the SPHR exam.

A general rule: Use the HRCI’s years of experience qualifier and apply it to the top three areas of exam content, which looks something like this:
Chapter 1: Introducing the PHR/SPHR Exam: Just the Basics, Please

Table 1-2  Figuring Out Which Exam Is Right

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHR</th>
<th>SPHR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A minimum of one year of experience in a professional-level HR position with a master’s degree or higher.</td>
<td>A minimum of four years of experience in a professional-level HR position with a master’s degree or higher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or</td>
<td>or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A minimum of two years of experience in a professional-level HR position with a bachelor’s degree.</td>
<td>A minimum of five years of experience in a professional-level HR position with a bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or</td>
<td>or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A minimum of four years of experience in a professional-level HR position with less than a bachelor’s degree.</td>
<td>A minimum of seven years of experience in a professional-level HR position with less than a bachelor’s degree.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Check out HRCI’s Guide to Professional Level Experience to further assess your exam readiness.

**PHR:** For the PHR, 63 percent of the exam content for the PHR is in the areas of Workforce Planning and Employment (24 percent), Employee Labor Relations (20 percent), and Compensation and Benefits (19 percent). Aim for the minimum years of experience requirements in each of these top three areas. For example, if you have a master’s degree, you should be fine if you have one year of experience in workforce planning and employment, labor relations, and compensation and benefits.

**SPHR:** For the SPHR, 66 percent of the exam content is in the areas of Business Management and Strategy (30 percent), HR Development (19 percent), and Workforce Planning and Employment (17 percent). This information translates for someone without a bachelor’s degree as seven years of experience in each of these top functional areas. Yes, it’s 21 years, and yes, the exam content will demand it of you.

If this information seems to be excessive, at minimum, aim for the number one area of content in the minimum experience requirements.

Don’t quickly dismiss these percentages as overkill. Take a moment and look at the exam pass rates or read the online forums of failed exam takers condemning HRCI for exam level difficulty. Consider just for a moment that diluting the exam value by making it easier is less effective than individuals simply choosing the right exam the first time. It’s also worth noting that professional exams for attorneys and accountants share similar levels of difficulty. Do you take your profession seriously?

Head to www.dummies.com/extras/phrsphrexam for additional information about why people seek PHR or SPHR certification.

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

Many individuals believe that if they meet the SPHR exam eligibility requirements, then they should start there. However, this assumption is both important and dangerous for three reasons:

- If you take the SPHR and fail it the first time around, you’ll have to pay a second exam fee to take it again. Starting with the PHR makes more sense. You gather your baseline knowledge in your brain and then can go round two with the SPHR on firm ground.
Passing the PHR first and then taking the SPHR is a much better use of two exam fees, and most importantly, it spreads your learning out over an extended period of time, which impacts long-term retention for career application. At the end of the day, career progression really is the point of putting you through the process.

✓ Depending on the amount of time that you have available to study, reaching for the SPHR first may make for an unnecessarily stressful exam preparation process. Unless you have unlimited time to study and very few other obligations such as work and family, spreading your certification over two exam windows is perfectly reasonable.

✓ Rome wasn’t built in a day, and neither is your career. Both exams require recertification credits with a goal of lifelong learning. Instead of recertifying your PHR exam with webinars and classes, take the time to study and successfully pass the SPHR exam. Renewal, refreshment, and most importantly, relevance are the keys to a successful career in HR, and this path allows for all three.

If you want more information about the recertification process after you pass the PHR or SPHR Exam, check out [www.dummies.com/extras/phrsphrexam](http://www.dummies.com/extras/phrsphrexam).

Still undecided? Taking practice tests

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

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

You can find a practice PHR test in Chapter 13 and an SPHR test in Chapter 15. (Chapter 14 provides the answer explanations for the practice PHR test and the SPHR answer explanations in Chapter 16.) You can also find PHR and SPHR practice tests online at [www.dummies.com/go/phrsphrexam](http://www.dummies.com/go/phrsphrexam).

Knowing What to Expect on the Exams

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

Looking at the exams’ structure and types of questions

Both exams have questions that are written by certified HR professionals, not academics. HRCI correlates exam scores to the years of experience that are required for the tests, which is in part to justify the need for practical work experience for a successful test. Furthermore, as part of the accreditation process, the exam content is validated to the exam bodies of knowledge (BOK). The exam’s BOK are based on an analysis of the HR field as a whole. Test questions are written to the exam specifications to validate the relevance of each question.
Chapter 3 discusses the exam structure, including a review of the different types of test questions. Although all test items are multiple choice with four possible options, each question may be worded differently. The exams include scenario, direct, and fill-in-the-blank questions.

**Grasping how the exams are scored**

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

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

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

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

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

**Preparing to Tackle the Exam**

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

- **Study plans:** A study plan is a tool that you design. It’s a written plan of attack that addresses the things that make you unique — your specific strengths and weaknesses and the amount of time you have available to study — which means that you’ll need to have a general idea of your exam date and assessment scores. I’m not a fan of absolute statements, but I make an exception here: Successful test takers *must* have a written plan of attack. Get organized and stay organized to ensure that you don’t miss studying critical exam content.

- **Practice exams:** You can’t possibly know the extent of your strengths and weaknesses without taking a sample test. You may be as knowledgeable as any other successful candidate, but applying that knowledge takes preparation. The practice tests are the tool that you can use to accomplish it.

- **Study groups:** Another option for getting ready for the exam is by joining a study group. You can join a study group, either through a college campus or independently. Chapter 2 discusses the pros and cons of this support option.

HRCI generally recommends that you use multiple preparation resources to study for the exam. For this reason, have a preparation resource specific to your exam and then surround yourself with other resources that can take you deeper into the content. In each of the Part III chapters, I suggest numerous websites that can help you begin your research.
Part I: Getting Started with the PHR/SPHR Exam

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

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

▶ Before the test: You’ll need to be make many decisions in advance of the 24 hours before test day. For example, some individuals prefer to book a hotel room near the exam facility, which minimizes the possibility of heavy traffic and allows for a quiet evening before to review. Regardless of your decision, in the 24 hours before your test, turn off the cell phone, TV, and other distractions, and concentrate on a relaxed state of mind. Make sure that you get a good night’s rest.

▶ On exam day: Exam day basics should focus on stamina. Sitting in a small room for a few hours while your brain is drained isn’t an easy task. Distractors such as fatigue and hunger are real threats to success. For this reason having a plan of attack before you’re faced with the conditions is helpful. Chapter 4 discusses more strategies on taking breaks and eating snacks to keep you focused.

▶ After the test: I’m confident that you’ll feel a sense of relief as you answer the last question. In some cases, you may have marked questions for review and will need to go back and finish them before you cross the finish line. If you fail the exam, a more detailed score report will be mailed to you so you can see how close you were and in what functional areas you didn’t pass. Regardless of a pass or fail score, you have just spent several weeks immersing yourself in the world of HR. Refer to Chapter 5 information on how to apply your knowledge on the job.

At the end of the day, you are a unique individual with individual needs, and no one-size-fits-all solution exists to how well you manage before, during, and after the test. Some students swear by cramming the night before whereas others say doing so confused them. Eating a large meal before the test was impossible for some, whereas others knew that low blood sugar during the exam would sink them. Knowing your needs and extracting advice that meets those needs is the purpose of these discussions so that you can be at maximum performance level when it counts.

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

Examining the Core Subject Areas on the Exam

Both exams share functional areas in terms of content, but you need to know what to do with this information in order for it to serve you. Similar to the test questions, you must be able to apply the knowledge to be successful. The exams have six functional areas, in addition to the core knowledge requirements. These sections provide a brief overview of what you can expect about the core knowledge and functional areas of the PHR and SPHR exams. I include chapter references to help you apply them.

SPHR test questions are highly scenario-based and require the ability to integrate information from all of these functional areas in your analysis.
Functional area 01 — Business Management and Strategy

If you’re taking the SPHR exam, your main focus should be Business Management and Strategy. If you’re a PHR candidate, don’t ignore this subject. Study this functional area from the perspective of strategy. For example, explore how operations can contribute to an organization’s strategic plan or how industry changes affect a company’s ability to compete. Chapter 7 breaks down these concepts and more, giving you the keys to unlock this important function.

Functional area 02 — Workforce Planning and Employment

The functional area of Workforce Planning and Employment carries quite the punch on both exams, making up more than 30 questions on both tests. Although heavily oriented toward recruiting, selection, and labor law compliance, it also delves into the application of “employees are assets” business practice. Be prepared to discover about recruitment strategies, job descriptions, and more as you navigate this exam area. Chapter 8 explains the ins and outs of this subject area.

Functional area 03 — Human Resource Development

Human Resource Development is about more than just training workers. Tied closely to organizational development, it expands upon the idea that training and performance management will help organizations meet both current and future needs. Among the exam objectives expect to see HR behaviors such as executive coaching, career development, and organizational theories/application. You can read more about this subject area in Chapter 9.

Functional area 04 — Compensation and Benefits

Labor costs are often the top expense for organizations, so executing this function well is the focus of Compensation and Benefits. Successful exam takers must be able to develop, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of employer compensation and benefits plans while staying compliant with the vast area of labor law related to this topic. Studying this exam area can teach you about cash and noncash compensation methods, budgeting and accounting practices for payroll, and for SPHR candidates, a good dose of executive compensation plans and challenges. Check out Chapter 10 to get a good feel for what you need to know about this subject area for the PHR and SPHR exams.

Functional area 05 — Employee and Labor Relations

Not just union management anymore, this functional area has evolved to the management of all relationships in the workplace. Coming at the content from that perspective can enable to you to identify factors that determine whether a relationship is good or bad, which includes gathering feedback from workers and addressing their complaints when
necessary. The flip side of that coin is embracing their hard work through recognition and special events, keeping them involved and harnessing their talent for maximum effect. Head to Chapter 11 for more information about this subject area.

**Functional area 06 — Risk Management**

Knowing that this functional area long ago was titled Workplace Safety and Health should help you understand what is at the core of Risk Management. This exam content is highly oriented toward identifying and addressing risks to the human, physical, and financial assets of a business. With workplace violence, cyber attacks, and a global customer base, this exam content is filled with the need for plans and policies to address 21st-century issues. Chapter 12 gives you the lowdown of this subject area.

**Remembering the Core Knowledge Requirements**

No discussion of exam content would be complete without a snapshot of the core knowledge requirements (CKR). Chapter 6 provides you with a complete list of these requirements and goes into more detail about how to utilize this roadmap to the exam content. It’s important to note two things about the CKR:

- You can read and organize it as a stand-alone document for studying, which is why it’s numbered consecutively.
- HRCI’s BOK document sorts them by functional area to support your studying of the exam objectives.

The CKR is an excellent place to begin to organize your study plan and launch your preparation efforts.

**Understanding That You Can’t Be Taught the Exam**

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

- The exam is deeply experience based. Writing a study guide that gauges every exam taker’s level of experience and breaks down the content into the right size piece for everyman’s palette is impossible. It comes down to quantity versus quality. Having the right number of years of experience doesn’t guarantee that you’ll pass. The quality, depth, and breadth of the experience get you an invitation to the certified members’ lounge.

- The exam isn’t about rote memorization and to suggest that it must become so is diluting the value for those professionals who are certified and the profession as a whole. Dumbing it down into memorizable pieces mocks the profession, because it doesn’t translate into practice. Imagine binding HR professionals to textbook answers
Chapter 1: Introducing the PHR/SPHR Exam: Just the Basics, Please

and one-size-fits-all strategies. C-suite executives would take one cross-eyed look at that approach and go rogue, exposing businesses to risk and devaluing an HR professional’s role. Talk about why executives avoid HR! This approach damages HR’s credibility and effectiveness.

✓ The homework, research, and creative studying methods make you a better HR practitioner. You’ll come out of the preparation trial-by-fire well-seasoned and tempered to be the business partner that your enterprise needs. Unless you hope to go back to party planning and payroll, jump on the bandwagon and dig deep. These exams aren’t for the faint at heart.

✓ Just because you fail doesn’t mean that you aren’t good at your job. You may not be a good test taker. The testing room may have been too hot. Perhaps you aced one area, but you need more rounding out in others. Toughen up and try again. As an HR professional, you need to be the model of perseverance for those impacted by your talent, and inflating your ability or transferring blame serves no one. Having a do-over is okay. Review how far you came in terms of knowledge before you began preparing compared to test day. Growth is happening, so believe that with another few months of studying those initials shall be by your name as well. And guess what — you’ll have earned the certification.

My exam journey

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

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

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

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

The PHR and SPHR certifications allowed me to pursue my passion while still living the life that I loved with my children who are now 9 and 13 years old. Certification has validated my talent and opened doors that would have firmly remained closed without it. So, you can worry about the pass rates and the time commitment and continue to put you and career second to all of the other important things in your life or you can seize the tiger by the tail and go for it.
All exams aren’t created equal nor all exam takers the same. Hence, you must consider both the exam selection and your individual skill set when preparing for the PHR or the SPHR.

“Pass it ugly” is a term I use to remind overachievers that they don’t need to ace this exam. All they have to do is pass it. Having a comprehensive study plan is critical when preparing for the exam because it ensures that you focus on the right things, not necessarily on all things.

Focusing on the right things begins by anticipating exam content, comparing the content to your individual assessment results, and accessing resources that are uniquely suited to your exam readiness.

This chapter discusses tips, tricks, and best practices that take into account your unique ability and resource availability and how you can get organized for maximum effect. As with all things HR, proper planning is the first activity leading to ultimate success.

### Considering Exam Weights by Functional Area

Weighting the exam content allows the test builders to rank information in the order of importance. Exam weights are expressed as percentages — the higher the percentage, the more important the information. The following sections take a closer look at how much the different functional areas are worth on the two exams.

For example, the functional area of Business Management and Strategy weighs in at approximately 30 percent of the content of the SPHR exam, making it a top priority for SPHR exam takers. PHR candidates should pay special attention to the category of Workforce Planning and Employment, which is 24 percent of that exam.

Ignore this critical exam feature at your peril, because the weights tell you exactly where you should spend the bulk of your study time, regardless of your test selection.

Both the PHR and the SPHR exams have the same body of knowledge (BOK) with identical exam objectives. That means that you must be prepared to see similar content on both
exams. Although both exams have 175 questions, they each place different emphasis on the exam objectives. See Table 2-1 for the exam weights sorted by functional area for the two exams. For example, the PHR exam has 24 percent of its questions devoted to Workforce Planning and Employment, which is approximately 42 questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional Area</th>
<th>Exam Weight — SPHR</th>
<th>Number of Questions SPHR</th>
<th>Exam Weight — PHR</th>
<th>Number of Questions PHR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business Management and Strategy</td>
<td>30 percent</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>11 percent</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce Planning and Employment</td>
<td>17 percent</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24 percent</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resource Development</td>
<td>19 percent</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>18 percent</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation and Benefits</td>
<td>13 percent</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19 percent</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee and Labor Relations</td>
<td>14 percent</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20 percent</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Management</td>
<td>7 percent</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8 percent</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The core knowledge requirements are the seventh studying area. These concepts exist and apply throughout all of the preceding objectives, but they aren’t necessarily stand-alone.*

If you’re on an accelerated study schedule or just want to brush up on the salient points, take a look at Table 2-2 that shows you the three functional areas that make up more than 50 percent of the PHR and the SPHR exam.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional Area</th>
<th>Exam Weight</th>
<th>Number of Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workforce Planning and Employment</td>
<td>24 percent</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee and Labor Relations</td>
<td>20 percent</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation and Benefits</td>
<td>19 percent</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>63 percent</strong></td>
<td><strong>110/175 questions</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional Area</th>
<th>Exam Weight</th>
<th>Number of Questions</th>
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<td>17 percent</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resources Development</td>
<td>19 percent</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>66 percent</strong></td>
<td><strong>116/175 questions</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two exams differ in two ways. The Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI) specifies these differences in the following ways: