The benefits of human resources certification

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This study examines whether Human Resources (HR) certification is beneficial to HR professionals and organizations and explores the antecedents of HR certification. We surveyed 422 HR professionals from local chapters of the Society of Human Resources Management. The results indicated certified HR professionals received more pay (even after controlling for level of education and years of HR experience) and had higher occupational commitment than uncertified HR professionals. We also found that when organizations provided support for certification, HR professionals were more likely to obtain certification and had higher organizational commitment. Because we did not manipulate any variables, we were unable to make causal inferences. All of the instruments were self-reported measures (mono-method bias). Because we relied on a convenience sample, our sample might not be representative of the HR profession. HR certification may have some positive benefits for professionals such as more pay and employees who are more committed to their occupation. Organizations may want to support their employees’ HR certification efforts because of its positive relationship to organizational commitment. A certified HR professional may invest mental energy, time, and even his or her own financial resources to become and remain certified.

Keywords: Human Resources certification, certification motivation, organizational support, occupational commitment, organizational commitment, salary.

INTRODUCTION

Many HR professionals devote hours of their own time studying for HR certification exams. Once they become certified, those HR professionals devote their own financial resources and time to continuing education so that they can maintain certification. Over the years, a certified HR professional invests mental energy, time, and maybe even his or her own financial resources into certification. The main purpose of this study was to examine whether HR certification offers benefits to those HR professionals and their organizations. Another objective of this study was to explore antecedents of HR certification. What makes an HR professional more or less likely to become certified? Before exploring these topics, it might be helpful to provide the reader with some background on the history and variety of HR certifications available today.

History of HR certification

Before discussing the history of HR certification, it may be useful to differentiate between licensure and certification. HR is not a licensed profession, such as medicine or law. To practice medicine or law, for example, one must obtain a license from the state. The purpose of a license is to protect the public from incompetent practitioners. State regulatory boards determine who receives a license to practice in a licensed field. For many non-licensed professions, such as HR, a professional organization that represents the profession may create a certification to indicate that the possessor is able to meet certain standards of professional practice. Although certification is not required to practice, if the certification is recognized across the field as an indicator of professionalism, professionals will be motivated to acquire certification.

The American Society for Personnel Administration (ASPA) was established in 1948 and the creation of HR certification originated with the ASPA Accreditation Institute in 1973 (Leonard, 1998). Today, the ASPA has transformed into the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and the ASPA Accreditation Institute has transformed into the Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI) (Cherrington & Leonard, 1993; Wiley, 1992). While SHRM and HRCI are legally separate organizations and have separate governing boards, they are closely intertwined. In the past decade, the number of certified HRCI professionals has grown from 43,000 in 2000 (Aguinis, Michaelis, & Jones, 2005) to over 135,000 worldwide in 2015 (HRCI, 2015). Thus, close to 50% of SHRM’s worldwide membership of over 275,000 are certified by HRCI. SHRM and HRCI are headquartered in Washington, DC, USA.

According to Lester, Mencl, Maranto, Bourne, and Keaveny (2010), HRCI’s certifying exams are accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies. HRCI offers three major certification exams: Professional in Human Resources (PHR), Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR), and Global Professional in Human Resources (GPHR). HRCI also offers the Professional in Human Resource (PHR-CA) and the Senior Professional in Human Resource (SPHR-CA) exclusively for the state of California. Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis (2012) point
out that there are six main topics for the PHR and the SPHR exams: strategic HR management, work personnel planning and employment, human resource development, total rewards, employee and labor relations, and risk management.

In addition to the HR certifications offered by the HRCI, there are other HR certifications available. For example, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) headquartered in London, England, is another association for HR professionals. It has over 135,000 members across 120 countries. It offers qualifying exams at foundation, intermediate, and advanced levels (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2015).

There are also HR associations devoted to more specific aspects of HR work. For example, WorldatWork is a non-profit organization that offers education and research related to global human resources subjects such as work environments, compensation, and benefits. Through WorldatWork Society of Certified Professionals, it offers its members five types of certifications (WorldatWork Society of Certified Professionals, 2015). With only 70,000 members and subscribers, WorldatWork lacks the clout of SHRM and HRCI or CIPD, but its certifications are highly recognized by compensation and benefits professionals (WorldatWork, 2015). The International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans (IFEBP) is a non-profit organization that focuses on employee benefits, compensation, and financial education and information. It sponsors four certifications (IFEBP, 2015). The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) which represents learning and development professionals, offers a certification called Certified Professional in Learning and Performance (CPLP) through the Association for Talent Development (Association for Talent Development, 2015). While other HR certifications exist, these are the best known and respected because they are backed by large, professional HR organizations.

Demand for HR certification

There is limited demand for HR certification in the HR labor market. For example, Aguinis, Michaelis, and Jones (2005) conducted a study of 1,873 HR job announcements on job hunting websites, such as www.monster.com, www.shrm.org, www.hotjobs.yahoo.com, and www.careerbuilder.com, for a period of one week. Results revealed that only nine job announcements required HR certification and only 70 job announcements preferred applicants with any type of HR certification. According to Aguinis, Michaelis, and Jones, there are few HR institutes or professional organizations (e.g., Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology) related to employee selection and assessment that recommend or promote the use of HR certifications when hiring. These authors concluded that:

The field of HR needs to do a better job of gathering evidence about validity, utility, and lack of adverse impact regarding the use of certification in selection and assessment decision making. Once this evidence is collected, employers may perceive HR certification as a more critical signal of a job applicant’s future contributions (p. 160).

Perceived benefits of HR certification for employees

In spite of the limited demand for HR certification, many HR professionals invest their time and money to acquire certification. There are various reasons individuals seek certification. According to Wiley’s (1992) study, the reasons individuals pursue certifications include demonstrating one’s professional achievement, fulfilling personal satisfaction, helping in career advancement, enhancing one’s understanding of the field, and earning recognition from peers. Fertig (2011) analyzed the value of certifications to individuals from three perspectives: signaling theory, acquiring power, and intrinsic motivation.

Signaling theory. Earning a certification may help an individual make a favorable impression during a job interview (Fertig, 2011; Jones & Pittman, 1982). Signaling theory suggests that earning a certification is like sending out a signal to the potential employer that an individual has acquired the needed knowledge and competency in the field and has the capability to do the work (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983; Spence, 1973). Cohen (2012) pointed out that obtaining an HR certification shows an individual’s dedication to his or her HR career and the willingness to obtain up-to-date HR knowledge. It demonstrates that an applicant is more likely to work harder to achieve a higher level of advancement for his or her career. Thus, a potential employee with a certification may create a more positive image compared to other applicants without a certification.

Acquiring power to be influential. Rosenfeld, Giacalone, and Riordoan (1995) argued that one reason people acquire power is to be more influential. When an individual acquires a certificate, it may intimidate others (Fertig, 2011; Jones & Pittman, 1982) because it signals that he or she is more competent, more qualified, and capable of performing better. In group decision making, other HR professionals may defer to the certified employee’s judgments and, over time, the certified employee would be more likely to assume leadership positions.

Intrinsic motivation (personal satisfaction) of earning an HR certification. Obtaining a certification can boost a professional’s self-confidence and self-satisfaction (Wiley, 1992) and enhance his or her professional self-identity because he or she feels more competent and able to solve problems
that employers have been relying more on certifications as the
or employees can perform at an acceptable level or whether
identify qualified candidates. According to Chatman (1989),
are used in many fields as an important selection tool to
From the organization’s perspective, professional certifications
helpful to professionals who lack the resources to earn a college
more than those with less experience. Thus, if an
HR professional has a seasoned boss, becoming HR certified
might be a good idea. Also, certifications can be especially
helpful to professionals who lack the resources to earn a college
or advanced degree (Eck, 1993). Supporting this point,
Lengnich-Hall and Aguinis (2012) argued that HR professionals
who do not have college degrees or do not have a college
degree in an HR-related field would be the most likely to benefit
from earning an HR certification.

**Salary and advancement.** In addition to these three motivations
for getting certified, employees may use certifications as
important symbols to receive better job opportunities and
higher salary (Blau, Fertig, & Zeitz, 2009). Lengnich-Hall and
Aguinis (2012) and Wiley (1992) stated that certification can
limit the supply of available professionals in the field, which
can drive up wages. While Aguinis, Michaelis, and Jones
(2005) found a positive correlation between HR certification
and salary level when HR job openings required or preferred
applicants who have an HR certification, there is little evidence
to demonstrate that HR professionals with certifications have
higher salaries or have better chances to be promoted than
uncertified professionals. Employers focus more on years of
working experience and job performance than they do on
certification (Lester, Mencel, Maranto, Bourne, & Keaveny,
2010). Nonetheless, if HR professionals believe that
certification is related to higher pay and advancement, many
will be motivated to pursue certification for those rewards.

Anderson, Barrett, and Schwager (2005) found that HR
professionals with more than 10 years of HR experience valued
certifications more than those with less experience. If an
HR professional has a seasoned boss, becoming HR certified
might be a good idea. Also, certifications can be especially
helpful to professionals who lack the resources to earn a college
or advanced degree (Eck, 1993). Supporting this point,
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who do not have college degrees or do not have a college
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from earning an HR certification.

**Perceived benefits of HR certification for employers**

From the organization’s perspective, professional certifications
are used in many fields as an important selection tool to
identify qualified candidates. According to Chatman (1989),
certifications help organizations determine whether applicants
or employees can perform at an acceptable level or whether
they are appropriate for a certain position. Carter (2005) noted
that employers have been relying more on certifications as the
U.S. economy has transitioned from manufacturing oriented
to service and information oriented. Blau, Fertig, and Zeitz
(2009) stated that employers can also use certifications to
present an image of employee prestige and authority. In the
HR field, Lester, Fertig, and Dwyer (2011) investigated
organizational leaders’ opinions and acceptance about the
benefits of having HR-certified professionals in the
organization. The results revealed that from the 116 managerial
respondents, 104 supervisors (90%) agreed that having a HR-
certified professional is beneficial to the organization.

Paxton (2012) believed that sponsoring HR certification for
HR professionals can be a valuable investment because HR
leaders can interact more effectively and more often with their
employees because the employees will have more ideas to
share. Also, training for certification will lead to more consistent
ways of thinking about how to solve HR problems.

**Increasing organizational and occupational commitment.** Lee
and Bruvold (2003) found that if an organization values
employee development and focuses on developing its
employees’ competencies, it will make employees feel valuable,
satisfied towards their jobs, and more affectively committed to
the organization. Finegan (2000) pointed out that employees
tend to hold positive attitudes towards organizations that value
development, creativity, and openness. One way to invest in
HR employees’ development is to provide support for
certification. The payoff could be multifold: more capable
employees who are more committed to their occupation and
organization. Affective organizational commitment, HR
professionals with more occupational commitment, and HR
departments that provide more effective HR services to their
organizations.

**HR certification model**

A preliminary model of the antecedents of HR certification and
the consequences of certification for HR professionals is
presented in Figure 1. The antecedents of certification would
be the individual reasons or motivations for pursuing
certification and the amount of organizational sponsorship for
certification. The potential consequences of certification for
the individual would be a greater likelihood of being hired,
better pay, and faster career advancement. The potential
organizational consequences of certification would be HR
professionals with more affective organizational commitment,
HR professionals with more occupational commitment, and
HR departments that provide more effective HR services to
their organizations.

The scope of this study did not allow us to examine all of the
consequences. We focused on three: pay, affective
organizational commitment, and affective occupational
commitment. That led to the following five hypotheses:
Hypothesis 1: HR professionals who perceive more benefits associated with being certified (e.g., better chances for getting hired or a greater sense of occupational identity) will be more likely to either have an HR certification or be planning to get one compared to those who perceive fewer benefits.

Hypothesis 2: HR professionals whose organizations support HR certification will be more likely to be certified or be planning to get certified than HR professionals whose organizations do not support HR certification.

Hypothesis 3: HR professionals who have an HR certification will be paid more than HR professionals who do not have an HR certification or who have no plan to get certified, after controlling for level of education and years of HR experience.

Hypothesis 4: HR professionals who have an HR certification or who are planning to get one will have greater affective organizational commitment than HR professionals who do not have an HR certification.

Hypothesis 5: HR professionals who have an HR certification or who are planning to get one will have greater occupational commitment than HR professionals who do not have an HR certification.

Method
Participants
We collected data by contacting every local chapter of the Society of Human Resources Management (SHRM) in fifteen different states. Four hundred twenty-two HR professionals responded. Seventy-five percent of the participants were women and 25% were men. The average age was 46 (SD = 10.4). Eighty percent of the participants were non-minority members and 20% were minorities. Two percent of the participants had only a high school degree, 15% had an associate’s degree or some college, 44% had a bachelor’s degree, and 39% had a graduate degree. Also, 30% of the participants had a specialized degree in Human Resources or Industrial-Organizational Psychology, 43% had a degree in Business, 17% had a degree in the Behavioral Sciences or Education (e.g., psychology, sociology and education), and 10% had a degree in some other subject. The average number of years of HR experience for the participants was 16 (SD = 8.1). The average income for the participants was between $60,001 to $80,000. An examination of the participants’ work places revealed that the organization size was between 100-1,000 employees for most participants and the average HR department size was four to five employees.

Measures
HR certification. This variable was measured with a one-item scale. The participants were asked, “Do you have any Human Resource certifications?” If they checked, “No, I do not, nor do I have any immediate plans to get certified,” they received a score of 1. If they checked, “No, I do not, but I certainly plan to get certified in the next year or two,” they received a score of 2. If they checked, “Yes, I am certified,” they received a score of 3.

Of the 422 participants, 71.2% had an HR certificate, 12.4% were planning to get one, and 16.4% had no plans to get one. We asked those with HR certifications whether they obtained certification before or after starting work with their current employer and 45.5% replied before, 49.5% replied after, and 5% replied some before and some after.

Certification motivation. This variable captured the participants’ motivation for obtaining an HR certificate. Participants were asked three questions about external motivation: (a) will be more likely to be hired, (b) will be paid more, and (c) will advance faster. Participants were also asked three questions about internal motivation: (d) will be more respected by fellow HR professionals, (e) will have greater knowledge of the HR field, and (f) will have a greater sense of occupational identity. This variable was measured with six items using a seven-point Likert scale which ranged from 1 to 7.
(strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Coefficient alpha was 0.89 for this instrument, which indicates good internal consistency.

**Organizational support for certification.** This variable captured the amount of support the participants’ employers provided for obtaining an HR certificate. It was measured by asking whether their employers offered (a) training materials, (b) training instruction or classes, (c) time off for study, (d) exam fees, and/or (e) travel fees for instruction or for taking the exam. Participants simply responded yes or no. Coefficient alpha was 0.78 for this instrument, which indicated adequate internal consistency.

**Salary.** This variable was measured with a single item. Participants were asked to indicate their salary range. There were nine ranges to choose from, starting with “less than $20,000” and ending with “more than $100,000.”

**Affective organizational commitment.** This variable was measured using Meyer and Allen’s (1997) eight items with a seven-point Likert scale which ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). In a study of 366 nursing students, Meyer and Allen found internal consistency of 0.82 for the affective organizational commitment measure. In our study, coefficient alpha was 0.87 for this instrument. It seems this instrument has effective internal consistency across the nursing and HR professions.

**Occupational commitment.** This variable was measured using a version of Meyer, Allen, and Smith’s (1993) six-item instrument with a seven-point Likert scale which ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). In the same study of 366 nursing students mentioned above, Meyer, Allen, and Smith also found internal consistency of 0.82 for the occupational commitment measure. In our study, coefficient alpha was 0.85 for this instrument. Similar to the instrument above, it seems this instrument also has effective internal consistency across the nursing and HR professions.

**Procedure**

Before collecting any data, we visited each SHRM chapter’s web page online and contacted the chapter’s president. We asked each chapter president if he or she would help distribute the cover letter and survey to all of the chapter members. If the chapter president agreed, then he or she emailed each chapter member the cover letter explaining the study’s objectives and informed consent. Also contained in the letter was a link to an electronic version of the survey created by Surveymonkey.com. The survey was anonymous. Once the participants completed the survey, the results were immediately sent back to the data base and saved on Surveymonkey.

Unfortunately, our procedure made it difficult for us to determine our response rate because we did not contact the SHRM chapters’ members directly. Not only were we unsure of how many members each chapter had, we were unsure of which chapter presidents followed through on our request to contact their members. All we saw were the surveys that were returned.

**RESULTS**

**Main research questions**

The first hypothesis was that HR professionals who perceived more benefits associated with being certified would be more likely to either have an HR certification or be planning to get one. This hypothesis was supported ($r = 0.31, p < 0.001$). When we broke down the data by the types of benefits, we found all of them were significantly related to either having an HR certification or planning to get one. The types of benefits included: (a) more likely to be hired ($r = 0.27, p < 0.001$), (b) more likely to be paid more ($r = 0.15, p < 0.01$), (c) more likely to advance faster ($r = 0.20, p < 0.001$), (d) gaining more respect from fellow HR professionals ($r = 0.33, p < 0.001$), (e) greater knowledge of the HR field ($r = 0.29, p < 0.001$), and (f) a greater sense of occupational identity ($r = 0.32, p < 0.001$). Thus, more pay was the least critical motivator for obtaining an HR certification.

The second hypothesis was that employees whose organizations supported their HR certification efforts would be more likely to either have an HR certification or be planning to get one. This hypothesis was supported ($r = 0.22, p < 0.001$). To examine the impact of each type of organizational support (provided or not provided), we treated HR certification as a categorical variable and used chi-squared tests to examine independence. Specifically, we found that organizational support for training materials ($\chi^2(2) = 19.1, p < 0.001$), training classes ($\chi^2(2) = 15.7, p < 0.001$), and exam fees ($\chi^2(2) = 16.7, p < 0.001$) were all positively related to the percentage of participants who were certified. However, the relationship between the variables of time off for study ($\chi^2(2) = 5.0, p > 0.05$) and travel fees for instruction or for taking the exam ($\chi^2(2)$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of organizational support</th>
<th>% of employers offering</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training materials</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training classes</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam fees</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time off for study</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel fees for taking the exam</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The third hypothesis was that employees with HR certification or planning to get one would actually make more money. This hypothesis was supported. An ANOVA was used to investigate whether those with an HR certificate have higher salaries. They do ($F(2,320) = 10.3$, $p < 0.001$). Specifically, the average salary for those with an HR certificate was 7.1 ($SD = 1.46$) compared to those thinking about getting an HR certificate ($M = 6.1$, $SD = 1.65$) or those not thinking about getting an HR certificate ($M = 6.5$, $SD = 2.13$). To make some sense out of the three means, a score of seven indicated a salary range of $60,001$ to $80,000$, while a score of six indicated a salary range of $50,001$ to $60,000$. In other words, those who have an HR certificate appear to make about $5,000$ to $10,000$ a year more than those without one. Using a Tukey’s post hoc test, we found that the group with an HR certificate was significantly different from the two groups without an HR certificate. Thus, it was not enough to simply be planning to get a certificate.

We wanted to see whether HR certification would be able to predict salary after controlling for education level and years of HR experience. Using multiple regression, we found that all three variables added explanatory variance. We first entered education into the equation and its Beta coefficient was significant ($p < 0.01$). Next we entered years of HR experience into the equation and its Beta coefficient was significant ($p < 0.001$). Finally, we entered HR certification into the equation and its Beta coefficient was significant ($p < 0.01$). Together these three variables explained 29% of the variance in salary.

The fourth and fifth hypotheses stated that employees with an HR certification or planning to get one would have greater affective organizational commitment and greater affective occupational commitment. The relationship between HR certification and affective organizational commitment was not significant ($r = 0.06$, $p > 0.05$). However, the relationship between HR certification and occupational commitment was significant ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$).

**Exploratory analyses**

In addition to the main hypotheses, we also examined other potential relationships in Figure 1. For example, we found that the HR professionals who received more organizational support for HR certification had greater affective organizational commitment than those who did not receive as much organizational support ($r = 0.23$, $p < 0.001$). We also found that organizational support for HR certification was not related to occupational commitment ($r = 0.06$, $p > 0.05$).

We found that the HR professionals who perceived more benefits of HR certification were more occupationally committed than those who perceived fewer benefits ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$). However, the HR professionals who perceived more benefits of HR certification did not have greater affective organizational commitment ($r = 0.01$, $p > 0.05$). This was opposite the relationships found for organizational support.

Finally, we examined how the demographic variables (age, sex, minority status, education level, HR experience, HR department size, and organization size) were related to the criterion variables (HR certification, salary, organizational commitment, and occupational commitment). As can be seen in Table 3, the criterion variable that was most related to the demographic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational support offered by employer</th>
<th>No plans to get certified (%)</th>
<th>Plan to get certified (%)</th>
<th>HR certified (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training material</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training classes</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam fees</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time off for study</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel fees for taking the exam</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: 68% of the participants whose employers offered training materials for HR certification were certified, but only 32% of the participants whose employers did not offer training materials for HR certification were certified. 45% of the participants whose employers offered training materials for HR certification were planning to get certified, but 55% of the participants whose employers did not offer training materials for HR certification were not certified but planning to get certified. 41% of the participants whose employers offered training materials for HR certification were neither certified nor planning to get certified, but 59% of the participants whose employers did not offer training materials for HR certification were neither certified nor planning to get certified.

$3.7$, $p > 0.05$ were not significantly related to the percentage of HR professionals who were certified. An examination of Tables 1 and 2 reveal that the three types of support that most organizations choose to offer are the ones that appear to be the most effective.
variables was annual salary. Not surprisingly, the HR professionals who made the most tended to be older, male, more educated, more experienced, and working in larger HR departments. Experience was the most powerful predictor of salary.

Also, there was a slight tendency for HR professionals with more HR experience and who work in larger HR departments to have greater occupational commitment.

DISCUSSION

The main findings of our study are illustrated in Figure 2. The confluence of relationships between the motivation for HR certification, HR certification, and occupational commitment points to the importance of HR certification for professional identification. For example, the most important reasons for HR certification were gaining more respect from fellow HR professionals, a greater sense of occupational identity, and greater knowledge of the HR field. Being hired, receiving higher pay, and advancement, while important, were less predictive of HR certification. These results are consistent with Blau, Fertig, and Zeitz’s (2009) findings that earning professional certification is to enhance professional self-identity. Fertig (2011) found that extra credentials which can enhance the trust of organizational stakeholders. Eck (1993), Blau, Fertig and Zeitz (2009), and Lengnich-Hall and Aguinis (2012) suggested that certifications can improve employees’ likelihood for obtaining higher salaries. Spence (1973) used signaling theory to explain how certification can be tied to higher salaries. He argued that certification can help to promote an employee’s appearance of job competency. Even if certified HR professionals are not superior performers, Maranto, Bourne, and Keaveny (2010) found that those with PHR certificates were more likely to be hired than those without a certificate. On the other hand, Aguinis, Michaelis, and Jones (2005) found that few organizations ask for HR certifications when hiring HR professionals. In our study, we found that HR professionals with certifications have higher salaries than HR professionals without certifications, even after controlling for the effects of education and years of HR experience. Chatman (1989) observed that certifications can be used to determine whether employees can perform at an acceptable level of performance or whether they are appropriate for a position. Thus, an organization may be willing to pay more for an employee if it feels more certainty about what it is getting with that employee. This is consistent with Cohen’s (2012) proposition that certified HR professionals should have higher salaries than uncertified HR professionals because they bring extra credentials which can enhance the trust of organizational stakeholders. Eck (1993), Blau, Fertig and Zeitz (2009), and Lengnich-Hall and Aguinis (2012) suggested that certifications can improve employees’ likelihood for obtaining higher salaries. Spence (1973) used signaling theory to explain how certification can be tied to higher salaries. He argued that certification can help to promote an employee’s appearance of job competency. Even if certified HR professionals are not superior performers,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Variables</th>
<th>HR Certification</th>
<th>Annual Salary</th>
<th>Organizational Commitment</th>
<th>Occupational Commitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.33***</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.18***</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority status</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.17***</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR experience</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.50***</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.12*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR depart. size</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.12*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization size</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: For sex and minority status, point-biserial correlations are reported. For sex, 1 = women and 2 = men, thus, positive correlations indicate that men are higher, while negative correlations indicate that women are higher. For minority status, 1 = non-minority and 2 = minority, thus, positive correlations indicate that minorities are higher, while negative correlations indicate that non-minorities are higher. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Figure 2. Relationships between main study variables.
the belief that they are can lead to more pay or better advancement opportunities.

When organizations offer support for HR certification, the participants in our study were more likely to be certified or planning to become certified. One reason for this result could be that support is a way for an organization to communicate to an employee that it thinks HR certification is important. This could serve as a subtle form of pressure in the form of “you do not have to do it, but it is recommended.” Another reason may be that when organizations are willing to pay for employee training, HR employees may see this as an opportunity to take advantage of organizational resources for self-gain. Another explanation could be that support reflects an organization’s investment in its employees’ development which could make HR employees feel more valued and, subsequently, be more likely to invest their time and mental energy to improve themselves.

Lee and Bruvold (2003) argued that organizations that invested more in employee development would be more likely to have employees with higher affective organizational commitment because the employees would perceive the organizations as caring about their career development. Blau, Fertig, and Zeitz (2009) argued that employees who worked hard to become certified would become more committed to their organization. We did not find this to be the case. While HR certification was related to occupational commitment and salary, it was not related to affective organizational commitment. One possible reason for this result could be that many of the employees were already certified before joining their employer, so they did not connect certification to their organizational membership. Or perhaps they obtained their certification while employed by their current employer, but they received no support in obtaining their certification.

Our results suggest that those with an HR certification focus their sense of identity more on what they do, not where they do it. This is consistent with research on workers from individualistic cultures, such as America, where the focus is more on individual goals than the whole group (Hofstede, 2001; Li & Karakowsky, 2001). It is also consistent with research on the specialized career paths of Western workers (Ouchi, & Jaeger, 1978).

If HR certification does not improve an employee’s affective organizational commitment, an organization may legitimately ask why it should contribute resources to help its HR professionals get certified. The answer is that it is not getting certified that is the key, it is offering organizational support for HR certification that is the key to affective organizational commitment. We found that the HR professionals whose organizations offered support for HR certification had greater affective organizational commitment. Thus, perhaps it is not whether the employees take advantage of that support, but simply their awareness that the organization is concerned about their professional development. Because affective organizational commitment is related to a host of positive organizational attitudes and behaviors, as Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, and Topolnytsky (2002) found in their meta-analysis of organizational commitment, offering support for HR certification could be an investment with a positive return. In addition, word of mouth advertising about that organization’s support of its HR professionals’ development could also improve recruitment of quality HR people.

The three types of organizational support that were most related to certification were providing training materials, training classes, and exam fees. In Porter and Lawler’s (1968) model of performance, they posit that performance is influenced by three factors: motivation, ability, and situational constraints. By offering its employees support, an organization is removing important situational constraints, such as a lack of time and money, and providing motivation by signaling to employees that HR certification is seen as important to the organization.

Several demographic variables were related to salary: age, sex, education, and years of HR experience. Regarding age and experience, older and more experienced HR professionals make more money. This is hardly surprising. Aguinis, Michaelis, and Jones (2005) found that there is a greater demand for experienced HR professionals, such as HR directors and specialists, in the job market than for lower level HR jobs, and it takes time to acquire the knowledge and skills for these jobs.

Regarding education, those with more traditional education tend to make more money. This may be because HR professionals with graduate training in business or I-O psychology use their knowledge to perform better than their peers, and hence move up into better paying positions. Or it could be that the same skills that allow an individual to acquire graduate training, good work habits and cognitive ability, also allows them to succeed in the work place. Or it could be that educational degrees act as a passport to higher paying jobs if they are a job requirement. Perhaps all three play a role.

Regarding the sex of an HR professional, men make more money than women. It could be argued that HR is a female profession. For example, 73% of our participants were women. However, the men in this profession make significantly more money than the women. The subject of pay discrimination is beyond the scope of this study, but it seems the HR profession is not immune from the glass ceiling.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

One limitation of this study is the homogeneity of the participants. They were members of local SHRM chapters.
Thus, the sample does not accurately represent the entire population of HR professionals. We would have liked more compensation and training professionals. Also, most of the participants were HR certified and more than half of them were in the position of HR manager or higher. Therefore, the sample underrepresented HR employees in lower level positions who are not certified. Future studies on a more heterogeneous sample of HR professionals are needed. For example, we would like to explore the benefits of other HR certifications, such as those related to compensation, benefits, and training.

In addition to external validity issues, the main threat to internal validity was the fact that we did not manipulate any variables. Thus, we were unable to make any causal inferences. Also, the new instruments that we developed to assess certification motivation and organizational support for certification are new and untested. While they had acceptable internal consistency, there may have been parts of each construct domain that our instruments failed to capture. Finally, all of the instruments were self-report measures, which make our findings subject to mono-method bias. Future studies on how HR certification impacts hiring and promotion decisions, in addition to pay, are needed. As Aguinis, Michaelis, and Jones (2005) suggested, more research on the validity of HR certifications as a selection tool is needed. Longitudinal studies that follow HR professionals with and without certifications might shed more light on the predictive validity of HR certification.

CONCLUSION

Although Hyland and Muchinsky (1990) found no significant relationship between professional certifications and one’s job performance, there are still many advantages to certification for the HR professional. From a pocketbook perspective, we found that HR certification was related to higher pay. Although the pay difference was only on the magnitude of $5,000 to $10,000, over the course of a career that could add up to a considerable sum of money, more than enough to justify the investment in time and money required to obtain and maintain HR certification. In addition, obtaining an HR certification can serve as a symbol of professional competence and achievement both to oneself and others. We found that HR certification was related to greater occupational commitment. Perhaps the hard work required for certification creates cognitive dissonance so that the individual needs to justify his or her efforts by becoming more committed to his or her profession. In addition, if one’s co-workers view the HR certification as a symbol of competence, this can create a Pygmalion Effect in which other people’s beliefs and high expectations cause the certified professional to live up to those expectations and become a better performer (Eden & Shani, 1982; Rosenthal, 1973).

Although Aguinis, Michaelis, and Jones (2005) found low demand for HR certification in HR job announcements, our research indicated that offering organizational support for HR certification was related to the affective organizational commitment of an organization’s HR professionals. While this result was only correlational, we would recommend carrying out research to see whether offering training materials, training classes, and offering to pay for exam fees for HR certification enhance HR professionals’ affective organizational commitment, which is related to many positive organizational outcomes.


