

Perceived Value of HR Professional Certification in a Disrupted Marketplace

Brian Martinson

Tarleton State University

John A. DeLeon

Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

Randy McCamey

Tarleton State University

In response to Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis' (2012) call for examining the practical value of HR professional certification, and using Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis' individual-level propositions as hypotheses, this study compares 123 HR practitioners' evaluations of HR certification based on attained education, membership in professional associations, and commitment to the HR profession. Our analysis found that HR practitioners value certification equally regardless of attained education level, members of professional associations ascribe 16% more value to certification than nonmembers, and certified members have a higher commitment to the profession. Further, a comparison between the established HRCI certifications and the newly competing SHRM certifications on pay level, job offers, and promotions received mixed results, with the established HRCI credential yielding slightly more value for job offers than the new SHRM certifications.

Keywords: HR certification, human capital, selection, signaling theory

Introduction

In 2012, Human Resource Management Review published a special issue on Human Resource Management certification. The focus of the issue was to stimulate a broader discussion about whether or not, and if so, how, HR certification contributes to the value of HRM practices in support of organizational outcomes (Thacker, 2012). The lead paper on the issue decried the lack of scientific measurement of the effect of HR certification on individual and organizational outcomes and provided 14 propositions guided by a multi-level framework to address HR certification research (Lengnick-Hall & Aguinis, 2012). The propositions aimed at individual and organizational outcomes

suggested testing if HRM certification relates to individual job opportunities, pay level, and job performance, as well as HR unit level reputation and effectiveness; and queries whether the combination of these two levels may lead to increased legitimacy perceptions of the HR profession as a whole. Surprisingly, few studies have been published directly testing the individual-level propositions put forth by Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis (2012) since the release of the special issue, and no studies have been published comparing the value perceptions between the old Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI) and the new Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) certifications. This study seeks to provide theoretical support, and tests, for several of their individual-level propositions (propositions 1,2,7,8 and 9) and compares these outcomes between the HRCI certifications, the gold standard at the time of their article's publication, and the new SHRM certifications recently developed by the leading HR professional association in the world.

This study seeks to contribute to the HR field by answering Cascio and Aguinis' (2008) call to address the science-practice gap by being one of the first to test Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis' (2012) individual-level propositions. The second contribution this study seeks to make is comparing HR professionals' perceptions of the value of HR certification between the well-established HRCI PHR/SPHR certifications and the newly introduced SHRM-CP/SCP certifications. Before 2014, SHRM and HRCI both participated in the creation and promotion of the PHR/SPHR credentials. In 2014 they ended their partnership and became competing organizations promoting separate credentials (Jackson, 2014), essentially disrupting the HR professional certification market and causing individuals to choose between preparing for, earning, and maintaining the established HRCI credentials or expending the considerable effort and cost of attaining the new SHRM credentials. This study is the first to investigate the effect of this dramatic change on the individual level value perceptions of HR certification by SHRM members and nonmembers and by HR certified professionals and non-certified HR professionals.

The study will take the following approach. A review of HR certification literature will be presented along with brief descriptions of the HRCI and SHRM organizations and their respective certifications. The five hypotheses addressing individual-level effects of HR certification will be presented along with theoretical support for each prediction. Next, the sample and data collected will be described along with the statistical analysis results. Finally, the results will be discussed along with practical implications, research limitations, and the significant conclusions derived from the study.

Literature Review

A Brief History of HR Certification

While the specific definition of a "profession" is debated (Saks, 2012), it is typically thought of as knowledge and expertise that differentiates one occupation from another, and that has a "stronger formal knowledge and education base than other occupations" (Freidson, 1986, as cited in Saks, 2012, p 2). Certification typically involves assessing whether or not an individual within a profession possesses the requisite skills or knowledge based on some set of established standards, "to most people, the word "certified" is interchangeable with the word "competent" (Butler, 2001, p. 91). Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis (2012) state that individuals in Human Resources certify "to gain credibility as an established field" (p. 246) and to "demonstrate mastery of a body of knowledge" (p. 247). Dachner et al. (2021) suggest that certification demonstrates a commitment to a profession, signals to employers the level of knowledge and skill obtained and enables individuals to take the initiative to earn certification to attain higher levels of knowledge and career benefits. Certification is also a way for organizations to verify the competence of workers in specific jobs or occupations, including those individuals working in the field of human resources (Gasiorowski-Denis, 2012; Kis et al., 2020; Loufrani-Fedida & Aldebert, 2020; Subramony et al., 2021). Certification has been linked to both

antecedents and outcomes of organizational values (Piwowar-Sulej et al., 2022). Typically, certification is a measurement process within professions that resembles a comprehensive program examination in higher education designed to demonstrate mastery of the programs, processes, and procedures within that profession (Institute, 2017).

As early as 1948, discussions were taking place about how to determine and measure competencies required for HR professionals. These discussions centered around three questions: What body of knowledge must personnel professionals [HR professionals as they are now called] know? Who defines that body of knowledge? How do you objectively measure it? (Leonard, 1998).

In 1973, the American Society of Personnel Administration (ASPA, now the Society for Human Resource Management or SHRM) embarked on a process to develop “criteria that would define Human Resource Management as a Profession” and accreditation for HR professionals through the ASPA Accreditation Institute or AAI (now the Human Resource Certification Institute). Certification contributes to the recognition of a profession in that it defines knowledge that is authorized and made explicit (Kihlander et al., 2022). Committees were created within the AAI to develop the HR body of knowledge. As fate would have it, the “committee names” essentially defined the body of knowledge at that time and included: employment, placement and personnel planning, training and development, compensation and benefits, health, safety and security, employee and labor relations, and personnel research (Leonard, 1998).

Two levels of HR certification exams were also first initiated in 1975, the Generalist and the Specialist (Leonard, 1998). The first “certification exams” were then given in 1976 (HRCI, 2017). In 2002, HRCI initiated a Global HR certification program, and by 2004, HRCI began computer-based certification exams (Leonard, 1998). Since their inception, the number of individuals earning HR certification has grown considerably. A report by Putka et al. (2015) lists a total of 111,449 individuals who hold certifications by HRCI as of August 2014.

SHRM and HRCI have ended their longstanding association. SHRM, beginning in 2011, developed its competency model and HR body of knowledge resulting in two new HR certifications, the SHRM Certified Professional (SHRM-CP) and the SHRM Senior Certified Professional (SHRM-SCP) (Management, 2017). There are a variety of other professional certifications in some of the more specialized fields under the umbrella of human resources, mostly by the sponsoring professional organizations within those specialized fields, including the Certified Compensation Professional (CCP) and Certified Benefits Professional (CBP) offered by the WorldatWork organization (WorldatWork, 2019), the International Public Management Association Certified Professional (IPMA-CP), and the Certified Professional in Learning and Performance (CPLP) from the Association for Talent Development Certification Institute (ATD Certification Institute, 2019), among others (Lengnick-Hall & Aguinis, 2012).

Hypotheses Development

Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis (2012) call for a comparison of the views on the value of HR certification between members and non-members of HR associations (Proposition 1). At the organizational level, the institutional theory dimension of normative isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) suggests that as members of a profession, HR professionals may share similar beliefs about the value of a credential, especially if it was promoted and recognized by the leading professional association dedicated to the advancement of the HR profession. Professionals are exposed to normative pressures in part because of their shared experiences such as similar training (Parks-Leduc et al., 2018), expressed codes of conduct, compliance requirements of rules and regulations that apply to their area of operations (Higgins & Lo, 2018), and the development of shared values and beliefs about the appropriate action to take for a given management challenge (Suchman, 1995, Wilensky, 1964). As previously mentioned, SHRM, the world’s largest professional association for HR

practitioners (SHRM, 2017), developed both the HRCI and SHRM credentials and actively encourages achieving certification through robust marketing programs and through the development of local, state, and national certification leaders tasked with promoting certification and professional development activities aimed at maintaining certification (SHRM, 2019). The constant reinforcement of the knowledge and skill enhancement derived through preparing for the certification exam, and the expected benefits realized after achieving certification, as promoted by SHRM, would likely yield strong normative pressure across the HR profession given SHRM's role as a dominant influence on the norms and values of HR practitioners.

Cumberland et al. (2018) found enhancing personal identity was a strong motivating factor in pursuing professional certification. At the individual level, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) suggests that an individual's self-identity is shaped and reinforced through social categorization and the desire to align with others along common categories to achieve feelings of self-esteem and legitimacy as well as to distinguish themselves from out-group members (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The desire for feelings of belonging to the group will cause members to adhere to the norms, behaviors, and beliefs of the group (Hogg et al., 1995). As a category, membership in a profession, as opposed to membership in a professional organization is more general and less volitional, and therefore less salient than actively joining a specific organization. Given that individuals with membership in SHRM organizations are more directly exposed to communication regarding the degree to which the organization values professional certification, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Members of Local or national SHRM organizations will rate HR certification as more valuable than non-members

Human capital theory predicts people will make investments in their knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) in pursuit of increased returns from the use of their human capital in the labor market (Becker, 1962; Wayne et al., 1999). Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis (2012) conjecture based on signaling theory (Kirkpatrick & Hoque, 2022; Spence, 1973), that formal college degrees in HR fields provide stronger signals to employers about an employee's KSAs than certifications (Proposition 2). If this holds, given the effects of diminishing marginal utility (Hirshleifer, 1965), the significant investment of time, effort, and money required to achieve certification will yield variations in the perceived value of certification relative to its cost, given an individual's level of educational attainment. Therefore, we propose the following:

H2: Individuals with undergraduate or master's degrees in human resource management or related disciplines will value HR certification less than individuals without the degree

Lengnick Hall and Aguinis (2012) posit that possessing HR certification will be related to higher pay levels (Proposition 7). Hsu and Yacey (2015) found a positive correlation between pay level and possessing certification. Several theories support this proposition. Human capital theory suggests that investments in developing KSAs yield a return on investments. The effort invested in attaining certification would yield increases in the content knowledge associated with the certification exam. This increased knowledge may allow an individual to perform a broader range of tasks (creating greater deployment flexibility), execute tasks more independently (reducing the need for supervision), and/or perform tasks more efficiently and effectively (yielding higher output for a given unit of input). Skill-based pay approaches, policies that set pay levels based on skills attained by the employee rather than the requirements of a job (Murray & Gerhart, 1998), seek to stimulate and reward human capital development utilizing the efficiency wage theory (Cappelli & Chauvin, 1991). According to the theory,

above-market wages would be offered in exchange for KSAs that lead to above-average performance. The increased knowledge, the ability to work more independently, and increased productivity expected of an individual earning HR certification would satisfy the condition supporting the efficient wage theory, and therefore we propose:

H3a: Having HR certification will relate to receiving increased pay

As described earlier, the most salient attribute of a credential is what earning the credential conveys about the holder to an interested observer. Signaling theory suggests that a prospective employer may assume the certified job candidate possesses at least the minimum required general HR knowledge needed to earn the credential. In addition, possessing the credential provides additional evidence of an applicant's interest in the profession and reflects a level of an initiative undertaken by the candidate to prepare for employment in the field. As proposed by Lengnick Hall and Aguinis (2012) (proposition 8), given these apparent indicators of an applicant's attained level of human capital, hiring managers are likely to select certified candidates over noncertified candidates to reduce uncertainty about the new hire's potential to successfully perform their new role. Lester et al., (2010) found that HR college graduates successfully passing the PHR certification exam were more than twice as likely to obtain an HR job than those that did not take or pass the exam. *Ceteris paribus*, we propose:

H3b: Having HR certification will relate to increased job offers

Weer and Greenhuas (2017) propose and test a model for how supervisors develop perceptions of employees' prospects for career growth. Their study found that enhanced career opportunities are afforded to employees perceived by their managers to be engaged in their work and exhibit extra-role behaviors. These positive behaviors were viewed by managers as indications of employee career and organizational commitment, which in turn yielded increased manager perceptions of increased employee growth opportunities. Their findings were strongest for opportunities within the employee's job through increased responsibilities and challenging assignments. In addition, De Pater et al., (2009) found that challenging job assignments were strong predictors of supervisor promotability evaluations. Based on signaling theory, we propose that competence and initiative are conveyed through earning an HR credential which, in turn, will lead to increased opportunities within an organization, and ultimately to higher-level positions within the organization. There before we propose:

H3c: Having HR certification will relate to increased job promotions

The final hypothesis focuses on the relationship between HR certification and commitment to the HR profession proposed by Lengnick Hall and Aguinis (2012) (proposition 9). Commitment, as defined by Meyer and Allen (1993) existing from an employee to an organization (and subsequently extended to a profession), can be considered along three dimensions. Affective commitment is a positive emotional attachment reflected by identification with the goals of the organization and a desire to remain affiliated with the organization. Continuance commitment is the need-based cause that motivates a person to continue a relationship with an organization. It is a function of the economic and social costs of leaving versus the costs of staying and is influenced by the employee's investment of time such as time spent developing firm-specific knowledge, cultivating social capital within the organization, and status and benefits received as a result of their job tenure. Normative

commitment is reflected as a felt sense of obligation to others. It reflects the effects of norms of reciprocity and the potential imbalance that leaving an organization may cause.

In Meyer and Allen's 1993 study designed to extend the constructs of commitment to professions, they found a positive correlation between affective and continuance commitment and continued engagement in professional activity. They also found a negative correlation between affective and continuance commitment and intentions to leave an occupation. Oh et al. (2017) proposed that a person's ability to exhibit competence and creditability, and earn recognition are critical factors related to commitment to the HR profession, and found support for their proposition with Korean HR managers. The desire to achieve certification and the costs of switching careers given the investment in an HR-specific certification, along with the competence and creditability gained, and recognition earned for meeting the experience and knowledge requirements of the HR professional certification, suggest the following:

H4 - Certified HR professionals will be more committed to the HR profession than non-certified HR professionals.

Methods

We collected data using an online survey system to distribute an anonymous survey link to three separate groups. The first group was comprised of individuals affiliated with two local SHRM chapters located in North Texas with a combined sample size of 562. The second group was graduate students enrolled in a Masters of Science in HR program at a regional university in the same geographic area with a sample size of 159. The third group was 113 individuals from an online job posting site that self-identified as interested in HR-related positions in the state of Texas. Overall, the survey was distributed to 834 individuals interested in, or working in, HR careers. 123 individuals submitted complete responses for a response rate of 14.7%. The sample consisted of 62 respondents from local SHRM chapters (50.4% of the total sample), 32 respondents from a university graduate HR program (26.0% of the total sample), and 29 respondents from an online job recruiting site (23.6% of the total sample).

Sample Characteristics

The demographic characteristics of the sample indicated that 79.7% were female, 77.2% were white, and their age ranged from 22 to 75 years with a median age of 44. The highest level of educational achievement reported indicated a four-year degree (62.6%) as most common, followed by a Master's degree (20.3%). The mean job tenure is 6 years, with a median of 3 years and a range of 0 to 30 years. 20.3% of the sample were exclusively national SHRM members, 12.2% were exclusively local SHRM chapter members, 42.3% indicated both national and local SHRM membership, and 25.2% indicated no membership with either the national SHRM organization or a local chapter. 61.0% of the sample indicated they held an HR Certification, with 17.1% indicating they held an HRCI certification exclusively (PHR or SPHR), 2.4% held an SHRM certification exclusively (SHRM-CP or SHRM-SCP), 41.5% indicating they held both certifications from both HRCI and SHRM, and 39.0% did not have a certification from HRCI or SHRM.

Measures

Subject responses were recorded using a variety of single-item measures and one adapted scale. Membership in national and/or local professional associations was measured using a dichotomous variable indicating yes or no. Subjects were asked to identify which of the following certifications they have earned: PHR, SPHR, GPHR, SHRM-CP, SHRM-SCP. Subjects were asked to rate how valuable the PHR/SPHR and the SHRM-CP/SHRM-SCP certifications would be for helping them "get their

next job,” “get increased pay,” and “get a promotion at work,” using a 7-point Likert scale with 1 being “No value at all” and 7 being “Very valuable”. Subjects were asked to report their age, race, sex, employment status, and level of education including degree and major area of study.

Commitment to the HR profession was measured with a six-items adapted from Elsbach’s (1994) Managing Legitimacy scale. Using a 7-point Likert scale with 1 being “Definitely not,” and 7 being “Definitely,” Subjects responded to the following statements: *Do you plan to stay in the human resource management field for the rest of your career? Have you ever thought of switching to a non-HR position for future employment? Would you take a non-HR position that pays a comparable salary to your current or most recent position if it was offered to you? Would you take a non-HR position that pays a higher salary than your current position if it was offered to you? Would you encourage a friend or family member to pursue a career in HR? Would you encourage a coworker to pursue a career in HR?*

Results

We tested our hypotheses using t-tests for differences in means. While the results from a t-test and ordinary least squares (OLS) regression are expected to be the same, a t-test has fewer model assumptions. The rest of this section is as follows. First, we provide our tests of hypotheses 1, 2, and 4. Second, we provide our tests of hypothesis 3 when HRCI and SHRM certifications are grouped together. Third, we examine hypothesis 3 considering HRCI certification and SHRM certification independently. Finally, we discuss differences in conclusions between HRCI and SHRM certification.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that members of a local or national SHRM organization would value HR certification, in general, more than non-members. Our test of hypothesis 1, found in Table 1a, was conducted using a t-test. Hypothesis 1 found strong support ($p < .01$) for the difference in HR certification value based on local or national SHRM membership. On a scale of 1 to 7, members of a local or national SHRM organization evaluated the value of HR certification with a mean value of 5.0, as compared to a mean value of 4.3 for non-members.

Table 1a - Beliefs about Certifications (n=123)

	Members	Non-Members	Difference	(p-value)
Value of Certification	5.0	4.3	0.73	0.0091

Survey on a scale of 1= “No Value” to 7= “Very Valuable”

Hypothesis 2 predicted individuals who have completed formal education in HR, either an undergraduate or master’s degree, would value HR certification less than individuals that have not completed a formal HR education. Our test of hypothesis 2, found in Table 1b, was conducted using a t-test. Hypothesis 2 failed to find statistical support ($p > .10$). Surprisingly, and in contradiction to our hypothesis, the mean value reported by those with a formal HR education was higher than for those without a formal HR education (4.2 compared to 4.1). Although a conclusion about the relative order or difference should be taken with caution since the difference is within the range expected due to sampling error, and as a result, firm conclusions are not statistically justifiable.

Table 2b - Beliefs about Certifications

	HR Education	Non-HR Education	Difference	(p-value)
Certification Benefits	4.2	4.1	0.15	0.6271

Survey on a scale of 1= “No Value” to 7= “Very Valuable”

Hypothesis 4 predicted certified individuals to be more committed to the HR profession than non-certified individuals. Our test of hypothesis 4 is found in Table 1c and was conducted using a t-test. Hypothesis 4 found strong support ($p < .01$) for commitment to the HR profession based upon being certified versus non-certified. The mean value for commitment to the HR profession for certified individuals was 6.1, compared to 5.3 for non-certified members.

Table 3c - Commitment to HR Career

	Certified	Non-Certified	Difference	(p-value)
Commitment	6.1	5.3	0.86	0.0035

Survey on a scale of 1= "Definitely Not" to 7= "Definitely"

Benefits of HR Certification

Hypothesis 3 predicted that possessing an HR certification would be related to increased pay (hypothesis 3a), increased job offers (hypothesis 3b), and an increase in job promotions (hypothesis 3c). Our test of hypothesis 3 is found in Tables 2a and 2b. For each hypothesis, we tested the relationships by examining the mean value reported (Table 2a) and comparing the difference between the mean value reported by certified members to non-certified members (Table 2b). Our approach is premised on the belief that differences between the evaluations of certified and non-certified members are informed by the actual experiences of certified members against the expectations of non-certified members.

Table 2a - Mean Value of HR Certifications (n=123)

	Mean	(p-value)
Pay Level Impact	3.8	0.0000
Job Offers Impact	5.0	0.0000
Promotion Impact	3.6	0.0000

Survey on a scale of 1= "No Value" to 7= "Very Valuable"

Table 2b - Mean Value of HR Certifications (n=123)

	Certified Members	(p-value)	Non-Certified Members	(p-value)	Difference	(p-value)
Pay Level Impact	3.4	0.0000	4.4	0.0000	-1.08	0.0018
Job Offers Impact	5.1	0.0000	4.8	0.0000	0.29	0.3505
Promotion Impact	3.5	0.0000	3.8	0.0000	-0.30	0.4216

Survey on a scale of 1= "No Value" to 7= "Very Valuable"

Hypothesis 3a predicted that HR certification would be related to increased pay level. The mean value of HR certification for increases in pay level was 3.8 on a scale from 1 to 7. Using a t-test between certified and non-certified members, hypothesis 3a failed to find support. Surprisingly, we found significant differences existed but in the opposite direction than expected. Certified members

evaluated the value of certification for increased pay levels lower than non-certified members (Table 2b, the value 3.4 compared to 4.4, $p < .01$).

Hypothesis 3b predicted HR certification to be related to increased job offers. The mean value of HR certification for increased job offers was 5.0 on a scale from 1 to 7. Hypothesis 3b failed to find support. While certified members did place more value on HR certification for increased job offers than non-certified members, the difference was not statistically significant (Table 2b, 5.1 compared to 4.9, $p > .10$).

Hypothesis 3c expected an HR certification to be related to increased job promotions. The mean value of HR certification for increased job promotions was 3.6 on a scale from 1 to 7. Hypothesis 3c failed to find support. Certified and non-certified members did not have significantly ($p > .10$) different views on the value of HR certification for a job promotion.

Benefits of HRCI Certification

Table 3a provides the mean values reported by certified and non-certified members in relation to HRCI certifications. Hypothesis 3a (pay level) failed to find support. Contrary to our hypothesis the mean value reported was lower for certified members as compared to non-certified members (Table 3a, the value 3.7 compared to 4.6, $p < .05$). This would seem to suggest that the pay level benefits expected by non-certified members failed to materialize. Hypothesis 3b (job offers) found support ($p < .05$). The mean value reported was statistically significantly higher for certified members versus non-certified members (Table 3a, the value 5.7 compared to 5.0, $p < .05$). Finally, Hypothesis 3c (promotions) failed to find support. Again, surprisingly the mean value reported for certified individuals was lower than the mean value reported for non-certified individuals (Table 3a, the value 3.8 compared to 3.9, $p > .10$) but the difference was not statistically significant.

Table 3a - Mean Value of HRCI Certifications (n=123)

	Certified Members	(p-value)	Non-Certified Members	(p-value)	Difference	(p-value)
Pay Level Impact	3.7	0.0000	4.6	0.0000	-0.85	0.0348
Job Offers Impact	5.7	0.0000	5.0	0.0000	0.72	0.0342
Promotion Impact	3.8	0.0000	3.9	0.0000	-0.05	0.9086

Survey on a scale of 1= "No Value" to 7= "Very Valuable"

Benefits of SHRM Certification

Table 3b provides the mean values reported by certified and non-certified members in relation to SHRM certifications. Again, hypothesis 3a failed to find support, while the difference in mean values reported by certified and non-certified members was statistically significant, it was in the opposite direction expected. Certified members reported a lower mean value in relation to pay level when compared to non-certified members (Table 3b, the value 3.0 compared to 4.3, $p < .001$). Hypothesis 3b also failed to find support when considering only SHRM certification. The mean value reported for increased job offers by certified members was 4.5 as compared to 4.6 for non-certified members (Table 3b, $p > .10$). Hypothesis 3c also failed to find support. The mean value reported for increased job promotions by certified members was 3.1 as compared to 3.7 for non-certified members (Table 3b, $p > .10$).

Table 3b - Mean Value of SHRM Certifications (n=123)

	Certified Members	(p-value)	Non-Certified Members	(p-value)	Difference	(p-value)
Pay Level Impact	3.0	0.0000	4.3	0.0000	-1.31	0.0001
Job Offers Impact	4.5	0.0000	4.6	0.0000	-0.13	0.7091
Promotion Impact	3.1	0.0000	3.7	0.0000	-0.56	0.1439

Survey on a scale of 1= "No Value" to 7= "Very Valuable"

HRCI Certification versus SHRM Certification

Conclusions for the value of HRCI certification and SHRM certification concerning our predictions were similar. For instance, both hypotheses 3a and 3c failed to find support regardless of the specific certification considered. In both cases, the mean value reported for pay level was lower for certified members than for non-certified members and was statistically significant, and the mean value of job promotions was statistically insignificant. However, differences between HRCI certification and SHRM certification did exist. First, while HRCI certification was perceived to be related to increasing job offers (supporting hypothesis 3b), SHRM certification was not perceived to be related to increasing job offers. This may be due to the relatively short period in which SHRM certification has been available as compared to HRCI certifications. Second, HRCI certification was perceived by both certified and non-certified members to provide more value than SHRM certification concerning hypotheses 3a, 3b, and 3c. These differences are reported in Table 3c. This would suggest that, in general, those in the HR profession place a higher value on HRCI certification than SHRM certification.

Table 3c - Difference in Value of HRCI vs SHRM Certifications (n=123)

	Certified Members	(p-value)	Non-Certified Members	(p-value)	Difference	(p-value)
Pay Level Impact	0.75	0.0006	0.28	0.0296	0.47	0.0969
Job Offers Impact	1.19	0.0000	0.34	0.0298	0.85	0.0078
Promotion Impact	0.70	0.0012	0.19	0.0429	0.51	0.0604

Survey on a scale of 1= "No Value" to 7= "Very Valuable"

Discussion

Our study sought to test the individual-level propositions Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis (2012) posited to guide the inquiry into the role HR certification plays in advancing the HR profession. Consistent with their proposition, we found that membership in SHRM organizations predicted how individuals value HR certification. Members of SHRM organizations valued certification approximately 16% more than non-members. This suggests that normative isomorphism pressures across the profession may have less of an effect than the social identity effect of organization membership on the evaluation of the value of HR certification by HR practitioners. Both groups place a relatively high value on earning the credential. Further study of the effect of group membership (profession vs. SHRM member) on certification valuation might provide insights as to which group

membership is more salient for a particular individual given their attributes and perhaps serve as a measure of the influence the SHRM organization has on the HR profession overall.

Contrary to Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis's (2012) expectations, we found that possessing advanced education in HR management did not predict how individuals value HR certification. Again, both groups rated the credential as relatively valuable, but the difference between the two was minimal and not statistically significant. This might suggest that college graduates with HR majors would consider investing the time, effort, and money in raising their human capital as would non-college graduates or non-HR majors pursuing careers in HR in part because of the realized benefits purported and assumed. As described earlier, Lester et al., (2010) found that college graduates with HR degrees who passed the PHR certification exam fared much better at obtaining an HR position after graduation. However, passing the exam is not the same as earning the credential and being allowed to use it for gaining and maintaining employment. Earning the credential requires knowledge plus experience. In their study, they may have been measuring something other than the value of earning the credential. Further study could include distinguishing the differing effects between earning the credential and possessing the knowledge required to earn the credential.

Practical Implications

Our findings offer several practical implications for job seekers, employees, and employers. Regarding job seekers, our study has two major implications. First, jobseekers should highlight any current HR certifications or pursue HR certification if they are currently uncertified as employers are seeking certified HR professionals more than they have in the past (Bayer & Lyons, 2020). Both members and non-members of SHRM placed significant value on HR certification (Table 1a). In addition, while differences between certified and non-certified members may not have always been statistically significant in our study, in each case individuals attributed some value to HR certifications towards pay level increases, job offer increases, and promotions (Table 2a), despite increased job offers being the only supported outcome hypothesis in our study. Further, given the greater commitment of certified individuals to the HR profession, HR certification may signal to prospective employers they are dedicated to staying in the profession which might also indicate an intent to stay with the organization if the opportunities for advancement are available. Second, job seekers might consider prioritizing HRCI certification over SHRM certification until the credential becomes more established. In every instance we evaluated, individuals reported a higher mean value for HRCI certification than SHRM certification. In addition, HRCI certification was found to have a positive impact on job offers, whereas SHRM certification failed to provide the same value. The new SHRM certification was less than two years old at the time of the study. Future research should review these comparisons to determine if the passing of time has changed respondents' evaluations.

For currently employed HR practitioners, our study suggests that HR certification may only provide limited benefits, and the pursuit of certification might be considered for reasons other than pay and job level changes. HR certification failed to provide increased pay level benefits or increased job promotions, as such there is limited utility for those currently employed. This is consistent with McCamey (2003) who found that individuals are more likely to participate in professional education for reasons of professional development more so than for personal benefits (i.e., pay and promotion) and this has been found in other studies as well (cf. Tana, 2019).

Regarding employers, our study suggests that HR certification may provide a useful screening tool for prospective and current employees. Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2022) found firms employing more qualified HR professionals adopted high-performance work practices (HPWP) at a higher rate than firms with fewer qualified HR professionals. Browne (2000) found a subset of HPWP identified as healthy work organization (HWO) practices correlated with improved employee job satisfaction and reduced work-related stress which led to increased organizational outcomes. Additionally,

individuals with an HR certification indicated higher levels of commitment to the HR profession that may ultimately lead to lower turnover costs for the organization (Martinson & De Leon, 2017). Further, given the increased commitment signaled by earning HR certification (Dachner et al., 2021), the increased knowledge gained by preparing for HR certification, and the lack of pay level increases associated with HR certification, employers should consider ways to reward individuals achieving HR certifications and make more explicit the current organizational rewards acquired through certification.

Limitations and future research

One limitation of our study was the potential for common methods bias to increase measurement error through the use of self-report data to measure the benefits received from possessing HR certification. This was slightly attenuated by using varying scale anchors as well as collecting the responses using an anonymous survey (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Comparing the expectations of non-certified respondents to the experiences of certified respondents to calculate the pay level, job, and promotion outcomes provides a reasonable estimation of the actual value but independently verified objective data would provide additional support to measuring the value of certification.

Further research should study the outcomes of pay level, hiring practices, and promotability of HR professionals with the professional certification status of the hiring manager as a predictor variable. It is implied that the theoretical hiring managers referenced in our study would generally have direct knowledge of HR profession-specific human capital and the body of knowledge required to earn profession-specific credentials and therefore, have a realistic assessment of the value of human capital associated with possessing certification. Empirically testing this assumption would provide valuable information and insight as to the real value of the credential beyond the certification in-group and across the HR profession group as a whole.

Also, these studies could be expanded to hiring, promotion, and pay outcome comparisons across and within professions. Are HR professionals in a unique position by being more involved in hiring and pay decisions across organizations as part of their core functions than various other professional groups within an organization? Do they value HR certifications similarly to how other professions value their profession-specific credentials as evidenced through hiring, pay, and promotion opportunities?

Conclusion

This study sought to investigate HR professionals' evaluation of, and experience with, the value of HR certification as well as to compare the outcomes associated with the established HRCI credentials versus the newly introduced SHRM credentials. Both members and non-members of SHRM placed significant value on HR certification. Also, both certified and non-certified individuals attributed the value of HR certifications to job offer increases. Further, given the greater commitment of certified individuals to the HR profession, HR certification may signal to prospective employers greater professional and organizational commitment. And finally, at the time of the study, the established HRCI certification yielded more value than the new SHRM certification.

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