

SHRM Sheds Light on New Certification, but Questions Remain

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Citing the need for HR practitioners to upgrade themselves with new skills and abilities, Society for Human Resource Management leaders made the case during their annual conference for the organization's new competency-based certification.

It's not just about intelligence and smarts, SHRM CEO Hank Jackson told members from the main stage before the opening keynote on June 22 in Orlando, Florida. HR practitioners need to display creativity and social skills in order to prepare the workforce of the future to keep up with new demands created by technology and automation.

"As a profession we're in the most important position to guide our organizations through this change, but we must be ready ourselves," Jackson said.

There are two new certifications that SHRM announced on June 19. They are: the SHRM Certified Professional, which is aimed at HR practitioners in the early stages of their careers who are acquiring basic knowledge and competencies, and the SHRM Senior Certified Professional, which is designed for practitioners with at least six years of experience and aimed at strategic and behavioral competencies.

In addition to the new certifications, SHRM announced the creation of the SHRM Certification Commission, an independent governance body that officials say will include HR professionals, certification experts, academics and members of the broader business community. The commission will manage the certification program, including development of exams, eligibility criteria and recertification requirements.

SHRM/HRCI Rift

It had always been SHRM's intent to work with the HR Certification Institute to launch this new certification, said Bob Carr, SHRM's senior vice president for membership, marketing and external affairs, at a news conference following the opening general session. But sometime in late fall of 2013, things changed.

"For quite some time, we thought we were moving together but something happened — we're not quite sure," Carr said. "Ultimately, we came to the conclusion that those conversations were not as productive as we had hoped and that we needed to continue this journey."

HRCI staffers and board members remember the fall meetings in a different light, saying discussions centered on SHRM's proposal to take over the HRCI body of knowledge, disband the independent HRCI board and make HRCI a division of SHRM.

“The fundamental difference here is the definition of the word collaboration,” said Clarissa Peterson, HRCI board chair and chief human resources officer at Abt Associates. “In our mind, collaboration is about partnership. SHRM’s definition of partnership was about control and probably taking over the institute. And that takeover and control, in our opinion, would jeopardize our independence and our ability to be accredited.”

Based on the fall meetings, the SHRM board made a decision this spring to launch the new certification on its own, Carr said.

What Are the Competencies?

The new certification is based on the SHRM competency model developed over three years under the direction of Alex Alonso, SHRM vice president of research.

That model, according to Alonso, was developed and validated with the help of 30,000 people around the world, and includes nine competencies: communication, consultation, relationship management, ethical practice, HR expertise, business acumen, critical evaluation, global and cultural effectiveness, and leadership and navigation.

“One of the things we studied was trends in certification,” Alonso said. “We learned that there were numerous organizations that were looking at this issue: How do we certify behavior? How do we assess behavioral competence?”

The intent was to assess HR skills and ability beyond technical knowledge and draw a correlation between proficiency and how it relates to performance on the job. SHRM’s Jackson put it in a different light.

The future of work “won’t be what you know,” Jackson told the audience on Sunday. “It will be what you can do with what you know.”

According to Amy Dufrane, executive director of the HRCI, the new competency certification is redundant as there is already significant overlap between SHRM’s competency model and the HRCI body of knowledge.

“They’re already there,” she said. “And if you talk to certificants, they’ll say you are already testing for competencies.”

Getting Certified

Those objections aside, many questions remain about the path to the new certification and several important elements to the program have not been developed yet.

SHRM plans to begin certifying HR professionals using the new certifications starting Jan. 1, 2015, and will continue to support all SHRM members in current certification programs until that time.

HR professionals holding HRCI's PHR, SPHR and GPHR credentials as well as selected other HR generalist certifications will be eligible for the new certification. In the meantime, in order to receive the new certification HR professionals will need to document their current certificate status, sign the SHRM Code of Ethics and complete an educational module and online tutorial on HR competencies.

After taking those steps, they will receive the new certification at no cost and will then need to re-certify in three years.

While SHRM spokesmen wouldn't share the financial investment the organization is making in the new certification program, Carr said the dollar figure is "not inconsequential."

That investment includes establishing a new division within SHRM to administer the certification program. Alonso said the credentialing division, which will be staffed by 15 people, will be "firewalled" from other SHRM divisions that deal with certification preparation in order to ensure its credibility.

Carr said the new division and certification program reflect the direction HR needs to go to encompass the knowledge HR professionals need to acquire as well as mastery of its application.

"We're going to put our brand power behind that certification," he said. "We're going to go to employers and let them know what we're doing and why we're doing it. We are hoping this will be the most recognized certification in HR, and members will be proud to wear the letters."