



The State of HR Skills and Education 2018

How HR professionals
use educational
resources,
certifications and
skills development to
ensure success

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Executive Summary

Today's HR professionals are increasingly well-educated. Post-graduate degrees are common, certifications are numerous and on-going learning is taken seriously. This study takes a close look at the amount and kind of education HR professionals have today and how that affects their workplace proficiency.

HR.com produced this study in partnership with BambooHR, a leading provider of HR technology for small and medium-sized businesses. The goal of the research was to:

- investigate the levels of education for today's HR professionals
- inquire about perceived levels of HR proficiency
- gain insights into types and numbers of certifications
- assess investments into HR career development
- highlight number of years of experience
- determine which skills are most highly associated with professional success



About this Survey

The survey, "The Skills and Education of Today's HR Professionals," ran in the fourth quarter of 2017. There were responses from 1,276 participants with 1,057 responding to every question. The participants represent a broad cross-section of employers by number of employees, ranging from small businesses with under 50 employees to enterprises with 20,000 or more employees. About 45% of respondents represented organizations with 500 or more employees.

BambooHR, the company that partnered with HR.com on this research, is a leading provider of HR technology for small and medium-sized businesses.

Below is a quick overview of some of the key findings

HR professionals tend to be highly educated. Almost 90% of respondents have a postsecondary degree and over 40% have a postgraduate degree.

About a quarter of respondents rate themselves as HR experts, while another 46% rate themselves as proficient.

The skill HR is weakest in is understanding and using HR data. Very few HR professionals (16%) see themselves as experts in using HR data.

Workforce planning is the component that is most essential in a talent analytics system. Almost two-fifths of organizations chose workforce planning as a top priority, slightly edging out analysis of employee performance and skills assessment.

The most proficient HR professionals invest in their own development. HR pros who rate themselves as experts invest more in self-development in every area covered in this study. One major difference was in getting HR-related certifications, where 53% of experts invested in this activity versus only 36% of those who rated themselves as only competent or lower.

Getting certified has a major impact in getting recognition for HR mastery. Almost 90% of respondents said gaining recognition was an important or very important reason for getting HR certifications.

Mid-sized organizations (100-999 employees) are the most generous in paying for HR certifications. Fifty-five percent of mid-sized organizations paid for HR certifications, compared to only 48% of large organizations (1000 or more employees).

It typically takes at least ten years to become an HR expert. While it was quite common for HR pros with more than 10 years' experience to rate themselves as experts (38%), fewer than 10% of those with 7-10 years' experience see themselves as experts.

The most proficient HR professionals are more likely to value general business skills. Only about 40% of HR professionals who rated themselves as competent (or less) saw general business skills as very important. For professionals who rate themselves as experts, that number leaps to 60%.

Today's HR Education Requirements and Trends

Today's organizations generally expect their HR professionals to be well educated. When hiring for HR positions, most employers seek candidates with at least a college degree, according to [research](#) conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management. Many (70%) look for prospects with a bachelor's degree in HR or for those with a degree in business with an HR concentration (59%).

But today's HR requirements go beyond university degrees. Commenting on a 30-year [research project](#), Dr. Dave Ulrich writes, "Being a competent HR professional has become increasingly complex, with some of the recent competencies (analytics designer and interpreter; technology and social media integrator) reflecting how HR competencies reflect general business trends...In addition, the competency domains have evolved." When that study first started in the late 1980s, there were three domains of HR knowledge. By 2016, however, the number of domains had increased to nine.

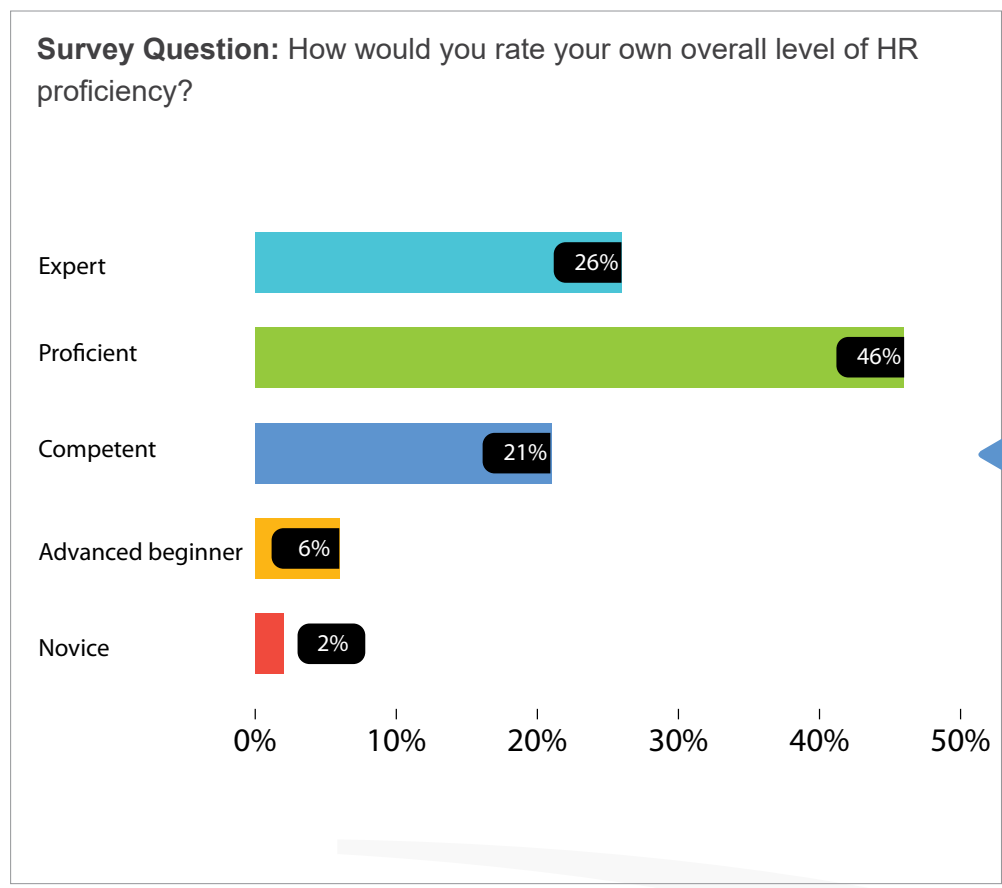
Changing business paradigms, of course, play a role in the number of required HR skills, but so do new technologies. A leader in learning and development, for example, must not only know a great deal about how adults learn but about the uses of learning technology. In fact, changes in technology create similar demands across the full spectrum of HR specialties. The issue for HR is not just mastering technologies per se but also understanding how technologies may disrupt traditional approaches.

Changes to laws and regulations represent another key issue. This is one reason for the increased demand for HR certifications. Certifications reassure employers that their HR employees have the skills and knowledge needed to carry out their jobs.

Levels of HR Proficiency

Finding: About a quarter of respondents rated themselves as experts

When participants were asked to rate their own levels of HR proficiency, about 26% described themselves as expert and another 46% referred to themselves as proficient. Although the ratings are based on self-reports, they did tend to correlate with more measurable data, such as level of education and years of experience. This study will refer to these proficiency levels in several other portions of the report.

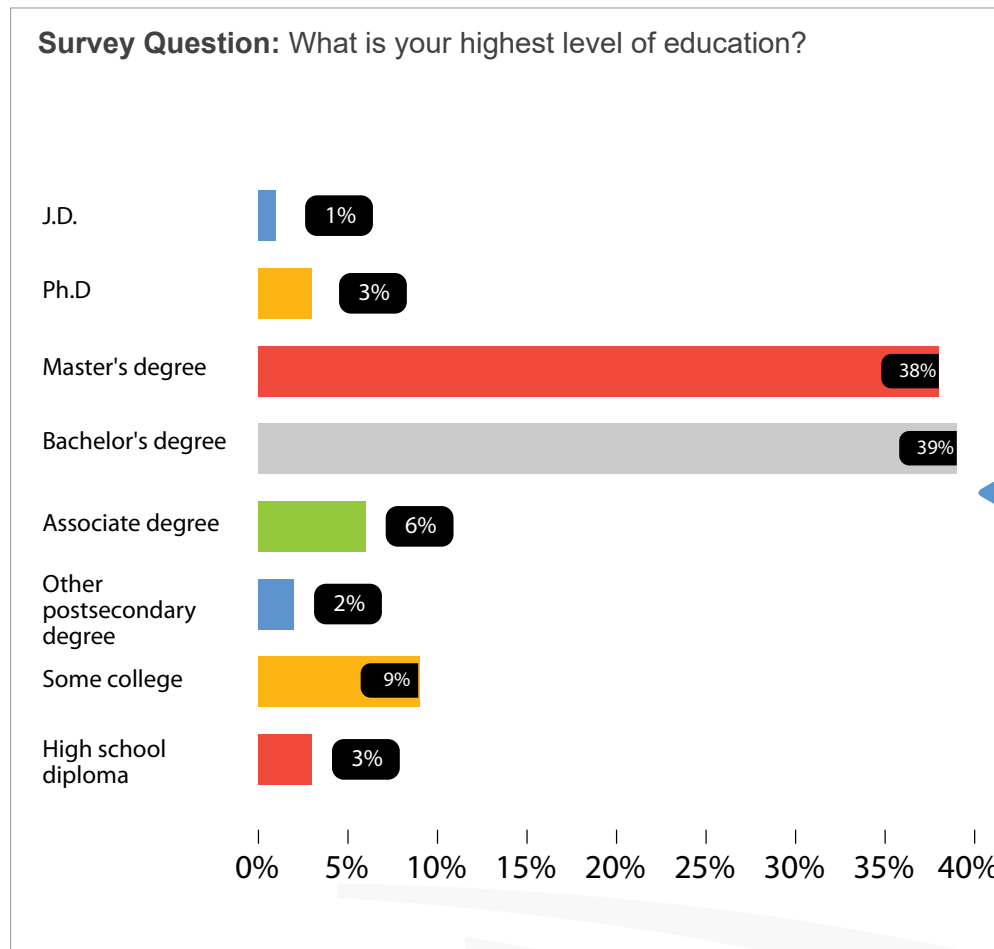


Most respondents rated their overall HR skill level as either expert or proficient

Formal Education

Finding: Over two-fifths of HR professionals have a postgraduate degree

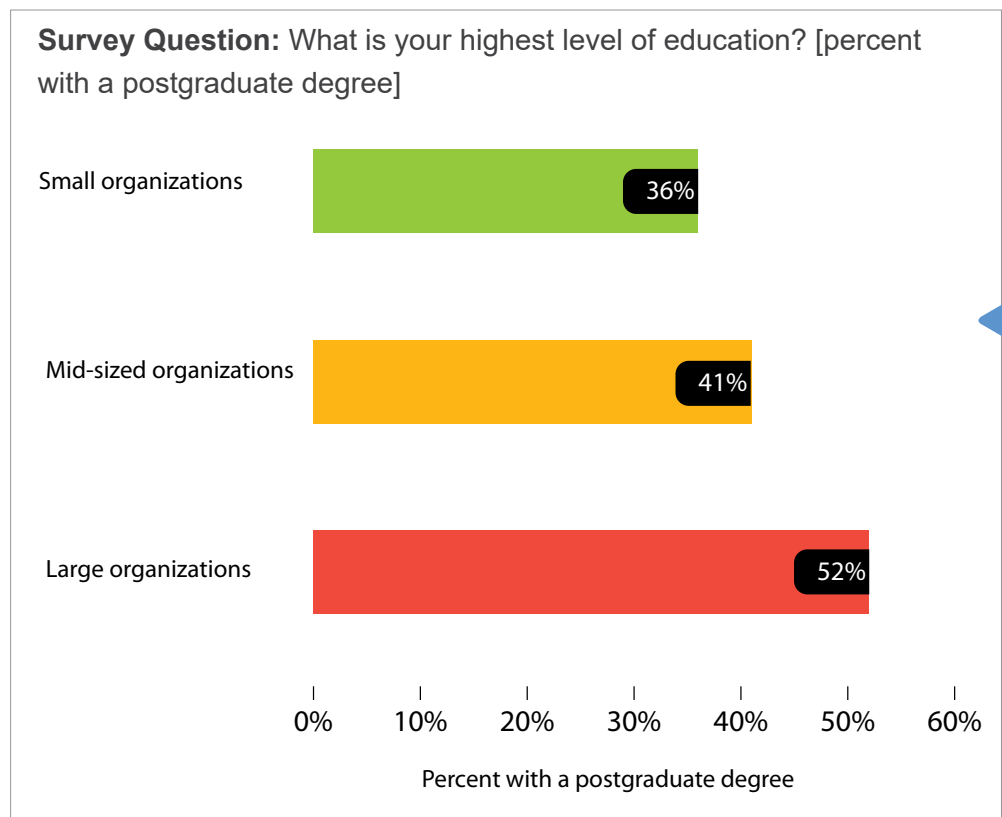
Almost nine-tenths of HR professionals have some kind of postsecondary degree. Perhaps more surprisingly, 42% have postgraduate degrees. The most common of these are master's degrees (38%), but another 4% have either Ph.D.'s or J.D.'s. It's clear that HR has become a highly-skilled profession.



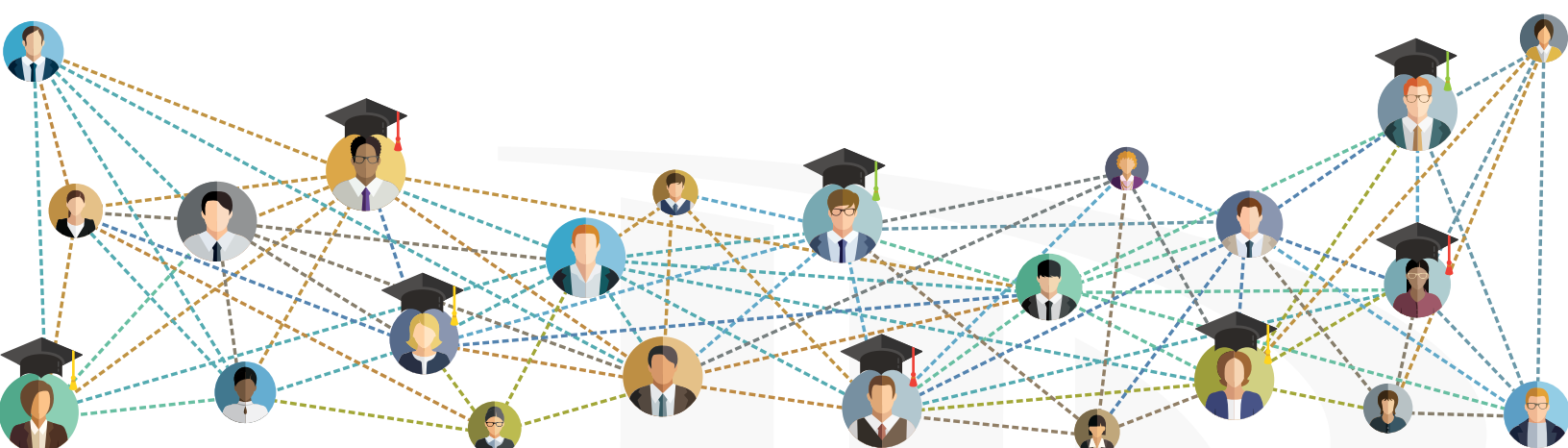
The vast majority of HR professionals have post-secondary degrees

Finding: In large organizations, over half of HR professionals have a postgraduate degree

The prevalence of postgraduate degrees is most striking in large firms, where over half of HR professionals have postgraduate degrees. Even in small organizations, however, over a third have postgraduate degrees. This illustrates how important higher education has become throughout the profession.



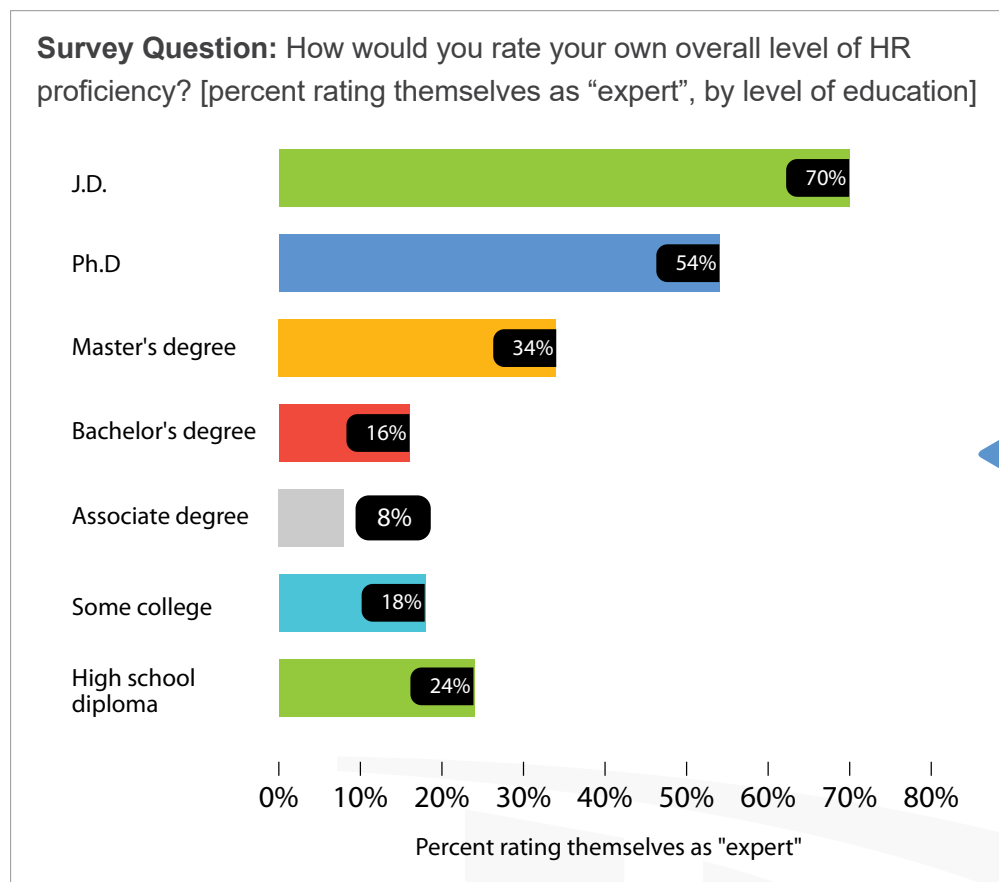
Even in small organizations, over a third of HR professionals have a postgraduate degree



Finding: People with a master’s degree are twice as likely to see themselves as experts as people with a bachelor’s degree

Does higher education pay off in terms of greater perceived expertise? Generally, yes. When we focus on associate degrees and above, we find that expertise rises along with the level of educational degree.

However, those with a high-school diploma or “some college” are more likely to see themselves as experts than those with a bachelor’s degree. We don’t want to read too much into this since the number of people with lower levels of education who rate themselves as experts is quite small. Most of these people are HR managers (from all sizes of organizations) who have presumably—despite their limited education—learned on the job and now consider themselves experts.

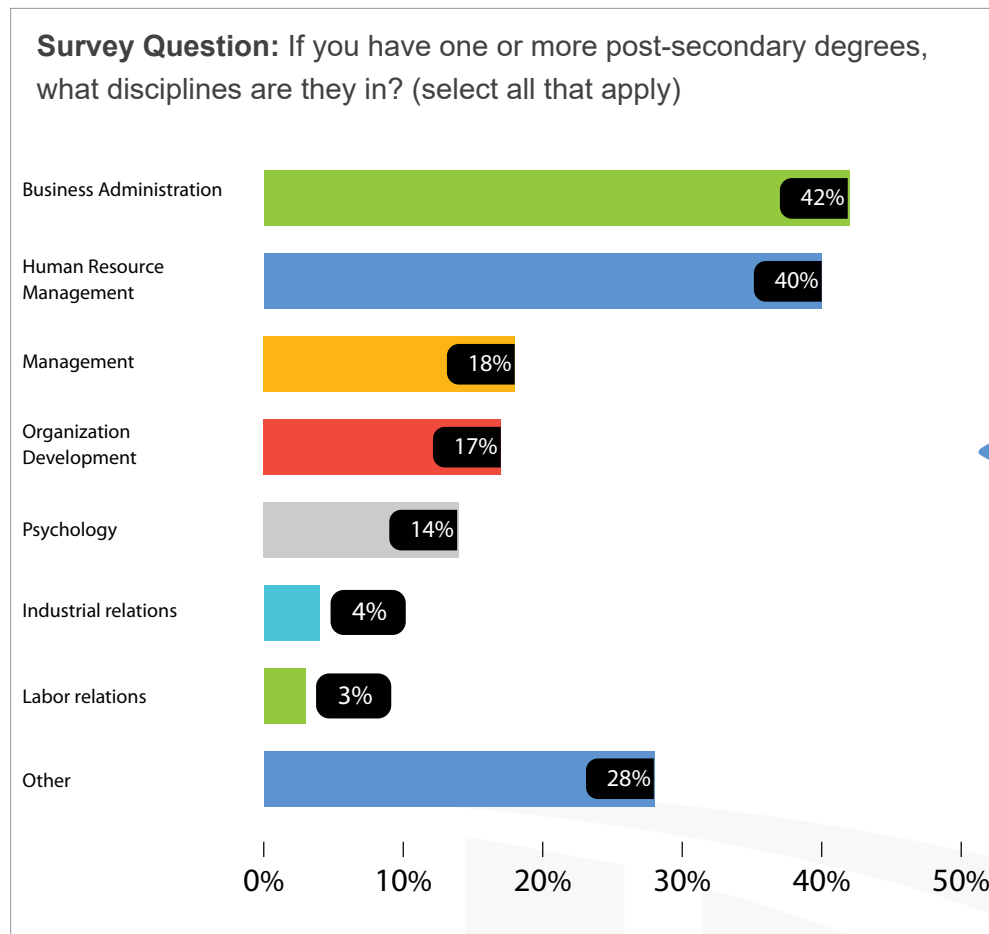


Those with Juris Doctor degrees (J.D.'s) are most likely to see themselves as experts

Finding: HR’s post-secondary degrees are most often in business administration or HR management

Most HR professionals have earned post-secondary degrees in business administration or human resources management. Non-HR business leaders may be surprised that so many HR leaders have the same education in business administration (42%) that they have.

It’s notable how few—just 7%—have post-secondary degrees in labor or industrial relations, subjects which were once more dominant in the profession. Psychology, considered by many to be the foundational science behind HR, is also not a common choice, with only 14% of respondents choosing this subject.



Few of today’s HR professionals have degrees in industrial or labor relations

Note: The data adds up to more than 100% since some individuals have multiple post-secondary degrees.

Human Resource Certifications

Finding: Overall, there were about 1.4 certifications per respondent

In addition to university educations, HR professionals often have professional certifications. In fact, the number of certifications adds up to 142%, meaning the average for all participants was 1.4 certifications per respondent. The bulk of the certifications were among the following:

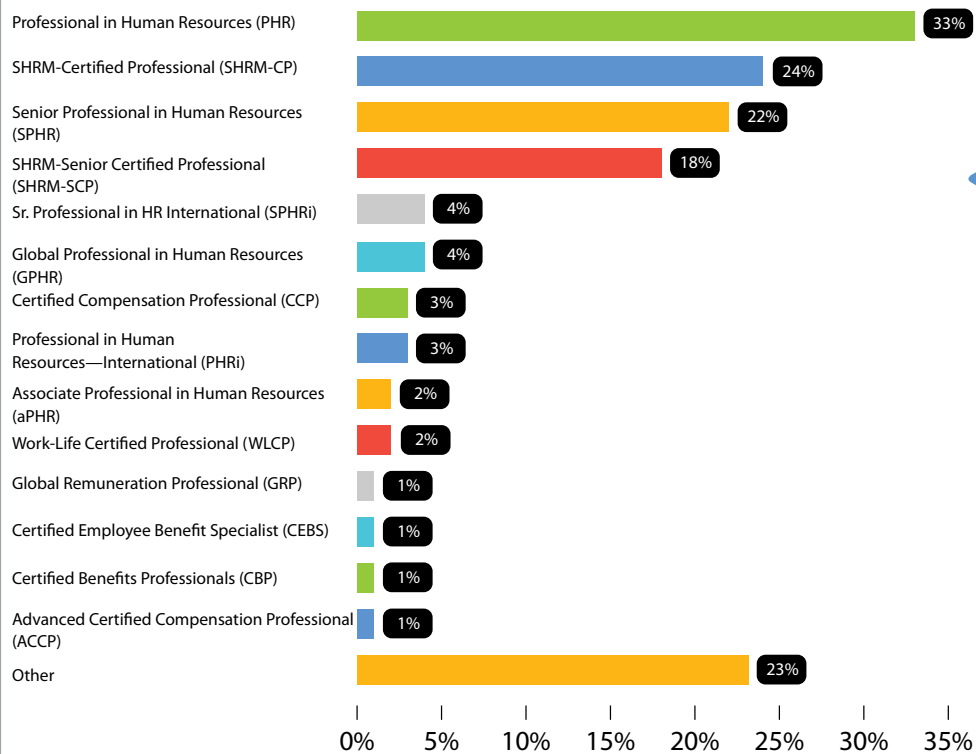
- the Professional in Human Resources (PHR) certificate from the Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI)
- the Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) certification, also from HRCI
- the SHRM-Certified Professional (SHRM-CP), from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)
- the SHRM-Senior Certified professional (SHRM-SCP)

While each of the other certifications had relatively small numbers (less than 5% of respondents in all cases), the number of different certifications is notable. Many of the “Other” came from countries outside the U.S. (mainly the UK and Canada); payroll and coaching certifications also sometimes appeared in “Other.”

This data reinforces how well educated the average HR professional is today. Furthermore, it shows a serious commitment to ongoing education throughout HR careers. HR professionals don't just preach the gospel of life-long learning, they practice it as well.

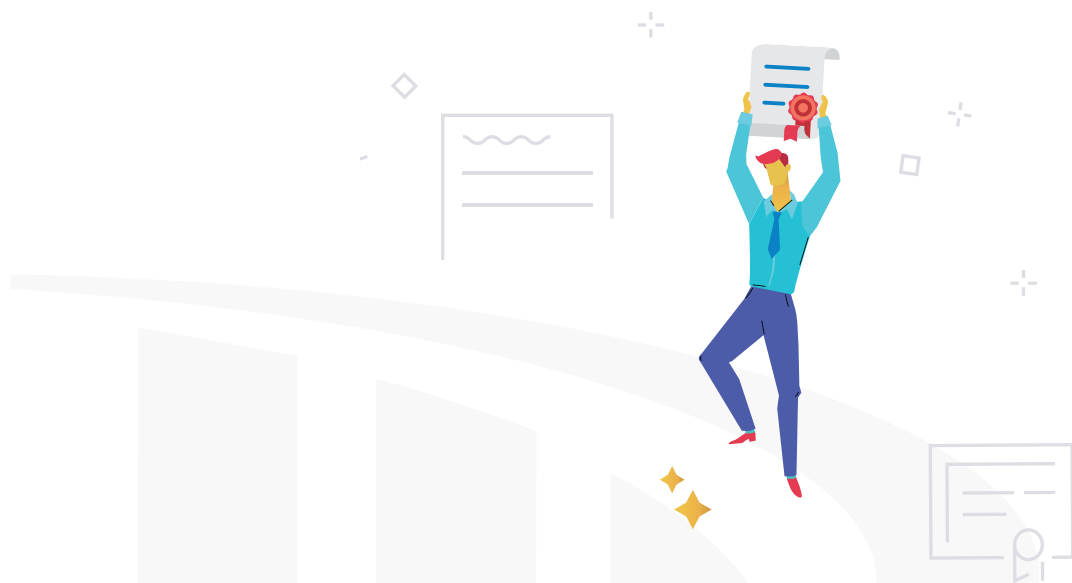


Survey Question: What certifications in Human Resource Management have you received? (select all that apply)



The PHR is the most popular certification and is held by about a third of respondents

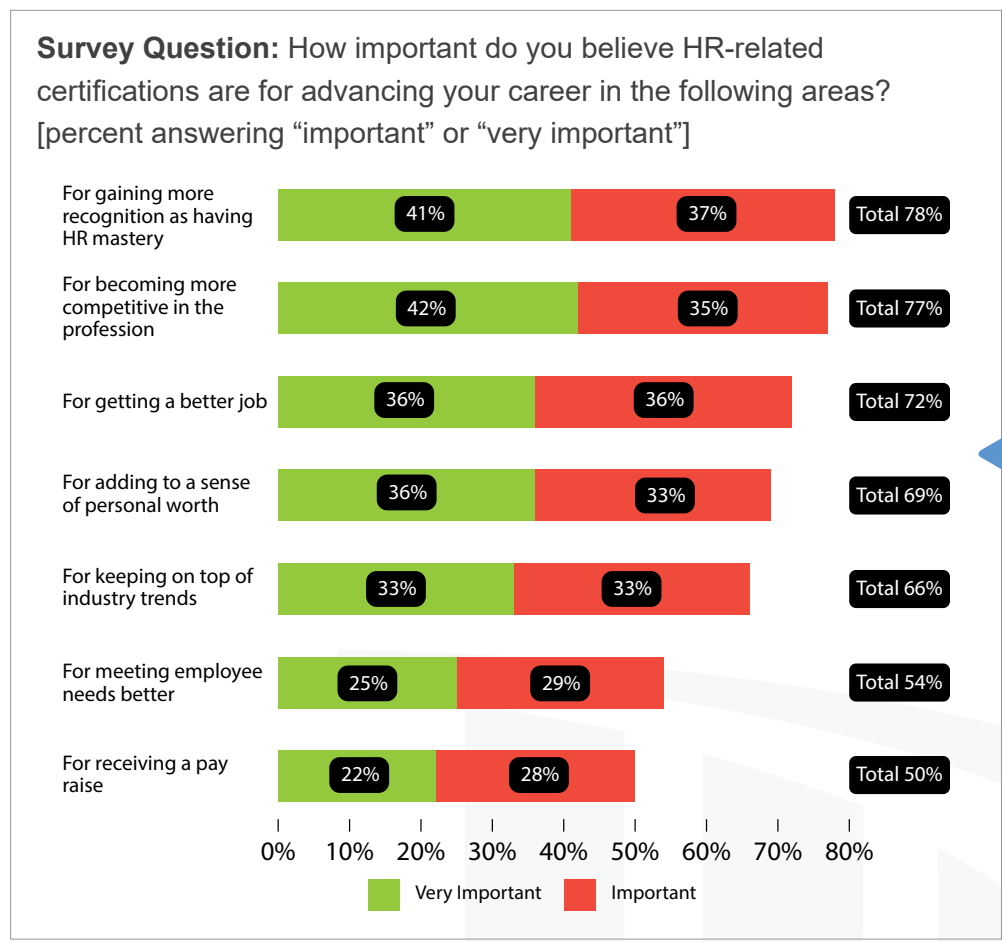
Note: The data adds up to more than 100% since some individuals have multiple certifications



Finding: The most critical reasons for getting certified are gaining recognition and becoming more competitive

The pursuit of certifications is not seen as a “nice to have.” Most respondents felt there were many different reasons that HR certifications were important or very important. The factor most commonly viewed as important or very important was “for gaining more recognition as having HR mastery” (88%), followed by “for becoming more competitive in the profession” (77%).

We should note, however, that even the factor least commonly rated as important or very important—“for receiving a pay raise”—was chosen by half of the respondents. This indicates that there are many legitimate and popular reasons for seeking such certifications. The overall number of certifications that HR professionals have—and the frequency with which they are ranked as important—show the significance of the role that certifications now play in the profession.



Certifications are seen as important or very important for a wide variety of reasons

The Top Skills HR Professionals Have and Need

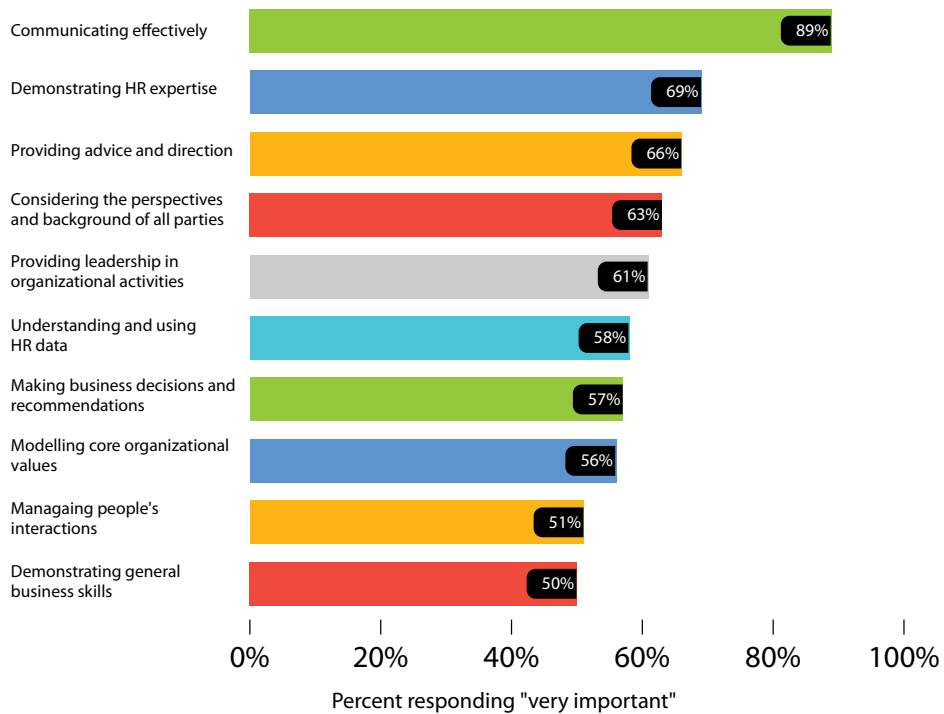
Finding: Effective communication is viewed as even more important than the ability to demonstrate HR expertise

Every skill listed in the survey was rated “very important” by at least half of the respondents. One skill stood out: just shy of 90% of respondents rated communicating effectively as very important. These findings were similar irrespective of organizational size.

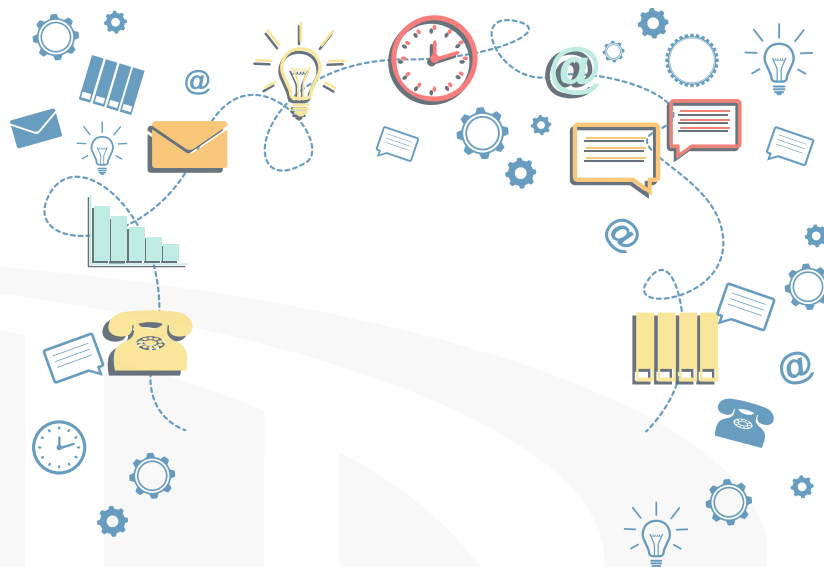
Communication rises to the top for two reasons. One is the nature of the work, which is dealing with people. That almost always demands excellence in communication. The second reason is that, due to the nature of organizational design, HR usually has to get results by influence rather than authority. HR professionals can't get much done by issuing edicts. They need to convince managers that HR's initiatives make sense, and so once again communication skills become paramount. The third reason is that some HR-delivered information potentially carries legal risks and so must be carefully communicated.



Survey Question: How important are the following skills to you, within your HR job? [percent answering "very important"]



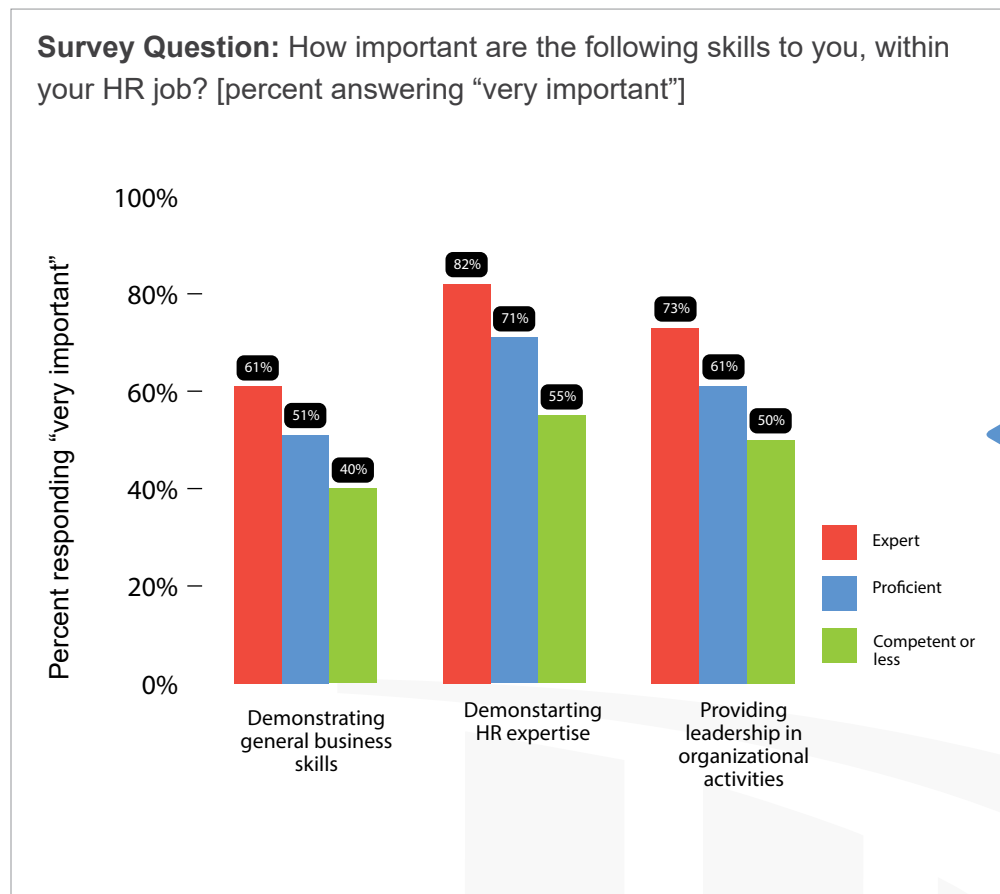
Almost 90% of HR professionals considered effective communication to be very important



Finding: There are three key areas that HR experts view as especially important

We examined the skills data in terms of three respondent groups—those who are expert, those who are proficient, and those who are competent or less. We found there were three skills that the most proficient HR professionals (that is, the experts) were much more likely to rate as highly important compared to less proficient pros. Those three areas are: demonstrating general business skills, demonstrating HR expertise, and providing leadership in organizational activities.

To some extent, the differences might be explained by seniority. Less-expert professionals, for example, won't face the same expectations to provide leadership. Nonetheless, this finding provides clear guidance on what ambitious HR pros will need to focus on as they move up towards becoming experts.

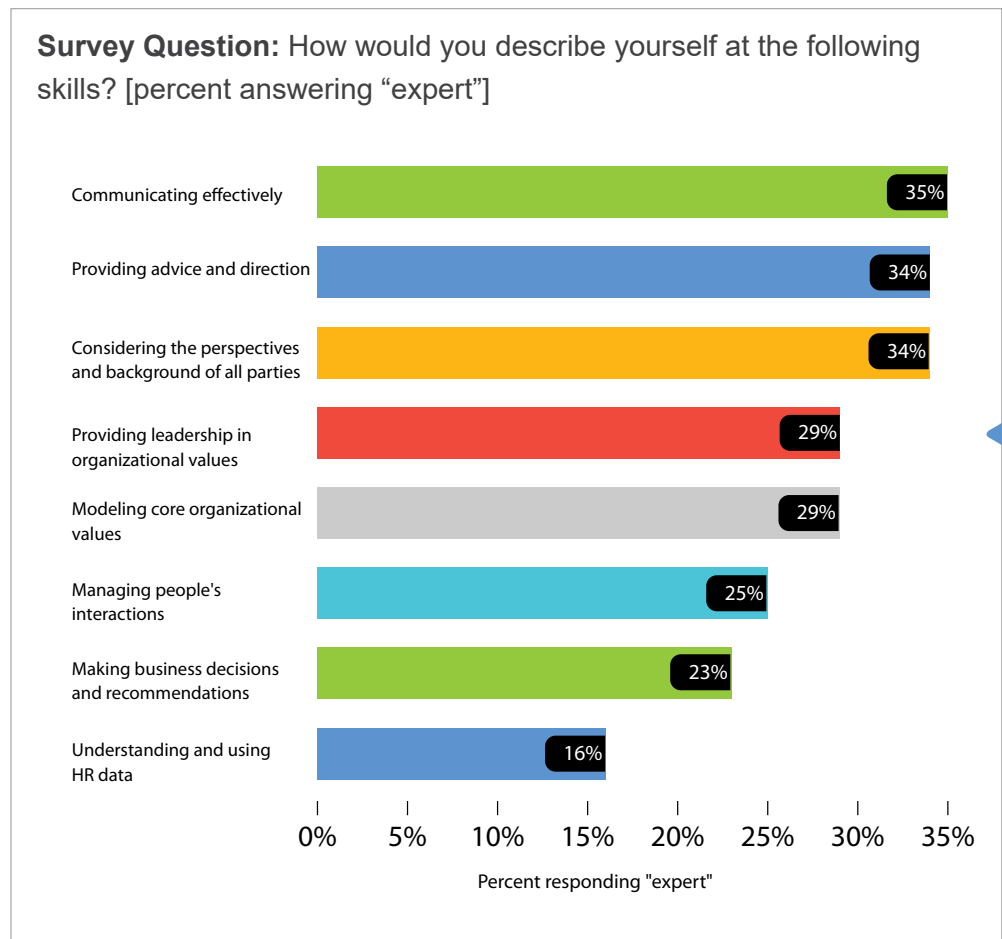


The most proficient HR pros were especially likely to rate leadership skills, HR expertise and business skills as critical

Finding: The weakest skill set for HR professionals is understanding and using HR data

The previous graphs showed which skills HR professionals thought were very important. The graph below shows respondents' degree of proficiency in those same skills. The skill respondents were least likely to rate themselves as expert in was understanding and using HR data. Historically, HR professionals—with the exception of compensation professionals—were not expected to be skilled in this area. That has begun to change.

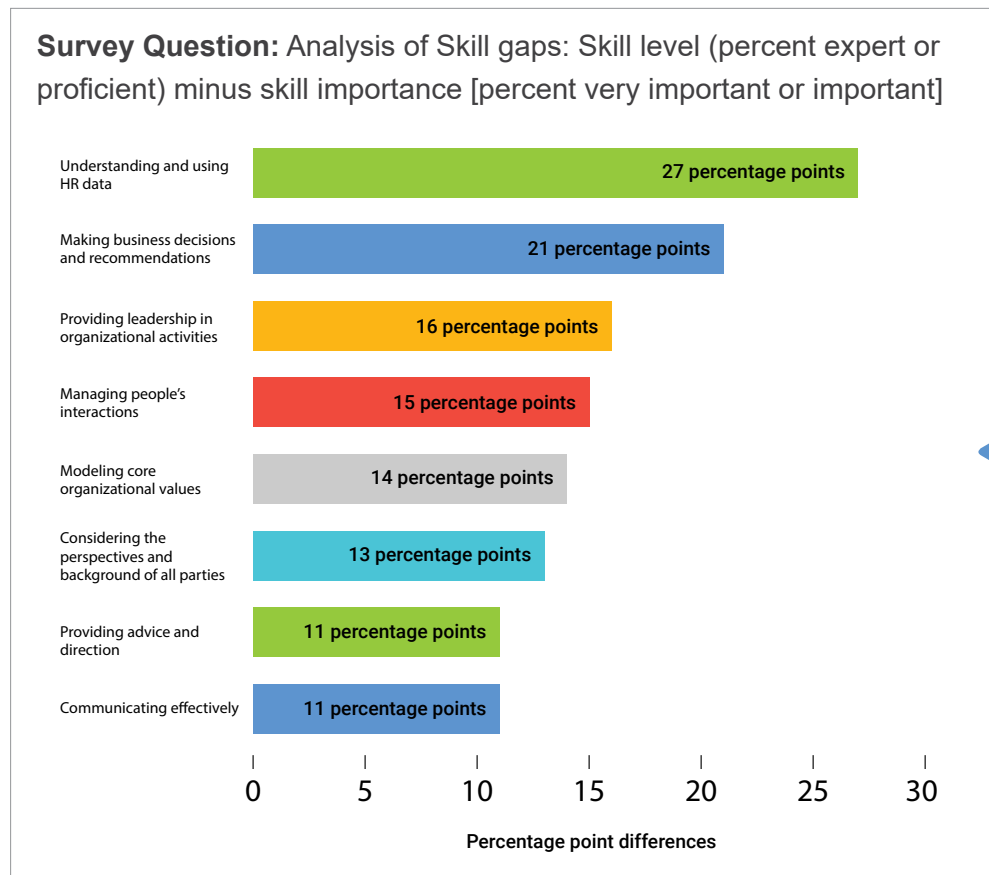
On a more positive note, it's encouraging to see that the area HR professionals rate as most important (that is, communicating effectively) is also the one they are most likely to rate themselves as expert in. However, they should be aware that it's unlikely HR will continue to be perceived as expert communicators if that communication is not backed with data.



Few HR professionals view themselves as expert in the areas of using HR data or making business decisions and recommendations

Finding: The gap between skill level and skill importance is greatest in the area of “understanding and using HR data”

The previous chart showed that HR was weak in the areas using data and making business decisions. The significance of this finding is reinforced by looking at the gap between skill level and skill importance. The biggest gaps are in these two areas: “understanding and using HR data” and “making business decisions and recommendations.” These are areas in which HR professionals may especially require training and development.



The smallest skills gap is in communicating effectively, which was also rated as the most important skill

Editor's Note: Please note that the graph above shows percentage point differences, not percentage differences.

Finding: HR experts tend to be much more skilled in three key areas

There are three areas in which we see large differences between the skill levels of experts and the skill levels of those with lower degrees of proficiency. They include:

- providing advice and direction
- making business decisions and recommendations
- providing leadership in organizational activities

This suggests that proficient HR professionals who have aspirations for becoming overall HR experts could focus on these three areas for developmental purposes.



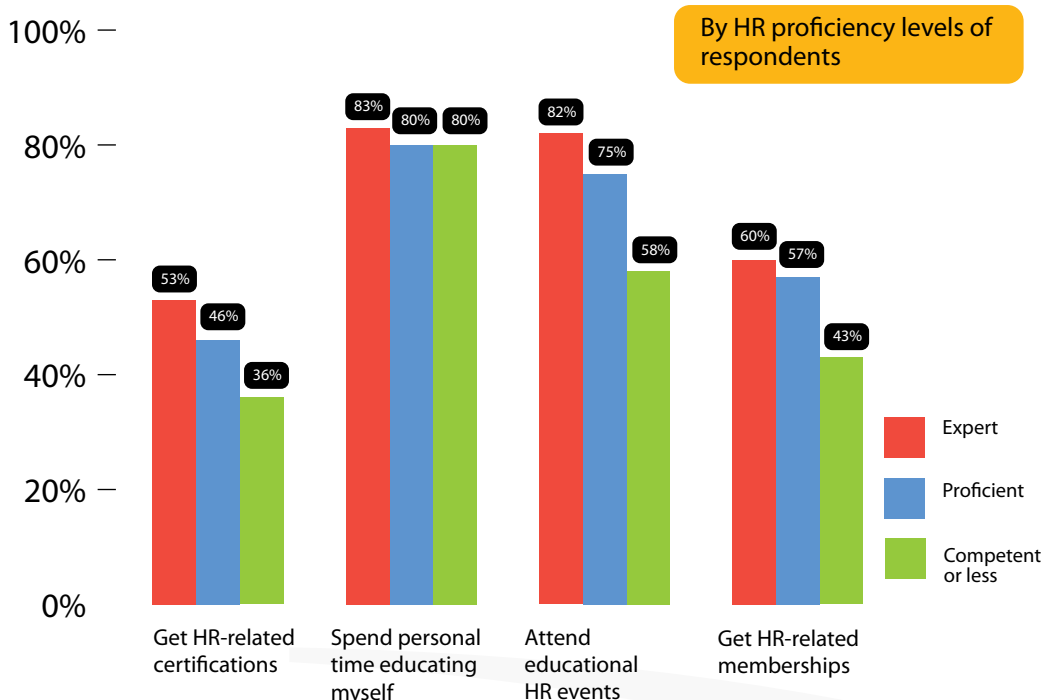
Investing in Career Development

Finding: Expert HR professionals invest more in their own career development

Most HR professionals invest their personal time in self-education, but some interesting distinctions show up when one compares the most proficient HR professionals to the rest. Across the board, HR experts were more likely to invest in development activities than their less skilled peers. One major difference was in getting HR certifications. These were sought out by 53% of experts but only 36% of those rated competent or less. The implication of this finding is that one way of becoming an expert—and being perceived to be an expert—is by pursuing certifications.



Survey Question: In what ways do you invest time and/or money in yourself for the purpose of career development? (select all that apply)

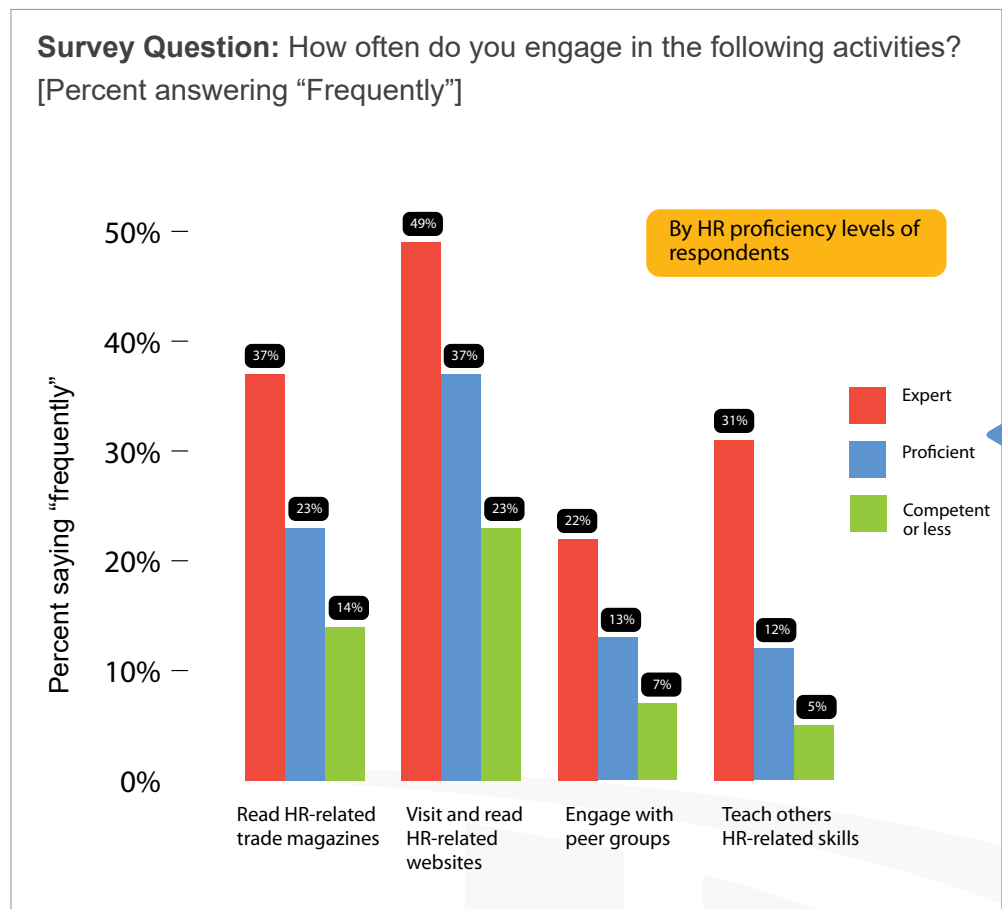


Experts are much more likely to invest in getting certifications

Finding: Expert HR professionals also engage in self-development much more frequently than their less proficient peers

Compared with their less proficient counterparts, experts engage in self-development activities to a strikingly higher degree. These include activities such as reading trade magazines and HR websites.

One missed opportunity for those who consider themselves “proficient” is that they are unlikely to teach others HR related skills: only 12% said they do so frequently versus 31% of those rated as experts. It’s a missed opportunity because one of the best ways to learn is to teach others. Therefore, proficient HR pros may be inhibiting their own path to expertise by not doing more training.



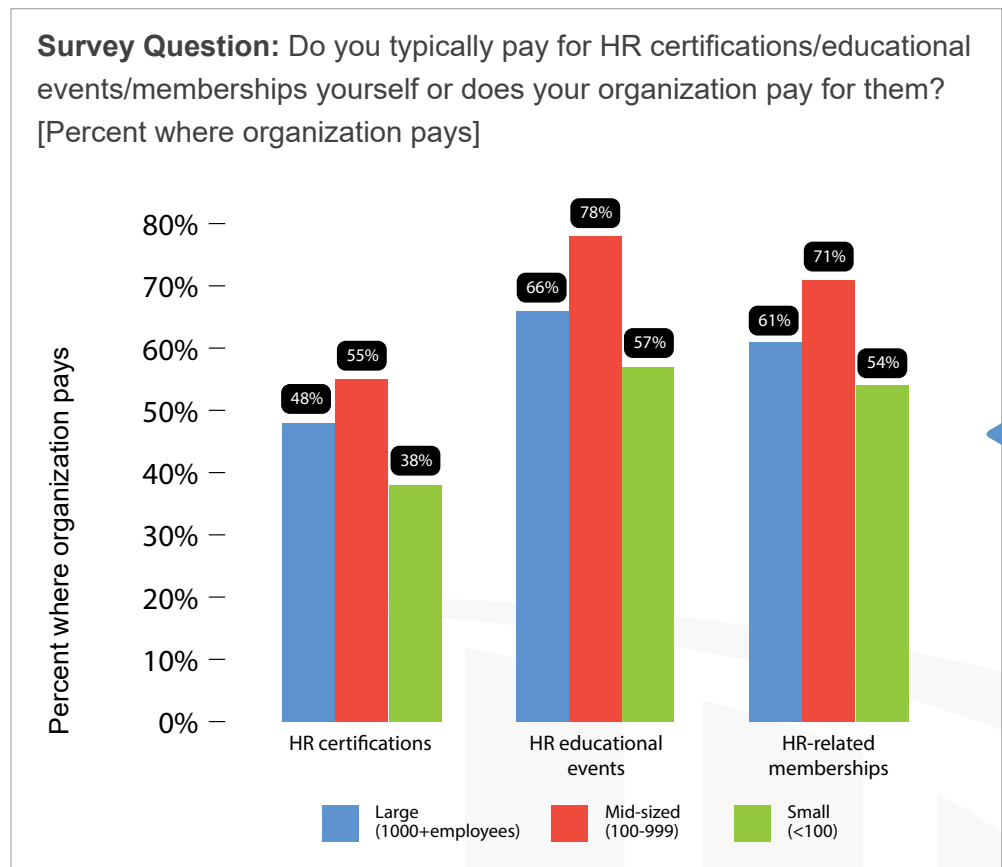
Experts are much more likely to teach HR skills to others

Finding: Mid-sized organizations are most likely to pay for HR certifications/educational events/memberships

One might expect that large organizations (1000 or more employees)—with their presumably deep pockets—would be more likely than mid-sized firms (100-999 employees) to pay for HR certifications, educational events or memberships. This is not, however, the case. Mid-sized organizations are notably more likely to pay for these things than either large or small firms.

It’s likely that in large firms there are more organizational layers between the average HR professional and the financial decision makers, giving them less influence in getting their certifications paid for. Large firms may also feel that once they have a number of HR professionals with certain certifications, adding more is not so important.

With small firms the reluctance to pay for certifications likely comes from the limited funds these firms have to invest in education.



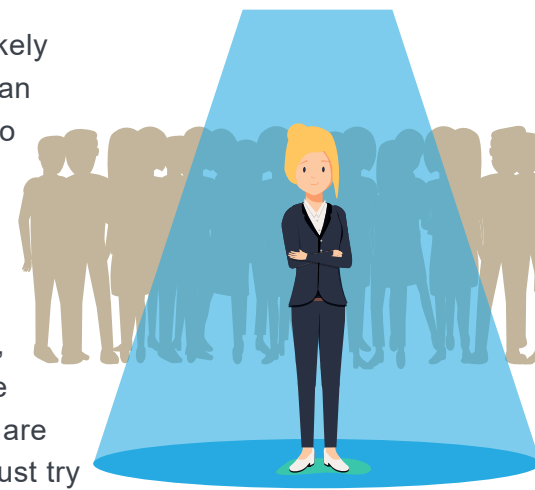
Mid-sized organizations are especially likely to pay for HR educational events

Finding: Higher-performing organizations are more generous in paying for HR education

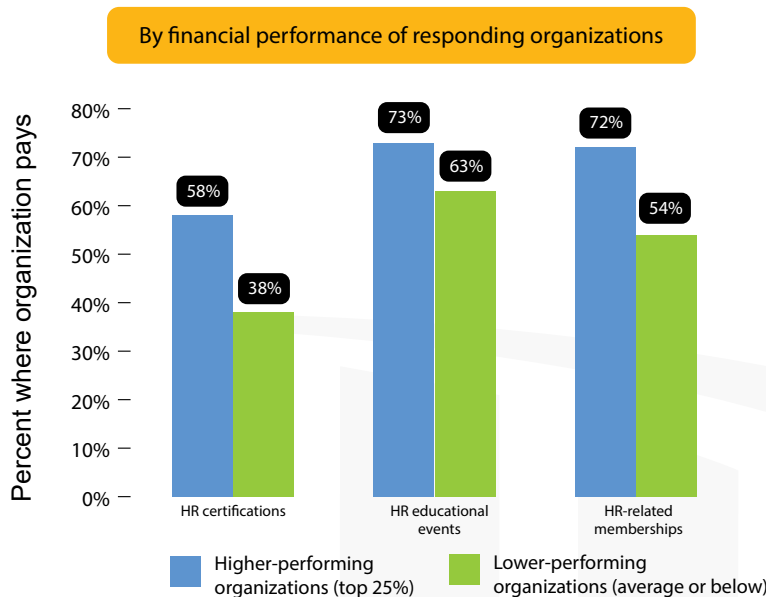
The survey included a question relating to the financial performance of participating organizations during the most recent fiscal year. Based on this question, we broke respondents into two groups: those that said their organization’s financial performance placed them in the top 25% compared to competitors in their industry, and those that did not.

We found that lower financial performing organizations were less likely to pay for HR certifications, educational events, or memberships than higher-performing ones. Therefore, HR professionals who choose to join less financially successful organizations should be aware that they are more likely to have to bear the costs of such educational opportunities themselves.

However, just because some HR pros have to pay for certifications, education or memberships themselves, that shouldn’t be an excuse for not doing so. As this study has shown, expert HR professionals are investing in education, and those in less profitable organizations must try harder if they want to keep up.



Survey Question: Do you typically pay for HR certifications/educational events/memberships yourself or does your organization pay for them? [percent where the organization pays, by financial performance of the organization]

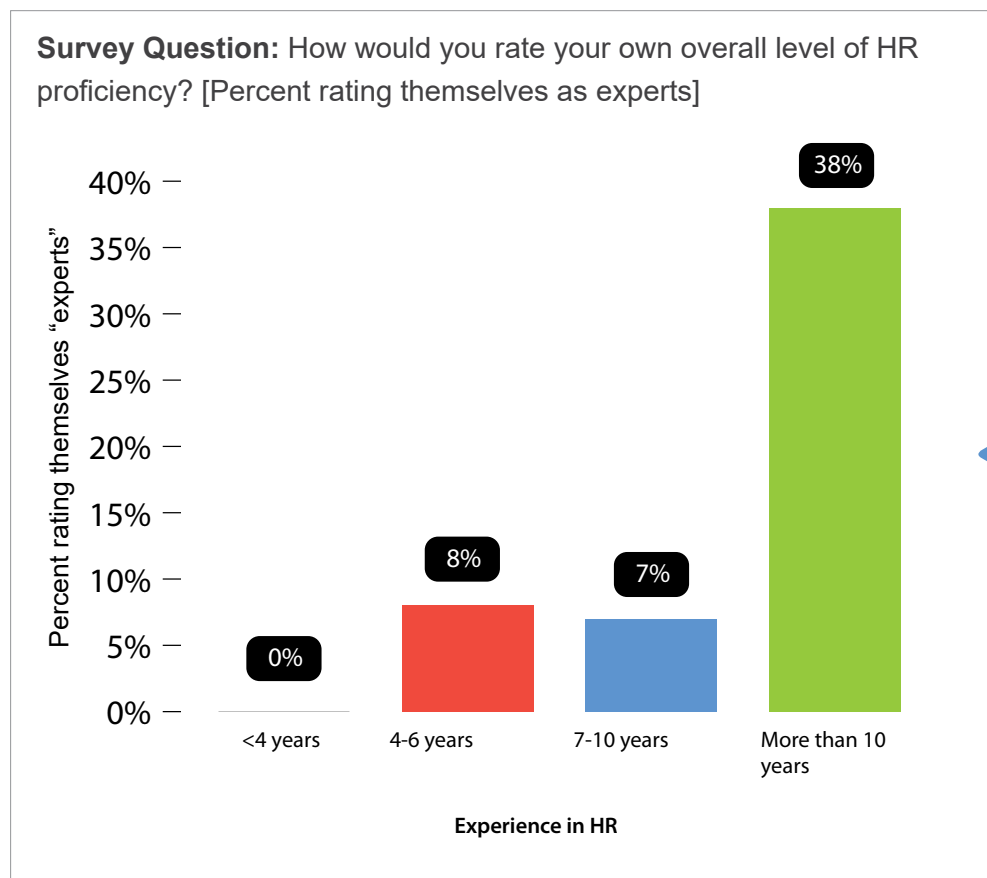


HR professionals in lower-performing organizations are more likely to pay out of their own pockets

The Role of Experience

Finding: Experience is a key driver of expertise

How do you get to be an expert? Education matters, but there is still no substitute for experience. Among those with more than 10 years of experience, 38% considered themselves as experts, whereas fewer than 10% of those with 4 to 6 years or 7 to 10 years of experience rated themselves as expert. HR is a difficult and subtle area, so education tested against real-world experience is the surest path to true expertise.



HR pros with fewer than 10 years of experience were unlikely to rate themselves as experts



Top Takeaways

What strategic and tactical lessons can we learn from this research? Here are several takeaways:

1

If you haven't already, seriously consider investing in formal education and certifications. Today, it is relatively common for HR professionals to have a master's degree and one or more certifications. HR professionals who think they can coast along without continually learning will risk being left behind.

2

Invest in self-development. The most proficient HR professionals invest more in their own development than other pros. Ambitious HR professionals should recognize that investing in self-development pays off. This can include a variety of actions, including:

- Studying for and getting HR-related certifications
- Attending HR-related conferences and trade shows
- Getting HR-related memberships
- Reading HR-related trade magazines and websites
- Participating in classes, webcasts, elearning and more
- Learning and connecting with other HR pros via social media sites
- Engaging with peer groups

3

Develop general business and leadership skills. The big differences between HR experts and less proficient HR pros tend to be showing general business skills, demonstrating HR expertise, and providing leadership in organizational activities.

4

Build expertise in understanding and using HR data to differentiate yourself. Communicating effectively may be the most important skill for HR pros, but over a third of respondents already consider themselves an expert in that skill set. HR pros interested in developing a more unique skill set should build expertise in understanding and using HR data since only 16% are experts in this area.

5

Teach HR to learn HR. One of the striking differences between experts and those less proficient in HR was that experts were much more likely to teach others. Since teaching others is one of the best ways to learn, HR pros should consider seizing more opportunities to teach others.

6

Determine what certifications you need. Newer HR professionals may want to earn one of the more common certifications early in their career to help signal that they have the necessary fundamental skills. More established HR professionals may want to attain more specialized certifications that will help them excel in specific area of interest.

7

Learn every day with online resources. One of the notable differences between expert and less-proficient HR professionals was how much the experts used HR-related websites. These are people who already see themselves as experts, yet they are still investing heavily in learning. There is an immense amount of HR information available online and HR pros need to keep an eye on it daily.

8

Become an expert conference goer. Conferences offer four benefits: the direct learning from the presentations, the indirect inspiration that comes from being in a learning environment where there is time to think, the discoveries that come from visiting the trade floor, and the networking that comes from meeting peers. Instead of passively attending a conference, it's worthwhile to have a strategy for how to get the most out of the experience, since you may only get to attend one conference each year.

9

Stay up to date with technologies. Technology is already important to just about every aspect of HR, and the impact of technology is only going to get greater. Be sure your education includes keeping abreast of HR technologies and their implications. Also, leverage learning technologies in order to become a better life-long learner.



About BambooHR

Serving more than 7,000 customers and 500,000 employees, BambooHR is the leading software provider powering the strategic evolution of HR in small and medium businesses. BambooHR's cloud-based system is an intuitive, affordable way for growing companies to manage essential employee information in a personalized Human Resources Information System (HRIS). Its software sets HR free to do great work and be more strategic, which helps the entire organization do the same. BambooHR's clients include innovators like SoundCloud, Foursquare, Freshbooks, Stance, Reddit, Magnolia Homes and others in more than 100 countries and 11 languages worldwide. To find out more, visit bamboohr.com or follow on Twitter at [@BambooHR](https://twitter.com/BambooHR).

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