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**Improving and Empowering US Army Human  
Resource Professionals through Certification**

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# Human Resources Certification

## **Foreword by James J. Galluzzo III, SPHR, Lieutenant Colonel, US Army (retired)**

When I prepared to transition from the Army, I knew my engineering degree and even MBA would be insufficient to demonstrate competence as a Human Resources generalist beyond the military. It was also evident that civilian companies continued to have difficulties understanding my experience as an Adjutant General's Corps Soldier and the applicable HR knowledge, skills and abilities I would bring to an organization. Fortunately, at that same time, the AG Corps had begun a partnership with the HR Certification Institute and I began to understand the practical value of certification. With study and practice I earned my credentials as a Senior Professional in Human Resources.

Certification validated that my knowledge and mastery of HR principles learned in the Army, would translate to civilian HR. It would open doors to civilian employers and they had assurance that I had demonstrated understanding of important HR principles that are essential to be a successful civilian HR practitioner. The certification is certainly beneficial at the end of a military career, but I also see great value and benefit to seek certification *during* a military career. Including certification as part of a Soldier's career development model and measure of proficiency are consistent with our warrior ethos and similar to skill identification badges or tabs that are used to distinguish those with specialized training and abilities.

The Army now has an opportunity to expand HR certification for Soldiers. This paper outlines key points that Army leaders should read and understand. The Army of 2025 depends on maximizing our human capital and that starts with a powerful, professional HR element. This can be achieved in part by acting on the recommendations in this paper. As a Soldier for Life, I will continue to advocate for our Soldiers, especially the nearly 40,000 dedicated HR professionals who continue to be Army Strong!

# Human Resources Certification

## Introduction

This white paper will focus on three key positive outcomes of Soldiers earning their Human Resources Certification. The first outcome is the betterment of the Army's Human Resources operations and contributions through a better educated and knowledgeable force. The second outcome is the ability of Soldiers to adequately translate their military service during their transition to the private sector. The third outcome is the increased post-service employment opportunities and compensation for Soldiers transitioned from the service, as well as decreasing Department of Defense Unemployment Compensation for Ex-servicemembers (UCX) expenses.

## Problem

The civilian HR field is becoming increasingly complicated due to expanding legislative restrictions and requirements, emerging technologies, and a greater emphasis on being tied to organizational goals and strategies. Gone are the days where effective HR is evaluated as consistently and cost-efficiently delivering the basics – employees are paid, pensions administered, attendance monitored, and employees recruited (Ulrich et al., 2015, p. 14).

While military HR continues to progress towards paralleled significance in its own environment and space, the gap between military and civilian HR skillsets continues to grow. It is critical actions be taken to build on the Army HR professional's knowledge, skills, and abilities that will achieve the dual-purpose of further professionalizing the Army HR function and empowering HR professionals with unique skillsets required to compete and succeed in the civilian marketplace.

The HR Certification Institute™ (HRCI) (HRCI, 2015), in coordination with business and HR leaders, academics, and practitioners from multiple industries, identified six key HR functional areas that detail the responsibilities of, and knowledge needed, by today's HR professional: Business Management and Strategy, Workforce Planning and Employment, Human Resource Development, Compensation and Benefits, Employee and Labor Relations, and Risk Management.

While the Army undoubtedly accomplishes these same functions, as do all types of organizations, many of those functions (i.e. recruiting, hiring, compensation and benefits) are segregated into specialized fields not directly related to, controlled by, or routinely performed by HR Soldiers. Additionally, there are distinct differences in the knowledge, skills, abilities and terminology when comparing military and civilian HR practices, to include knowledge and compliance of federal employment laws, best practices in hiring, talent management and employee engagement, and the junior- and mid-grade Soldier's understanding of how HR functions support strategic goals and objectives.

# Human Resources Certification

## Human Resources Certification

The HR Certification Institute (HRCI) offers the only HR certifications for HR generalists accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA). With a 40-year history and 150,000 certified professionals, HRCI certifications are viewed as the profession's gold-standard for HR certification. The Army and HRCI have enjoyed a partnership through the Training with Industry (TWI) program since 2013. During this time, HRCI has developed a greater understanding of the needs of the military HR professional, and service members have become increasingly aware of the benefits and opportunities related to HRCI credentials. The following certifications should be pursued by Army HR professionals as they progress in their careers based upon their experience, level of responsibility, and corresponding PME and professional development.

The Associate Professional in Human Resources (aPHR®) is an early-career HR certification achieved through a knowledge-based examination.<sup>1</sup> The aPHR was introduced in early 2016 to fill a certification gap in an HR professional's career, and answered a need to have a certification junior Soldiers were eligible for and would enable them to be more marketable to the civilian market upon their separation. Active and retired HR Soldiers were included with other industry professionals throughout the development process. The Army's target audience to receive this certification should be PVT-SSG and 2LT-CPT.

The Professional in Human Resources (PHR®) demonstrates mastery of the technical and operational aspects of HR practices and U.S. laws and regulations. The credential is targeted to the HR professional who focuses on program implementation, has a tactical/logistical orientation, is accountable to other HR professionals within the organization and has responsibilities that focus on the HR department rather than the whole organization. The Army's target audience to receive this certification should be SSG-SFC, WO1-CW2, and CPT-MAJ.

The Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR®) is the recognized credential for senior HR leaders in the U.S. The credential is targeted to the HR professional who has mastered the strategic and policy-making aspects of HR management in the U.S. It is designed for the HR professional who plans, rather than implements, HR policy, focuses on the "big picture," has ultimate accountability in the HR department, has breadth and depth of knowledge in all HR disciplines and understands the business beyond the HR function and influences the overall organization. The Army's target audience to receive this certification should be grades at and above, SFC, CW3, and MAJ, respectively.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the aPHR's recent creation, it is not yet accredited. It is expected to be accredited no later than Fall, 2017. This meets the accreditation requirements of the NDAA for FY 2016.

# Human Resources Certification

HRCI certifications are valid for three years, and recertification is required through demonstrated professional development or retaking the exam. Recertification demonstrates the commitment to staying current in the field of HR and building upon knowledge and experience while growing as a professional. Credits can be earned through the following categories: continuing education, instruction, on-the-job experience, research and publishing, leadership, and HR-related professional society membership. Many of these credits can be earned through Army HR elements of PME, college courses, workshops and webinars, on-the-job training, formal mentorship programs, instruction and training development, and membership with, as well as leadership roles within, the AG Corps Regimental Association.

## Continued Professionalization of Army Human Resources

*“HR Certification demonstrates competence across multiple areas of HR. Through the process of becoming certified, I was able to ensure I remained current in HR knowledge. The certification was the carrot that pushed me to put in the effort to better myself”* – CPT David Villarroel, PHR, USAR AGR AMEDD Officer<sup>2</sup>

Prior to my assignment as a TWI representative to HRCI, I had personal doubts that HR certification would help me be a better Army HR professional. I did not believe understanding civilian HR practices would apply to, or make me better at, my military craft. After going through the process to prepare, take, and pass the SPHR, as well as fully understanding the constant growth gained through recertification, I realized the significant value it could have added to my previous assignments, and will unquestionably impact my capabilities and performance in future assignments.

Improved performance is a result of greater knowledge and understanding of civilian HR concepts, knowledges, tasks, and best practices and applying those to military HR; the following are a few discernable descriptions of military applications, separated by HRCI’s HR functional areas:

- Business Management and Strategy
  - Integrating and aligning HR to achieve organizational and leader goals and objectives
  - Developing and utilizing HR metrics to measure achievement of the Army’s and organization’s strategic goals and objectives
  - Increased monitoring of legislative and regulatory environment to forecast potential changes and their impact to the organization
  - Participating in strategic decision-making and due diligence activities

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<sup>2</sup> With the exception of David Siler’s quote, all italicized quotes referenced in this paper are responses to a survey created by the author to capture individual perceptions of the value of HR certification from certified and serving HR Soldiers. Siler’s quote was obtained during his professional review of this paper.

# Human Resources Certification

- Workforce Planning and Employment
  - Understanding laws and regulations and their effect on underlying workforce planning and employment activities
  - Identification of workforce requirements to achieve organizational short- and long-term goals and objectives
  - Assessment of internal workforce
  - Benefits and best practices of comprehensive onboarding processes
  - Developing, implementing and evaluating succession planning, as well as retention strategies and practices
- Human Resource Development
  - Talent management practices to assess talent, develop career paths, and manage placement of high-potential Soldiers
  - Conducting needs assessments to establish priorities, training requirements, and methods to best improve Soldier and organizational performance
  - Understanding laws and regulations that affect human resources development
- Compensation and Benefits
  - Understanding laws, regulations, and current market practices that enable a greater ability to communicate and promote the value of the Army's total compensation package
  - Analyzing the relationships between rewards and performance
- Employee and Labor Relations
  - Understanding of laws and regulations related to employee and labor relations, especially when managing DA Civilians
  - Methods to assess organizational climate and developing and implementing programs that promote a positive organizational culture
  - Establishing, updating, communicating and monitoring application and enforcement of workplace procedures and policies
  - Administering and evaluating grievance/dispute resolution
  - Understanding disparate impact, termination practices, and employee relations to ensure legal and regulatory compliance while maintaining superior Soldier engagement and empowerment
- Risk Management
  - Understanding laws and regulations as they apply to risk management
  - Greater understanding of risk mitigation strategies
  - Reinforcement of policies and procedures related to appropriate use of electronic media and hardware and internal and external privacy policies
  - Better understanding and application of emergency contingency planning

## Human Resources Certification

Understanding and reaching proficiency in civilian HR practices is not just a matter of future employability, but is a tenet of the Army's Profession of Arms in that it "sponsors continuous self-assessment, learning and development that together enable the Army to be an adaptive, learning profession." (CAPE, 2011) Soldiers are required to meet institutionalized training objectives and structured self-development, and are encouraged to set and meet personal self-development goals such as pursuing college education and advanced degree programs. Lacking is guided self-development, which is "recommended but optional learning that will help keep personnel prepared for changing technical, functional, and leadership responsibilities throughout their career" (AR 350-1, para 1-11c(2)), specifically focused on HR core competencies. Promoting, funding, and recognizing progressive HR certification of Soldiers will fill this gap, increasing the Army HR professional's awareness, competency, and professionalism, while spring boarding future military HR practices.

The progression from aPHR to PHR to SPHR closely mirrors progression in PME and civilian education levels, and are highlighted in the Army's professional development regulations, DA Pamphlets 600-25 and 600-3, which clearly state Army HR Soldiers should pursue HR certifications, and are included in each cohort's career development plans' self-development goals along with degree completion. The progression from tactical to organizational to strategic knowledges represented by certification, as well as the continuing education required for recertification, can play a significant role in furthering the professionalism of Army HR Soldiers.

*"HR certification has increased my performance level because it has changed my mindset of thinking. I have benefited from my individual studying in preparation for certification...to watch how I can apply so many ideas and principles to different areas in my job amazes me." MSG Jimmie Wimberly, PHR, 7ID G1 Operations NCO*

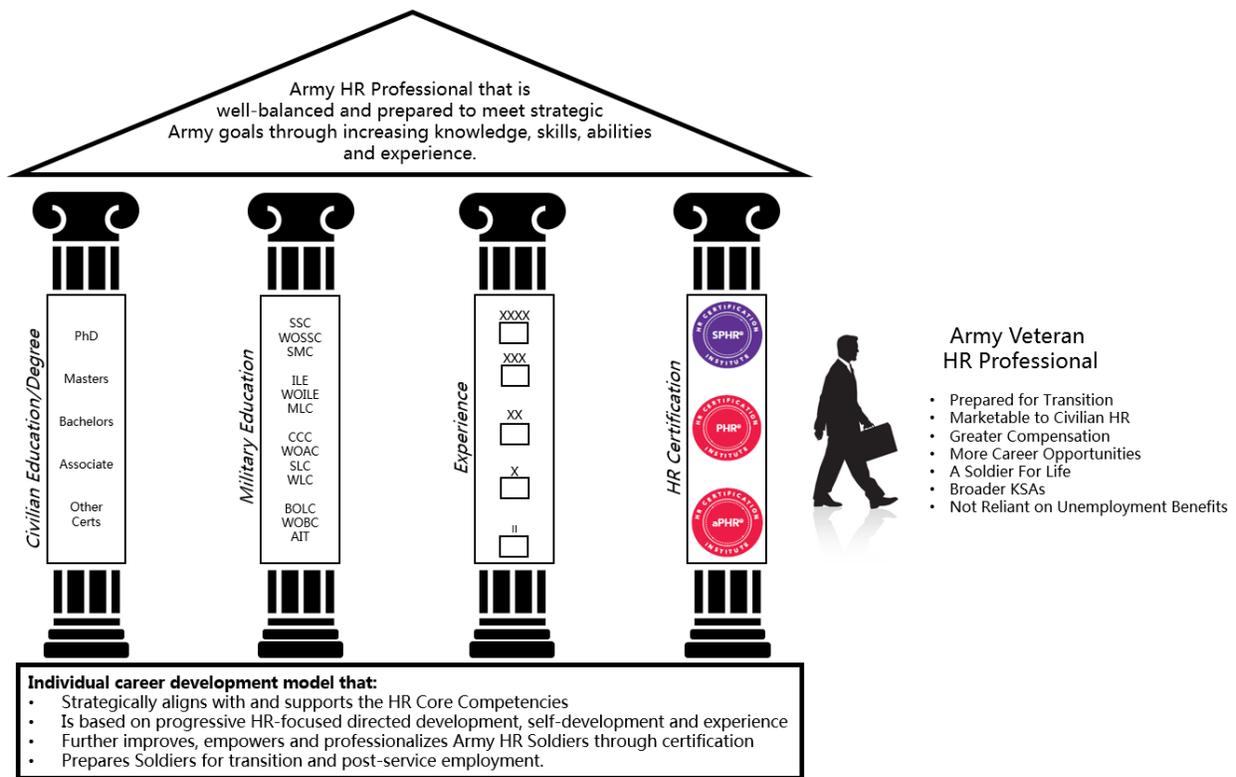
Leaders continually, and rightfully so, counsel and promote college education as a means of improving one's self and being more competitive for promotion. While regulations recommend programs that relate to their MOS, semi-centralized promotion points, and in most cases, centralized promotion boards do not place any emphasis on the type of degree attained; merely that the Soldier has pursued and achieved higher education. Achieving HR certification also meets the goals of self-improvement and achieving promotion points, but additionally provides *HR-focused* education, empowerment, and improvements to the individual and their organization.

Achievement of the aPHR during entry level service will create a foundation for professional development that can be built upon through recertification requirements, and as Soldiers progress in their career and hold positions of greater responsibility, they will meet eligibility requirements that qualify them to seek higher HR certifications, culminating in the SPHR. Progressing to and achieving the SPHR will prepare senior HR professionals to readily meet the challenges of positioning HR as a strategic partner

# Human Resources Certification

in any organization. This continuous cycle of development and progressive certification will not only create a more professionalized AG Corps, but significantly close the knowledge gap transitioning Soldiers will need to be competitive in the civilian marketplace.

HR certification of Army HR Soldiers also meets the DOD Transition Assistance Program's and Transition to Veterans Program Office's directive that all Service members be required to incorporate civilian career development through the span of their military careers ensuring Service members are "career ready" upon separation from active service (TAP, nd.).



## Soldiers in Transition

“47 percent of veterans feel they’re unprepared for their career transition out of the military, while 77 percent of employers said veterans could do a better job translating their military skills into corporate jobs.” ~ John Boyle, Citizen-Times (Boyle, J, 2014)

One of the greatest hurdles Soldiers face while transitioning to the civilian sector is relating their military education, skills, and experience into language recruiters and hiring managers can easily understand. Military job titles, acronyms, policy and

## Human Resources Certification

processes generally have related civilian terminology, but without knowledge of corresponding civilian practices and language, transitioning Soldiers often create resumes using military terminology, or turn to resume building and translation resources that often fail to accurately capture the marketability of what the Soldier brings to the table.

*"With 50%+ civilian employers either "requiring" or "preferring" HR certification from HR applicants, transitioning Soldiers must have these credentials in order to be competitive for open positions... or face a competitive disadvantage." ~ David Siler, SPHR, GPHR, HRMP, HRBP ~ Managing Partner, Distinctive HR, Inc.*

Making this translation is a critical component to the successful transition of Soldiers, and is one of the baseline tenets of the DoD's Credentialing Opportunities On-Line (COOL) program: "When you transition back to civilian employment, credentials help you translate your military training and experience into something civilian employers can easily recognize. That can help you get hired, get a better job, or promoted sooner!" (COOL, nd.) A transitioning HR Soldier with a well-respected and substantive credential will be able and well-prepared to represent to employers that, in addition to the desired attributes of a Soldier, their mastery of HR skills are on par with or exceed those of their civilian peers.

### **Post-Service Employment and Opportunities**

*"...the greatest value of certification is private sector employment. It validates the individual's knowledge of where they fit within the global HR community, provides them a certification that will assist in both employment and promotion in the private sector, and imbues the individual with a duty to stay certified and keep track of current HR issues and legislation." CW2 Michael T. Estes, PHR, VA ARNG HR Technician*

HR Certification leads to lower HR veteran unemployment, as well as elevated entry into the civilian market and greater earning power. Many Soldiers delay pursuit of certification until close to or after separation, which can result in a period of unemployment or underemployment until they are able to meet the requirement or validate their abilities to employers. Soldiers who have obtained and maintained their certification during their service already understand the relatability of their experiences, have a deeper understanding of civilian HR requirements and best practices, and are much better positioned to successfully transition than their counterparts who delay or choose not to seek certification.

Veterans with HR Certification can also expect many other increased opportunities and benefits. In a 2014 Human Resources Research Organization (HUM-RRO) study commissioned by HRCI, in which HR professionals, with and without PHRs and SPHRs, and their supervisors, were both surveyed it was found that:

## Human Resources Certification

- 2 out of 3 HR supervisors preferred HRCI certified professionals over similarly qualified candidates
- 1 in 5 HR supervisors indicated their organization requires HR certification when hiring for at least some of their positions
- PHRs and SPHRs earned an average of \$4,547 and \$19,712, respectively, more per year than their non-certified counterparts.
- Annual income growth for PHRs and SPHRs were \$292 and \$983, respectively, higher per year than their non-certified counterparts.
- Certified HR professionals reported a higher level of career satisfaction
- HRCI-certified professionals report better career outcomes than their non-certified counterparts.

### **Department of Defense Unemployment Compensation for Ex-Servicemembers (UCX)**

An auxiliary, yet important, benefit of funding HR certification for Soldiers is decreased Department of Defense UCX expenses. Transitioning Soldiers who are not competitive for open positions in the civilian workforce will draw unemployment benefits once they complete their military service period. In 2010 and 2011, 53% of Veterans per year faced a period of unemployment within 15 months of separation, and between 2007 and 2013, the national average duration of Veteran military unemployment usage rose from 18 to 22 weeks (VA, 2015. Pg. 10). While a strengthening economy, combined with government and corporate efforts on multiple fronts, have reduced veteran unemployment to its lowest level in seven years (Johnson, 2015), funding HR certification will further strengthen and impact these efforts.

HR certification's effect on transitioning Soldier's and veteran's increased marketability and competitiveness in the private sector will play a large role in reducing the time searching for a job, as well as the length of time they require UCX benefits. Though exact benefits vary from state to state, the return on investment of funding one HR certification is realized in the reduction of just one to two weeks of UCX payments as a result of a shortened job search. Sponsoring and encouraging professional accreditation prior to military separation should be measured, but is expected to have a profound cost-benefit impact.

# Human Resources Certification

## Concept

The Army can further professionalize its HR function and operations while simultaneously improving and empowering HR Soldiers while in service, transitioning, and post service by (1) providing increased funding and opportunities for Soldiers to seek and maintain HR certification and (2) promoting HR certification as an expectation of continuing education via leadership communications, increased awareness during professional military education courses, centralized selection board instruction and career development maps.

## Conclusion

Human Resources Certification can be a key element to increasing Army's Human Resources operations and organizational contributions through a better educated and knowledgeable force. In addition, certified HR Soldiers will be prepared for a successful transition from the service and realize increased post-service employment opportunities and compensation, while simultaneously reducing DoD UCX costs. Funded credentialing programs and increased leader support of professional credentialing will greatly increase the number of HR-certified Soldiers and the contributions they provide their organizations and individual self-development.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The NDAA for FY 2015, Public Law 113-291, Section 551 directs the Secretary of Defense "shall carry out a program to enable members of the armed forces to obtain, while serving in the armed forces, professional credentials related to military training that (1) are acquired during service in the armed forces incident to the performance of their military duties; and (2) translate into civilian occupations." The Law continues to direct the Secretary of Defense "shall provide for the payment of expenses of members for professional accreditation, State-imposed and professional licenses, professional certification, and related expenses." It further defines expenses to include, "expenses for class room instruction, hands-on training (and associated material), manuals, study guides and materials, text books, processing fees, and test fees and related fees. The NDAA for FY16 updates the law to include the requirement that any credentialing program used in connection with the program is accredited not later than three years after enactment of the NDAA for FY16 by an accreditation body that meets specific standards.

## Human Resources Certification

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