AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

_____Yushan Hsu_____ for the _____Master of Science_____

in _____Psychology_____ presented _____April 1, 2013_____

Title: The Benefits of Human Resources Certifications for Human Resources_____

Professionals and Their Organizations_____

Abstract Approved:_____

The purpose of this study was to examine (a) what motivates Human Resource (HR)

professionals to obtain HR certifications and (b) the benefits of HR certifications for the

employee and his or her organization. I surveyed 291 HR professionals from across

America and found that HR professionals were more likely to obtain an HR certification,

or to be planning to obtain one, if their organization provided support to prepare for the

certification. They were also more likely to obtain an HR certification, or to be planning

to obtain one, if they could perceived more benefits associated with being certified. I also

found that HR professionals with an HR certification made more money than those

without one, even after controlling for years of HR experience. HR professionals with an

HR certification also had higher occupational commitment than those without one. The

findings of this study may help HR professionals determine whether working for an HR

certification would be beneficial to their careers. The findings may also help

organizations and their HR departments determine whether they want to select HR

professionals with certifications and/or encourage their HR professionals to obtain one.

Further, this study may help organizations to develop more effective strategies for

motivating HR professionals to obtain HR certifications.

The Benefits of Human Resources Certifications for Human Resources Professionals and

Their Organizations

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Psychology

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science

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by

Yushan Hsu

April, 2013

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CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW

**Introduction**

For many years, there has been an increasing demand in the business field for creating unbiased and unequivocal principles and standards to measure job applicants' knowledge, skills, and job proficiency. With the help of recognized and accredited tests and assessments, employers can better discover and select the employee with the best person-job fit for the organizations. At this point, professional certifications have become one of the reliable and commonly-accepted selection tools to help individuals distinguish themselves from other job applicants and help employers to identify the potential qualified employees. According to Chatman (1989), certifications can help organizations determine whether applicants or employees can perform at an acceptable level of performance or whether they are appropriate for a certain job position. Also, Carter (2005) mentioned that, as the U.S. economy has changed from manufacturing oriented to service oriented, employers have been accepting and using certifications as an indicator to determine whether a job applicant/employee is competent and capable for a certain job position. In other words, U.S. industry has changed from manufacturing, to providing services to customers, to information workers, the demand for skillful laborers has increased. Carter also pointed out that the increasing acceptance for certifications could help diversity in the job market because not all of the employees have the job training from work, some (especially minority groups) might have the training from outside of the organization, such as schools or occupational institutes (Veum, 1993).

Similarly, Eck (1993) suggested that certification is helpful for employees who do not have a college degree because it can help them to compete with others for higher demanding or higher paying jobs. Some people might not be interested in going to college and get a college degree because it is time consuming and cost money. From this perspective, certifications create an opportunity for those without a college degree to pursue career advancement, because earning a certification may reduce the cost and time investment compared to going to college. Supporting this point, Lengnich-Hall and Aguinis (2012) argued human resource (HR) professionals who do not have college degrees or do not have a college degree in HR related field would be the most likely to benefit from earning an HR certification. As described by Blau, Fertig, and Zeitz (2009), certifications can be used as important symbols by workers to receive job opportunities and better salary, while employers can use certifications to present an image of prestige and authority. If certification is a valid predictor and a company uses it as a device to notice and select the best applicants, this means a company can minimize the potential costs and reduce the possible risks of hiring the wrong people (Lengnich-Hall & Aguinis, 2012). In other words, the company can maximize the chance of hiring the right people and placing them at the right job position. As described by McKillip and Owens (2000), the goal of certification is trying to convince professionals and their employers to agree that certified professionals can perform job tasks better than those who are not certified.

In the field of HR, Wiley (1995) indicated that from an organizational perspective, certified HR professionals are more likely to provide better advice and suggestions than those who are not certified. Similarly, Lengnich-Hall and Aguinis (2012) pointed out that the reputation of an HR department should be optimized, and the department

performance should be enhanced when there are more certified professionals engaged in the department activities because certified HR professionals have already possessed the preexisting knowledge and skills and, thus, are more likely to generate higher productivity and effectiveness. To examine how HR professionals evaluate HR certifications, Lengnich-Hall and Aguinis (2012) conducted a survey at two large metropolitan chapters of the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM). Respondents rated their responses with nine Likert-scaled statements, which determined the attitudes and perceptions toward HR certifications. The results revealed five significant differences between certified and uncertified HR professionals: (a) certified HR professionals performed better than uncertified professionals, (b) certified professionals preferred to hire an applicant who is already certified, (c) certified HR professionals required certifications when hiring HR employees, (d) when posting jobs, certified HR professionals stated the requirement for certification, (e) certified job applicants were more qualified than uncertified applicants if everything was being equal. Thus, they concluded that those who were HR certified are more favorable and positive for using certification as a selection tool than those who were not certified,

According to Blau, Fertig, and Zeitz (2009), if taking a certification exam can help an individual to increase task performance, enlarge knowledge attainment, and enhance the ability to meet customer needs, employers and employees will regard certifications as more valuable and significant. Also, Carter (2005) indicated that the increase in the use of certifications in the HR field is because HR certifications have gained more acceptance as measures of standardized knowledge, and employers are more likely to hire employees who have already had in-the-field expertise. Wiley (1992)

described that certification can function in two main directions in job markets. First, certification can define and limit the supply of labor, which means that not everyone can be perceived or hired as in-the-field professionals without the proof of competency. Certification can hinder and prevent the supply of insufficient personnel professionals and specialists to enter the field. In other words, this means certified individuals who proved they were capable of performing would be more qualified for a professional job position. The second function is that certification can restrict and block incompetent workers from getting the premium and high position jobs in the field. This means that certifications can help to screen out the marginal and incompetent workers who possess little or insufficient abilities and competency to be an HR professional.

The purpose of this study is to explore the benefits of HR certification for HR professionals and for their organizations. At the individual level, the main questions I hope to answer are whether an HR certification enhances an HR professional's knowledge and competency, professional credibility, career advancement, and salary. At the organizational level, does having one's HR professionals certified increase their commitment to their organization and to their occupation? Does it increase the effectiveness of the HR department?

**Organizational Values and HR Certification**

Williams (2002) stated that organizational values influence how an organization operates and how its employees behave and conduct toward the final goal. If we understand what factors influence an organization to value HR certification, we can better recognize the organization's HR practices regarding certification and how employees perceive certification (Garza & Morgeson, 2012). Toh, Morgeson, and Campion (2008)

found that the organizational values of innovation, people-orientation, and stability influence the use of HR certification as a selection tool. First, innovative organizations expect and favor employees who are willing to take risks, be competitive, and have the ability to detect and discover potential opportunities. The characteristic of a typical highly innovative organization is that it has the ability to be quick to change and fit into the surrounding environment. An example of an innovative company might be one in the electronic or information technology industry. The innovative organizations follow the trend of the current environment based on consumers' demands to provide and upgrade the service and products to the final customers. Therefore, highly innovative organizations are more likely to hire already competent applicants from the job market rather than spending much of time and money training and developing employees.

Thus, innovative organizations require the people they hire from the job market to immediately meet their selection requirements in order to be ready to work right away. In other words, innovative organizations would be more interested in those who are certified HR professionals because they are already equipped with preexisting knowledge and skills and are ready to apply what they have learned to the job. Therefore, highly innovative organizations are more likely to motivate and reward employees based on their level of knowledge or level of skills. This shows that employees in the innovative organizations are more likely to earn HR certification so they can be recognized and rewarded by the level of their competency (Toh et al., 2008).

The characteristics of people-oriented organizations are being supporting and focusing on employees' development. These organizations are trying to establish long term relationships with their employees. These organizations look forward to employees'

participation and involvement and, thus, encourage and promote employees' collaboration. Because these types of organizations care for and support their employees, they ensure that their employees have the opportunities to develop and advance themselves to their full potential (Garza & Morgeson, 2012). In other words, these organizations highly value employee development and inspire their employees to continuously learn in their career life. Therefore, people-oriented organizations are more likely to consider HR certification when making selection decisions because they expect their employees to continue with long term career development (Toh et al., 2008).

Organizations that emphasize stability focus more on employees' training and development. In order to reach organization's goal in a consistent way, stable organizations are likely to use extensive training to predict and conform employee behaviors (Toh et al., 2008). They are like people-oriented organizations, which also focus on developing long term relationships with their employees. Thus, we can imagine stability-oriented organizations favoring routine work, conformity, and following the established systems and procedures. Thus, unlike innovative organizations and people-oriented organizations, organizations that value stability would prefer to train and develop their own human resources rather than encouraging employees to seek outside certifications (Garza & Morgeson, 2012). Hence, stable organizations may be less concerned with hiring HR certified professionals. As a result, based on the study of three types of organizational values, Garza and Morgeson proposed that innovative organizations value HR certified people the most, followed by people-organizations, while stable organizations are the least likely to acquire people with HR certifications.

On the question of whether HR certification benefits an organization, Wang and Yancey (2012) asked the top HR executive at 94 credit unions how many cutting edge selection methods were used at their institutions. While having a degree in HR management or industrial-organizational psychology was related to using more cutting edge selection methods, having an HR certification was not a significant predictor of using more cutting edge selection methods.

**Individual Values and HR Certification**

According to Sincoff and Owen (2004), there is no specific certification requirement for HR professionals to demonstrate their work in the field; also, the certifications granted by the Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI) are not commonly perceived as a standard measurement to accurately evaluate HR professionals' abilities to practice in the field (Sincoff & Owen, 2004). Therefore, there are various personal motives and reasons for individuals to pursue certifications. For example, according to Wiley's (1992) study, the reasons for individuals to pursue certifications include demonstrating one's professional achievement, fulfilling personal satisfaction, helping in career advancement, examining the understanding of the field, and earning recognition from peers.

Blau, Fertig, and Zeitz (2009) indicated that the benefit of earning a professional certification is that individuals can change self-identity and they feel they are more competent and professional to solve problems. In other words, they feel they have more control over their careers. After earning a certification, they feel they are more capable and more professional to handle the problems and, at the same time, they can be independent from employers because the certification status empowers them to be more

competitive and stand out from other applicants in the HR labor market (Blau et al., 2009). Moreover, certification enforces an employee to keep up-to-date HR knowledge and skills and makes him or her able to elaborate and display techniques and readiness (Blau et al., 2009). Collectively, the benefits of certification for individuals seem attractive and encouraging. Further, because professional certification requires participants to spend much time and effort learning and dedicating to the preparation work, organizations and peers may feel this is a great approval of personal advancement and commitment (Fertig, 2011; Jones & Pittman, 1982). Even though acquiring a certification is time consuming and costs money, the benefits of certifications for an individual seem to outweigh the negative side of costs. For organizations requesting assessment to measure an individual's competency and capability, certification is assumed to provide some minimal degree of assurance that someone has met the requirement and obtain the needed skills and knowledge to perform the job (Wiley, 1992).

Lester, Fertig, and Dwyer (2011) investigated organizational leaders' opinions and acceptance about the benefits of having HR-certified professionals in the organization. The data were analyzed based on whether the leaders themselves hold certifications (i.e., not certified, HR certified, or non-HR certified). The test results revealed that from the 116 managerial respondents, 104 supervisors (90%) agreed that having a HR-certified professional at work is beneficial to the organization. Moreover, they found that HR-certified supervisors with HR-certified employees were more likely to be seen as credible and trustworthy ($r^2 = .24$, $p < .05$), and at the same time, more likely to bring credibility to the organization. Also, the test revealed that HR-certified supervisors were more likely to consider whether applicants have an HR-certification

when it comes to hiring decisions ($r^2 = .32$, $p < .05$). Moreover, Anderson, Barrett, and Schwager (2005) found that HR professionals with more than 10 years of HR experience valued certifications more than those with less experience. Therefore, those HR-certified professionals and those professionals with more experience tend to value certification more.

In another study, Lester, Mencl, Maranto, Bourne, and Keaveny (2010) examined 190 recent college graduates and found that students who passed the Professional in Human Resource (PHR) certification exam had more chances than those who did not take or did not pass the exam to be hired in an HR position. There is a statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2(1) = 5.45$, $p < .05$) between graduates who passed the PHR certification exam and the number of individuals hired in an HR field. Thus, this study suggests that HR majors would benefit from investing their time and money to pass the PHR certification exam because the probability for them of being hired in the HR field right after graduation is higher than those who did not pass or did not take the PHR exam (Lester et al., 2010).

**Demand for HR Certification in the Labor Market**

Despite the benefits, the growing popularity, and other positive aspects of HR certification, the demand for certification in the labor market does not seem alluring. Even though most professional certifications provide individuals the potential benefits of career advancement, credibility, and continuing learning opportunities, there is little evidence to prove that these potential benefits are actually achieved by those certified professionals (Aguinis, Michaelis & Jones, 2005; Blau et al., 2009). According to the study of Aguinis et al. (2005), several factors may explain the lack of demand for

certified HR professionals. First, there are few HR institutes or professional organizations (e.g., Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology) related to employee selection and assessment that recommend or require the companies to promote the use of human resource credentials and certifications when hiring. Also, Pilenzo (2009) indicated the certification process would not have significant value if it could not significantly define and establish the performance standards that specify the HR practices. Second, there is no strong support of affirmation and endorsement for certification credentials to be used as a selection tool (Aguinis et al., 2005). Third, there is an insufficient amount of HR certification studies regarding the topics of validity, utility or adverse impact to discover further related issues (Aguinis et al., 2005). As Hyland and Muchinsky (1990) observed, there is no significant relationship between professional certifications and one's job performance. Cohen (2012) pointed out that obtaining an HR certification or a related degree does not promise a better or more effective performance at work. However, Cohen (2012) inferred a certification does show an individual's dedication to his or her HR career and the willingness to obtain up-to-date HR knowledge.

Aguinis et al. (2005) conducted a study of 1,873 HR job announcements on job hunting websites for a period of one week. The websites included www.monster.com, www.shrm.org, www.hotjobs.yahoo.com, and www.careerbuilder.com. Results revealed that only nine job announcements required HR certification and only 70 job announcements preferred applicants with any type of HR certification. However, even though the demand for HR certified professionals seemed low, the demand for HR director, HR generalist and jobs requiring few years of HR experience was a little bit higher (Aguini et al., 2005).

**Factors that Influence the Demand for HR Certification**

There are various reasons for individuals and companies to seek certifications. Fertig (2011) analyzed the intentions and motives for individuals and organizations to value certifications from three perspectives. These three perspectives are discussed in the following paragraphs.

**Signaling theory.** Earning a certification may help an individual to gain favorable impressions and create nice images during job interviews (Fertig, 2011; Jones & Pittman, 1982). The signaling theory suggests that passing the exam and earning a certification is like sending out a signal to the potential employers that an individual has already acquired the needed knowledge and competency in the field and has the capability to do the work (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Spence, 1973). Fertig (2011) indicated that an individual must commit a certain amount of time and expense to complete the certification process and then attain it. In other words, a certification shows an applicant is more likely to work harder to achieve a higher level of advancement for his or her career. Thus, this makes it easier for a potential employee with a certification to create a positive image to the employer compared to other applicants without a certification.

However, this "signal" may not adequately convey or deliver the true message. People may try to look good with a certification in front of the potential employer when interviewing, but, in fact, they are actually not competent to do the work or have not acquired the desired competency. According to Gioia and Corley (2002), making hiring decisions based on certifications could result in hiring a wrong person who lacks proficiency and knowledge because he or she is trying to pass the exam and earn a

certification to look good instead being motivated to actually learn the knowledge to be a truly competent professional.

**Acquiring power to be influential.** Rosenfeld, Giacalone, and Riordoan (1995) argued that one reason people acquire power is to be more influential. When an individual acquires a certification, it may intimidate others (Fertig, 2011; Jones & Pittman, 1982). A certified applicant may look more competent than others because employers may assume or expect the certified person is more qualified and capable of performing better. In the same scenario, uncertified applicants may assume they are not as competent as certified applicants to perform the same level of job.

**Intrinsic/extrinsic motivation (personal satisfaction) of earning an HR certification.** Wiley (1992) indicated that obtaining a certification benefits individuals because it helps them to boost their self-confidence and self-satisfaction, meanwhile proliferating recognition and pay at work. Those who have strong internal motivation to be certified will be more likely to learn the content because they are self-determined to do so (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Also, according to Fertig (2011), individuals who are more self-motived to become certified are more dedicate to work and have a higher level of competency; in contrast, if individuals are not internally motivated to be certified, they are more likely not to complete the whole certification process. They will be discouraged if what they learn is not what they like or what they want. They will not be interested in the topics and the content in a long run, so completing the whole process of certification will seem unrealistic.

However, when a job is tough and influences an individual's identity and opportunities, internal motivation is increased if a person treats this as a chance to make

an advance in his or her career because this will stimulate an individual to develop more skills and competency to approach and deal with the challenging task (Blau, Fertig, & Zeitz, 2009). According to Blau et al., when individuals are high in intrinsic motivation to be certified, they treat preparation, training and practice as compelling and interesting. Individuals enjoy doing the work and enjoy the learning process. In addition, Blau et al. interpreted that the satisfaction the employees gained from the certification preparation process and tests should escalate their commitment level and make them more motivated to pursue more advanced certifications. Moreover, they emphasized that the internal motivations for certification seem to boost and concretize a commitment between organization and employees to generate better development and performance.

Burke and Hutchings (2007) reported that intrinsic motivation can also help individuals to adjust and get involved faster from training to the real work context. In contrast, according to Blau et al. (2009), if someone is externally motivated to seek certification, it is because he or she can gain promotions or monetary rewards and there is no relation to job performance. Therefore, those who are influenced by external motivation to earn a certification would probably try to pass the exam rather than learn from it.

Fertig (2011) conducted a study using hierarchical regression analysis to examine the relationship between certification status and job competence. He examined motivation to certify, affective occupational commitment, competency and social desirability response bias. The results revealed that HR professionals who were more self-motivated (identified motivation) to certify had higher levels of competence, while HR professionals who were more externally motivated to certify had lower levels of

competence. Also, the results indicated that certified professionals were more committed to their HR jobs than uncertified professionals. Therefore, this study showed that motivations influence job commitment, job competency and employees' certification status.

**HR Certification and Salary**

Is there a positive or negative relationship between HR certification and salary? Each scholar and professional has his or her point of view and interprets the reasons from a different personal angle. As Cohen (2012) proposed, certified HR professionals will have higher salaries than uncertified professionals because certified HR professionals will bring additional credentials to the organization such as the credibility and trust from stakeholders and customers.

Furthermore, Blau et al. (2009) mentioned that certification provides barriers to eliminate incompetent workers entering the labor market, therefore, the wages for those who obtain certifications should be higher. Lengnich-Hall and Aguinis (2012) had a similar perspective. They pointed out that certification may set the boundary for the supply of available professionals in the field; therefore, the wages should increase as well. Similarly, Aguinis et al. (2005) stated that there is a positive correlation between certification and salary level when HR job openings require or prefer applicants who have a certification.

Representing the opposite point of view, even though certifications may provide career opportunities and career advancement for HR professionals, there is no evidence to prove that HR professionals with certifications have higher salaries or have better chances to be promoted than uncertified professionals (Lester, Mencl, Maranto, Bourne,

& Keaveny, 2010). Also, Lester et al. suggested that college graduates do not expect to receive a high starting salary offer just because they have passed the PHR certification exam. Employers focus more on years of working experience and job performance than they do on certification (Lester et al., 2010). Certification is just one indicator for employers to consider.

**Licensure vs. Certification**

According to Blau et al. (2009), certification may be voluntary or mandatory depending on the type of job. Mandatory certification is usually considered licensing (Wiley, 1995). Governments require licenses to practice certain professions, especially the professions that are related to physical, legal or high risks services (Carliner, 2012). According to Lengnich-Hall and Aguinis (2012), licensure is required by law for professionals to perform a specific activity or task, whereas certification is voluntary. Gilmore and Williams (2007) indicated that licensure is related to legal professions while certification is related to commercial professions. Carliner (2012) described licensure as a barrier to filter who is qualified, while certification generally does not have any specific requirements that must be obtained. The major difference between licensure and certification is that licensure is approved by the government and enforces the power of law, whereas certification has no legal enforcement (Lengnich-Hall & Aguinis, 2012).

According to Carliner (2012), certifications are different from certificates and accreditation. Certificates mainly confirm and give approval to an individual who has completed an educational program, whereas accreditation needs an approval of a third party to grant official validation and recognition to prove that an academic program has met the specific requirement (Carliner, 2012). Also, HR certification is more for personal

pursuit and self-promotion, while HR licensure tends to protect and defend the public and clients (Wiley, 1999).

**History of HR Certifications**

The American Society for Personnel Administration (ASPA) was established in 1948 and the creation of certification originates from ASPA (Leonard, 1998). Today ASPA has changed to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) (Forman & Cohen, 1999). In 1976, Human Resources certification in the United States started its base from the Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI) (Cherrington & Leonard, 1993; Wiley, 1992). In the past decade, the number of certified HRCI professionals has grown from 43,000 in 2000 (Aguinis et al., 2005) to over 120,000 in 2012 (HRCI, 2012).

SHRM is the largest human resource organization world-wide and offers many kinds of certifications for HR professionals through the Human Resource Certification Institute (Lester et al., 2010). According to Lester et al., SHRM is accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies, and SHRM offers four major certification exams. The four exams are (1) Professional in Human Resources (PHR), (2) Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR), (3) Global Professional in Human Resources (GPHR), and (4) Professional in Human Resource with state certification in California and Senior Professional in Human Resource with state certification in California (PHR-CA and SPHR-CA). Specifically, the PHR is primarily designed for those professionals who emphasize the areas of technical implementations and operational jobs, whereas the SPHR is primarily designed for those professionals who emphasize the areas of decision making and assessment evaluation (Lester et al., 2010). The GPHR is designed for those professionals who mainly focus attention on the areas in international business relations,

whereas the PHR-CA and SPHR-CA are specifically designed for those professionals who are working in the state of California (Lester et al., 2010). Out of the four major certification exams from SHRM, PHR and SPHR are the most popular certification programs for HR professionals (HRCI, 2012). As sorted and examined by Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis (2012), there are six main topics for the PHR and the SPHR exams. They include strategic management, work personnel planning and employment, human resource development, total rewards, employee and labor relations, and risk management.

In a similar study, Huselid, Jackson, and Schuler (1997) identified two major competencies related to HR effectiveness and productivity. One is called professional HRM capabilities, which means a professional uses in-the-field knowledge and expertness to convey and carry out traditional HRM practices such as selection, training, compensation, and benefits and this competency mirrors the functions of PHR certification (Huselid, Jackson, & Schuler, 1997). The other competency is called business-related capabilities, which means a professional uses in-the-field knowledge and expertness to carry out the HR practices that is related to team work, employee empowerment, working personnel, and strategic planning to design business strategy and, thus, accomplish the final goals and this competency mirrors the functions of SPHR certification (Huselid, Jackson, & Schuler, 1997).

Cohen (2012) indicated that HR performance does not merely focus on an individual's knowledge base, but also needs to take education and working experience into consideration to evaluate an individual as competent. In a circumstance where a job applicant obtains a certain level of education and work experience, with the added credentials of certification, he or she may have a higher possibility to be hired (Cohen,

2012). Indeed, it appears that the overall purpose of the certification program is to encourage continuous learning and gaining more work experience at the same time, in order to cultivate more HR professionals.

**Other Types of HR Certifications**

Besides the HR certifications from HRCI, there are some other types of HR related certifications. Here are some brief findings for other types of HR certifications. First, WorldatWork is a non-profit organization that offers education and research related to global human resources subjects such as work environment, compensation, and benefits (WorldatWork, 2012). WorldatWork was founded in 1955 and has almost 30,000 members in more than 100 countries and provides certifications of Certified Compensation Professional (CCP), Certified Benefits Professional (CBP), Work-Life Certified Professional (WLCP), Certified Sales Compensation Professional (CSCP), Certified Executive Compensation Professional (CECP), and Global Remuneration Professional (GRP) (WorldatWork, 2012).

Another certification institute is The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD). ASTD specifically certifies learning and development professionals and offers the certification called Certified Professional in Learning and Performance (CPLP) (ASTD, 2012). Also, the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans (IFEBP) is a non-profit organization that offers global source of employee benefits, compensation, and financial education and information (IFEBP, 2012). According to IFEBP (2012), it sponsors four certifications: (1) Certified Employee Benefit Specialist (CEBS), (2) Group Benefits Associate (GBA), (3) Retirement Plans Associate (RPA), and (4) Compensation Management Specialist (CMS). Thus,

individuals who are interested in being certified in the HR field have a variety of options to choose from based on their job demand and personal needs.

**Affective Organizational Commitment and Occupational Commitment**

Meyer, Allen, and Smith (1993) defined organizational commitment as employees' psychological state viewing their relationships with the organization and deciding whether they should continue or discontinue their work in the organization. They concluded that there are three types of organizational commitment. They are affective, continuance, and normative commitment. Finegan (2000) described affective commitment as the emotional attachment and feelings that an employee carries towards his or her organization. Normative commitment is the mind state of an employee who feels that he or she has the obligation to stay in the organization. Continuance commitment is based on an employee applying a cost-benefit analysis of staying or leaving, and deciding to stay because the costs of leaving are too high. For example, if the employee leaves, he or she has to start over and lose the power and status attained, or the opportunities to gain more. Further, he or she may simply not be able to find other jobs at the moment, or at least not jobs that fit them better compared to the current one. Meyer, Allen and Smith (1993) indicated that employees have the strongest affective commitment when their experiences with the organization are consistent with their expectations and goals and when the organization can also fulfill their basic needs. Thus, when employees' affective attachment is strong to the organization, they show a great willingness to stay in the organization because they have the mentality of wanting to stick with the organization. In this study, we will focus mainly on affective organizational commitment.

According to Finegan (2000), if an individual's personal values can be matched with an organization's core values, it will make him or her commit to the organization emotionally. In other words, affective commitment is the highest if the organization values what the employee values. In sum, the similarity of values brings both employees and the organization to be more consistent in working towards the organization's goals. Finegan pointed out that people hold positive attitudes towards organizations that value development, creativity, and openness and, thus, the employees within those organizations tend to be more affectively committed.

Lee, Carswell, and Allen (2000) defined an occupation as an identifiable and distinct flow of jobs that an individual is dedicated to and involved in in order to make a living during a certain period of time. Commitment to an occupation is a psychological form of relationship that is between an individual's affective reactions to his or her occupation (Lee, Carswell, & Allen, 2000). As defined by Meyer et al. (1993), occupational commitment is the degree of emotional attachment that someone has toward an occupation. They also defined it as affective occupational commitment. Affective occupational commitment refers to the emotional connection an individual develops for being a business professional and wanting to and being willing to stay in a desired occupation (Meyer et al., 1993). Also, Snape and Redman (2003) indicated that it is because of unstable economic trends and organizational uncertainty within the surrounding working environment that employees might shift their commitment from the organization to their own occupation. By doing so, they will feel secure by having more control over their careers. Moreover, from Simola's (2010) review, occupational commitment is also related to job satisfaction and turnover or withdrawal intension (Blau

& Holladay, 2006; Irving, Coleman & Cooper, 1997; Meyer et al., 1993) and recruitment and applicant attraction (Simola, 2010).

Lee and Bruvold (2003) indicated that employee development is one of the important aspects for an organization's human resource management. If an organization values employee development and focuses on developing employees' competency, it will make employees feel valuable, satisfied towards their jobs, and more affectively committed to the organization (Lee & Bruvold, 2003). In the same scenario, this can be interpreted by employees that their employer actually cares about their development and the professional quality of their performance and is willing to invest time and money on the employees to make them become more competent and proficient. The similarity of the findings between affective organizational commitment and occupational commitment is consistent with and related to the results of employees' development. This is part of the formation of affective commitment, when employees perceive that the organization values employee development (Lee & Bruvold, 2003).

Paxton (2012) believed sponsoring certification for employees can be a valuable investment because HR leaders can interact more with their employees, communicate more often with them, and lead to more consistent ways of thinking. Sincoff and Owen (2004) also agreed that sponsoring certification programs for employees can help to instruct and guide the employees to become more effective on job performance. Therefore, developing an employees' development program should bring positive influences, contribute more values to the organization, and increase employees' commitment.

**HR Certification Model**

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

**Hypotheses**

Based on the model depicted in Figure 1, I generated seven hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 1:** The type of organizational strategies: (a) innovative, (b) people-oriented, and (c) traditional-oriented, under which an HR professional works will determine whether he or she has an HR certification or is planning to get one. I expect an innovative-oriented organization to have a higher percentage of HR professionals who either have an HR certification or are planning to get one, compared to people-oriented and traditional-oriented organizations. This hypothesis is based on the study of Toh, Morgeson, and Campion (2008). They found that innovative organizations expect employees to be risk taking, to be competitive, and to be quick to adjust and change. The environment requires the industries to be fast paced and quick to be up-to-date, such as the IT industry and the automobile industry.
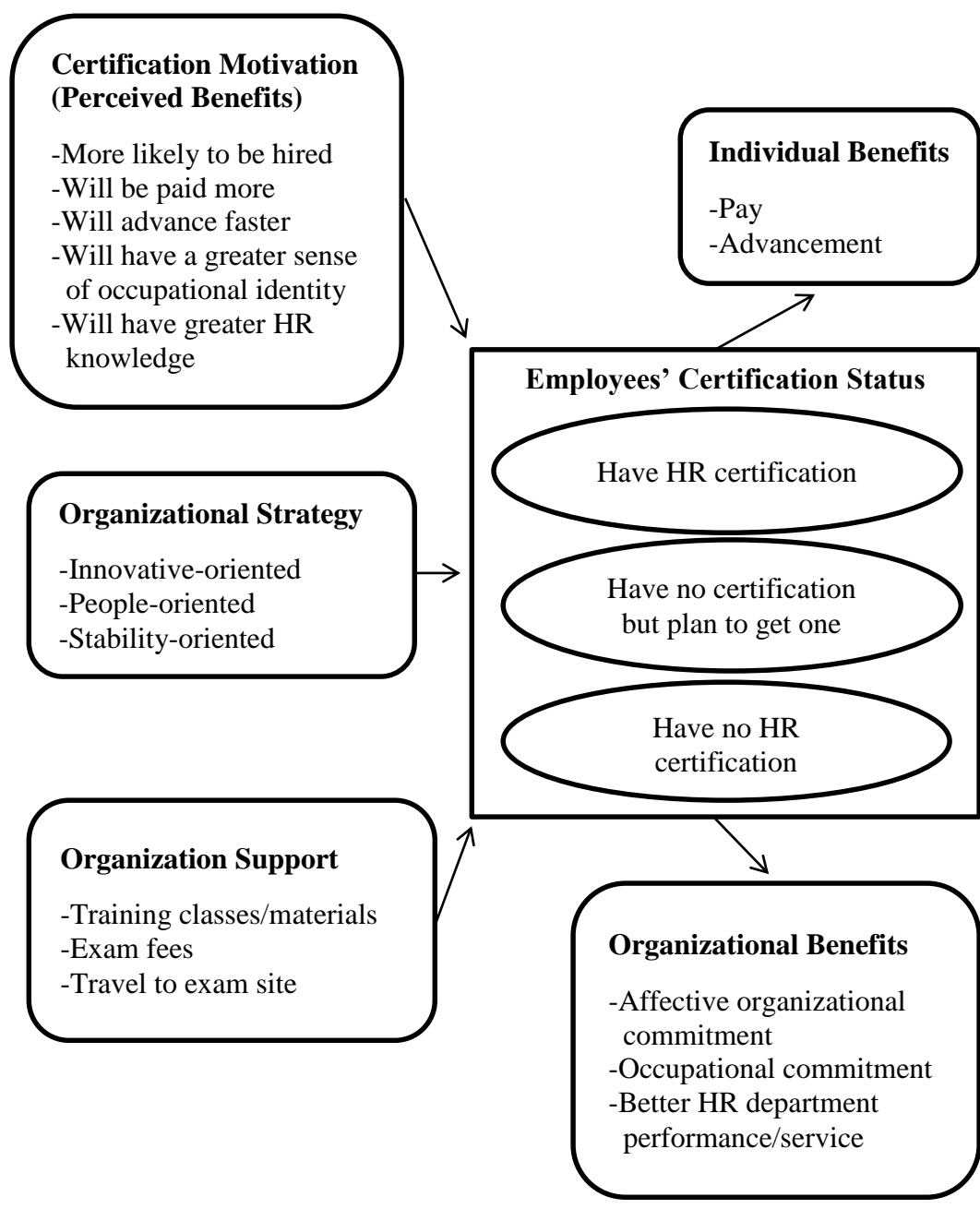
*Figure 1.* HR Certification Model

Highly innovative organizations are more likely to hire already competent and qualified human resources from the market rather than investing the time and money in training. People-oriented organizations focus more on establishing long term relationship with employees and care about their development and feelings. Therefore, when hiring, people-oriented organization may not concentrate on hiring HR certified people as much as the innovative-oriented organization because the people-oriented organization can provide the needed training and certification programs when the employees ask for it. In contrast, stability-oriented organizations focus more on consistency and routine tasks. Those organizations would prefer spending time and money in training and development to create human resources that fit their organizational core values rather than hire the certified people from the market. Thus, innovative-oriented organizations are expected to hire more individuals with HR certifications than people-oriented and stability-oriented organizations.

**Hypothesis 2:** Organizations that sponsor HR certification (e.g., paying for certification training and materials, paying for the certification exam) will have a higher percentage of HR professionals who either have an HR certification or are planning to get one, compared to organizations that do not sponsor HR certification.

Porter and Lawler (1968) posited that performance is influenced by three factors: motivation, ability, and situational constraints. Organizations that offer their employees support are removing important situational constraints and making it much easier for their employees to become certified.

**Hypothesis 3:** HR professionals who perceive that there are more benefits associated with being certified (e.g., better chances for getting hired or a greater sense of

occupational identity) will be more likely to either have an HR certification or be planning to get one, compared to those who perceive fewer benefits.

Lester, Mencl, Maranto, Bourne, and Keaveny (2010) found that those with PHR certificates were more likely to be hired than those without the certificate. Thus, HR professionals who recognize these types of career benefits are more likely to pursue certification. Also, Blau, Fertig, and Zeitz (2009) found earning a professional certification can positively change one's self-identity. Wiley (1992) concluded that a certification can help a professional have more self-confidence and self-satisfaction. Thus, HR professionals who recognize these types of personal benefits are more likely to pursue certification.

**Hypothesis 4a:** HR professionals who have an HR certification will be paid more than HR professionals who do not have an HR certification.

**Hypothesis 4b:** HR professionals who have an HR certification will be paid more for each year of HR experience (a measure of career advancement) than HR professionals who do not have an HR certification.

The fourth and fifth hypotheses are based on Spence's (1973) signaling theory. He indicated that having a certification can catch potential employers' eyes and create a favorable impression of the applicant. Certification helps to promote a job applicant's image of job competency. Thus, I expect to find a positive relationship between HR certification status and how far and how fast an HR professional moves up in an organization.

**Hypothesis 5:** HR professionals who have an HR certification will have greater affective organizational commitment than HR professionals who do not have an HR certification.

This hypothesis is based on Lee and Bruvold's (2003) study. They argued that employee development is one of the most important functions of human resource practice. They also indicated that the organizations that invest in employee development are more likely to have employees with higher affective commitment to the organization because the employees would perceive the organization as actually caring about job development.

**Hypothesis 6:** HR professionals who have an HR certification will have greater occupational commitment than HR professionals who do not have an HR certification.

Fertig (2012) found that employees with an internal motivation to certify had greater occupational commitment and job competency because they were more dedicated to their work and they pursued personal achievement in their career.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

**Participants**

I collected data by contacting the local group members from the Society of

Human Resources Management (SHRM). The participants were randomly selected from

SHRM chapters in fifteen different states in the United States. I distributed approximately

1,000 online surveys to the SHRM chapters' presidents and their members and had 316

returned responses. I also collected data from HR departments in local companies. I

distributed 15 surveys and had seven returned responses. In sum, I had a total of 323

responses. However, 32 of them skipped or did not answer the questions. Therefore, I had

only 291 participants for data analysis. Seventy three percent of the participants were

women and 27% were men. For age range, 5% of the participants were 20 to 29 years old,

23% were 30 to 39 years old, 28% were 40 to 49 years old, 30% were 50 to 59 years old,

13% were 60 to 69 years old,  and 1% were 70 years old or older. Therefore, the majority

of the participants were aged between 30 to 60 years old. For race, 86% of the

participants were White/Non-Hispanic, 4% were African American, 7% were

Hispanic/Latino, 2% were American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 1% were Asian.

For participants' education level, 2% of the participants had a high school degree,

16% had an associate's degree or some college, 41% had a bachelor's degree, and 41 %

had a graduate degree. Also, 34% of the participants had a degree specialized in Human

Resources or Industrial-Organizational Psychology, 50% had a degree in Business, and

16% had a degree in the Behavioral Sciences or Education (e.g., psychology, sociology

and education). For the job titles, 27% were HR managers, 24% were HR directors, 15%

were HR generalists, 8% were vice presidents, 6% were HR specialists, 4% were consultants, 4% were HR analysts, 4% were HR coordinators, 4% were presidents or CEOs, 3% were professors or attorneys, and 1% were HR associate directors. For the participants' income level range, 1% were earning $25,001-$30,000, 5% were earning $30,001-$40,000, 12% were earning $40,001-$50,000, 15% were earning $50,001-$60,000, 28% were earning $60,001-$80,000, 16% were earning $80,001-$100,000, and 23% were earning $ 100,001 or more. Eleven percent of the participants had 1-5 years of HR working experiences, 22% had 6-10 years, 25% had 11-15 years, 18% had 16-20 years, 13% had 21-25 years, 6% had 26-30 years, and 5% had more than 30 years.

In examining the approximately size of the participants' organizations, 15% had 1-50 employees, 7% had 51-100 employees, 33% had 101-500 employees, 16% had 501-1,000 employees, 18% had 1,001-5,000 employees, 4% had 5,001-10,000 employees, 5% had 10,001-50,000 employees and 3% had more than 50,001 employees. For the size of participants' human resource departments, 25% of them indicated that they had one HR employee, 11% had two HR employees, 10% had three HR employees, 8% had four HR employees, 7% had five HR employees, 18% had six to ten HR employees, 7% had eleven to twenty HR employees, 7% had twenty one to fifty employees, and 8% had more than fifty one HR employees.

For certifying status, 72% of the participants responded that they were HR certified, 13% responded that they were not HR certified but certainly plan to get certified in the next year or two, and 15% indicated that they were not HR certified and did not have any immediate plans to get certified soon. Among the certified participants, 128 of them reported that they have a PHR (SHRM/HRCI) certification, 93 have a SPHR

(SHRM/HRCI) certification, six have a GPHR (SHRM/HRCI) certification, three have a PHR-CA (SHRM/HRCI) certification, five have a SPHR-CA (SHRM/HRCI) certification, four have a CEBS (IFEBP) certification, one has a GBA (IFEBP) certification, one has a RPA (IFEBP) certification, two have a CMS (WorldatWork) certification, and four have a CCP (WorldatWork) certification. Forty-four percent of the certified participants reported that they got certified before they entered their current organizations, 51% got certified after they entered their current organizations, and 5% were some before and some after. Therefore, about half of the certified participants got certified before the current job and half of them got certified after working for the current companies.

**Measures**

Some of the instruments were created by myself. For those, I conducted a pilot test with five HR professionals from the university and three I/O psychology graduate students. Based on their responses and feedback, I made some adjustments to the items and reworded some questions for better interpretation and understanding.

**Organizational strategy.** This variable was measured by a single item. There were three types of organizational strategies: (a) innovative-oriented strategy (focus on developing new products/services), (b) people-oriented strategy (focus on relationship building with employees and customers, and (c) stability/traditional-oriented strategy (focus on reliability and efficiency). Participants were asked to indicate if their organizations were as described in the statements using a five-point Likert scale with ratings from "not at all my organization" to "perfect description of my organization". The item appears in the demographic section (see Appendix A).

**Certification motivation.** This variable captured the employee's internal motivation and external motivation for obtaining an HR certificate. Participants were asked three questions for external motivation and three questions for internal motivation. External motivation included: (a) will be more likely to be hired, (b) will be paid more, and (c) will advance faster. Internal motivation included (d) will be more respected by fellow HR professionals, (e) will have greater knowledge of the HR field, and (f) will have a greater sense of occupational identity. This variable was measured with a six-item Likert scale which ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). This measure can be seen in Appendix B. In my study, coefficient alpha was .87 for this instrument, which indicated good internal consistency.

**Organizational support for certification.** This variable captured the amount of support an employee's employer provided for obtaining an HR certificate. It was measured by asking employees to estimate the cost of five support behaviors (training materials, training instruction or classes, time off for study, exam fees and travel fees for instruction or for taking the exam) their employer was willing to contribute. Participants were first to indicate "Yes" or "No" for employer's support. If they answered "No", continued to the next question; if they answered "Yes", they needed to estimate the costs for the five items. These costs were then be added up for an overall estimate of employer support measured in dollars. This measure can be seen in Appendix C. In my study, coefficient alpha was .80 for this instrument, which indicated good internal consistency.

**HR certification.** This variable was measured with a one-item scale. Employees received a score of 1 if they did not have an HR certificate and they had no plan of obtaining one. Employees received a score of 2 if they did not have an HR certificate, but

they planned to obtain one. Employees received a score of 3 if they had an HR certificate. This measure can be seen in the demographic section (see Appendix A).

**Salary.** This variable was measured with a single item. Participants were asked to indicate their salary range. The item appeared in the demographic section (see Appendix A).

**Advancement.** This variable was measured by dividing the employee's salary by how many years the employee has worked in the HR field. Participants were asked to indicate the years of HR experience they had. These two items appeared in the demographic section (see Appendix A).

**Affective organizational commitment.** This variable was measured using Meyer and Allen's (1997) eight-item scale, which ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). For the first three items and the seventh item, participants were asked if they were happy and enjoy working for their organizations and if their organizations had a personal meaning for them. For the fourth, fifth, sixth and eighth items, participants were asked if they felt that they were not attached, not belonging and did not feel part of their organizations. These four items were reverse scored.

In a study of 366 nursing students, Meyer and Allen found internal consistency of .82 for the affective organizational commitment measure. This measure can be seen in Appendix D. In my study, coefficient alpha was .86 for this instrument, which indicated good internal consistency.

**Occupational commitment.** This variable was measured using a version of Meyer, Allen, and Smith's (1993) six-item scale which ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). For the first, third and sixth items, participants were asked if they

were enthusiastic and proud to be in the HR profession and seeing it as important. For the second, fourth and fifth items, participants were asked if they felt regret and dislike being an HR professional and did not identify with it. These three items were reverse scored.

I have replaced the nursing profession with the HR profession. In the same study of 366 nursing students mentioned above, Meyer, Allen, and Smith also found internal consistency of .82 for the occupational commitment measure. This measure can be seen in Appendix E. In my study, coefficient alpha was .83 for this instrument, which indicated good internal consistency.

**Demographics.** In addition to organizational structure, salary, and years of experience in the HR field, I also asked the participants a number of additional demographic questions. I asked their age, sex, race/ethnicity, education level, type of degree, job title, size of their organization, and the size of their HR department (see Appendix A).

**Procedure**

Before collecting any data, I first applied for IRB approval to ensure all the ethical requirements were met (see Appendix F). Then, I visited each of SHRM chapter's web page online for fifteen states and contacted each chapter's president. I asked each chapter president if he or she would not mind helping distribute my cover letter and survey to all of the chapter members. If the chapter president agreed, then he or she emailed each chapter member my cover letter explaining the study's objectives and informed consent (see Appendix G), following by a survey link which was the electronic version of the survey that was created by Surveymonkey.com. The web link contained the complete survey with all the instruments that were described in the method section.

For each participant, I first asked them to read the cover letter and decide whether they would like to participate in the research. If they agreed to do so, they simply clicked on the web link to answer the survey questions. During the survey, if any of the participants did not want to answer a specific question, they could skip to the next one, or if any of the participants did not want to continue to answer the survey questions, they could stop right away. The survey was anonymous and they did not need to provide any of their personal information. Once they completed the survey, the results were immediately sent back to the data base and saved on Surveymonkey.

I also recruited a few HR professionals to participate from local companies by making in-person visits to HR departments and asking HR professionals to participate. I followed a similar procedure with them. First, they read the cover letter that informed them of their informed consent. Then, if they were willing, I provided them with the survey to complete. Participants all requested to have few days to complete the survey due to their busy working schedules. I came back to pick up the survey a week later and then placed the survey in a large envelope with other surveys. They were all asked to not put their names on the survey.

After I collected the online data from Surveymonkey and saved it on a USB disc, I kept it with the surveys that I collected from local companies in a secured locker. Then, I used statistical software SPSS as my data analysis tool to explore whether there were any significant relationships between the variables. After I finished my analysis, I will keep the data for three years and then discard it. Only the summary results will be kept and shared.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

**Main Hypotheses**

The first hypothesis was not supported. There was no significant relationship between the type of organizational strategy and whether the HR professionals were certified or seeking certification for (a) innovative-oriented organizations ($r = -0.04$, $p > .05$), (b) people-oriented organizations ($r = .02$, $p > .05$), or (c) traditional-oriented organizations ($r = .09$. $p > .05$). I had hypothesized that people in highly innovative organizations would be more likely to either be certified or thinking about getting certified than those in less innovative organizations. I had also hypothesized a positive relationship for the people-oriented organizations and certification, but not as strong a relationship. Finally, I had not expected a strong relationship for the tradition-oriented organization.

The second hypothesis was supported. There was a significant relationship between organizational support/sponsorship (especially for certification training materials, classes, and exam fees) and HR professionals being certified or thinking about getting certified ($r = .22$, $p < .001$). To examine the impact of each type of organizational support, I treated HR certification variable as a categorical variable and used chi-squared tests to examine independence. Specifically, I found that organizational support for training materials ($\chi^2(2) = 19.77$, $p < .001$), training classes ($\chi^2(2) = 16.38$, $p < .001$), and exam fees ($\chi^2(2) = 11.38$, $p < .005$) were all positively related to the percentage of people being certified. However, the relationship between the variables of time off for study ($\chi^2(2) = 4.39$, $p > .05$) and travel fees for instruction or for taking the exam ($\chi^2(2) = 2.34$, $p > .05$)

were not significantly related to the percentage of HR professionals being certified. Therefore, organizational support and sponsorship were significant for HR professionals to be certified. In addition, training materials, training classes and exam fees were the most indicative supports. An examination of Table 1 will reveal that these are the types of supports that most organizations choose to offer; a wise decision.

The third hypothesis was supported. HR professionals who perceived more benefits associated with being certified were more likely to either have an HR certification or be planning to get one ($r = .33$, $p < .001$). When I broke down the data by the types of benefits, I found all of them were significantly related to either having an HR certification or planning to get one. The types of benefits included: (a) more likely to be hired ($r = .27$, $p < .001$), (b) be paid more ($r = .15$, $p < .05$), (c) advance faster ($r = .23$, $p < .001$), (d) gaining more respect from fellow HR professionals ($r = .35$, $p < .001$), (e) greater knowledge of the HR field ($r = .29$, $p < .001$), and (f) greater sense of occupational identity ($r = .35$, $p < .001$). In sum, the benefits of gaining more respect from fellow HR professionals, having greater knowledge of the HR field and having greater sense of occupational identity were the most influential benefits perceived by HR professionals to be certified. Therefore, for the HR professionals who perceived there were more benefits associated with being certified were more likely to obtain a certification or be planning to get one.

While the first three hypotheses were concerned with factors that I hypothesized would make HR professionals more likely to obtain an HR certification, the fourth hypothesis was concerned with potential advantages of HR certification for the employees, such as a higher salary or faster advancement. To examine Hypothesis 4a, I

Table 1

*Organizational Support/Sponsorship for Obtaining HR Certification*

| Organizational Support | Yes | No | % of Support |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Training Materials | 160 | 95 | 63% |
| 2. Training Classes | 151 | 101 | 60% |
| 3. Time Off for Study | 78 | 174 | 31% |
| 4. Exam Fees | 159 | 99 | 62% |
| 5. Travel Fees for Taking the Exam | 76 | 172 | 31% |

used an ANOVA to see whether those having an HR certificate would be more likely to have a higher salary. They were ($F(2,283) = 9.78$, $p < .001$). HR professionals who have an HR certificate were paid more than HR professionals who do not have an HR certificate. Specifically, the average salary for those with an HR certificate was 7.21 ($SD = 1.46$) compared to those thinking about getting an HR certificate ($M = 6.22$, $SD = 1.62$) or those not thinking about getting an HR certificate ($M = 6.32$, $SD = 2.21$). To make some sense out of these means, a score of seven indicated a salary range of \$60,001 to \$80,000, while a score of six indicated a salary range of \$50,001 to \$60,000. In other words, those who have an HR certificate appear to make at least \$10,000 a year more than those without one. Using a Tukey's post hoc test, I found that the group with an HR certificate was significantly different from the two groups without an HR certificate ($p < .005$ for each comparison). Therefore, the 4a hypothesis was supported.

Hypothesis 4b was that there would be a significant difference in the ratio of salary divided by the years of HR experience (a measure of career advancement) between certified HR professionals and those not certified or seeking certification. While I did find a significant difference using a one-way ANOVA ($F(2, 274) = 5.48$, $p < .01$), it was not in the expected direction. The ratio was lower for those with certificates. Using a Tukey post hoc test, I found that the group with an HR certificate was significantly different from the two groups without an HR certificate ($p < .05$ for each comparison). In other words, HR certified professionals were paid less for each year of HR experience compared to HR professionals who did not have an HR certification. The reason for this unexpected result was that while the HR professionals who were certified made more

money, they usually had more years of experience as well. Thus, their ratio was made smaller by having more years of experience.

While the fourth hypothesis was concerned with potential advantages of HR certification for the employee, the fifth hypothesis was concerned with potential advantages of HR certification for the organization. Unfortunately, the fifth hypothesis was not supported. I used Pearson's correlation coefficient to analyze the data and found that there was no significant relationship between HR certification and organizational commitment ($r = .04$, $p > .05$).

The sixth hypothesis was supported. HR professionals who have an HR certification or are planning to get one had greater occupational commitment than HR professionals who do not have an HR certification. From Pearson's correlation coefficient test, occupational commitment ($r = .24$, $p < 0.01$) was significantly related to HR certification. In other words, certified HR professionals were more occupationally committed than those who were not HR certified.

**Exploratory Analyses**

Extended from my fifth and sixth hypotheses, I wanted to inspect whether organizational support and certification motivation were related to HR professionals' organizational and occupational commitment. I used Pearson's correlation coefficient to analyze the data and found HR professionals who got organizational support were more organizationally committed ($r = .24$, $p < .01$) than those who did not have organizational support. In addition, I found that HR professionals who perceived the benefits of certifications were more occupationally committed ($r = .31$, $p < .01$) compared to those who did not perceive the benefits.

I also explored whether the time (got certified before, after, or some before and some after entering their current organizations) HR professionals got certified influenced their organizational and occupational commitment. First, for organizational commitment, I used one-way ANOVA to analyze the data and found out the result was not significant ($F(2,205) = .27$, $p > .05$) which means that there was no significant relationship between organizational commitment and (a) getting certified before entering the current organization ($M = 5.2$, $SD = 1.12$), (b) getting certified after entering the current organization ($M = 5.2$, $SD = 1.00$), or (c) getting certified some before and some after entering the current organization ($M = 5.5$, $SD = 0.86$). Therefore, the time HR professionals got certified did not relate to their organizational commitment.

To examine occupational commitment, I also used one-way ANOVA to analyze the data and found the result was not significant ($F(2,204) = 1.01$, $p > .05$). This leads to a conclusion that there was no significant relationship between occupational commitment and (a) getting certified before entering the current organization ($M = 6.3$, $SD = 0.73$), (b) getting certified after entering the current organization ($M = 6.2$, $SD = 0.73$), or (c) getting certified some before and some after entering the current organization ($M = 6.5$, $SD = 0.60$). In other words, the time HR professionals got certified did not affect their occupational commitment.

Next, I wanted to inspect whether the HR professionals' type of educational degree was related to their salary level. I categorized participants' degrees into four groups: (a) HR or I/O Psychology ($M = 7.2$, $SD = 1.56$), (b) Business ($M = 6.8$, $SD = 1.63$), (c) Behavioral Science or Education ($M = 6.9$, $SD = 1.84$), and (d) Others ($M = 7.1$, $SD = 1.75$). I used one-way ANOVA and found the result was not statistically significant

$(F(3,277) = 1.27, p > .05)$. Thus, HR professionals' salary level was not related to the types of degrees they earned.

Finally, I wanted to examine how the demographic variables, such as age, sex, minority status, education level, HR experience, HR department size, and organization size, were related to my main dependent variables: HR certification, salary, organizational commitment, and occupational commitment. I did not examine my measure of career advancement because it seemed to be a poor measure. As can be seen in Table 2, the only variable that was related to the demographic variables was annual salary. Not surprisingly, the HR professionals who made the most tended to be older, male, more educated, and more experienced.

Table 2

*Correlations of Dependent Variables with Demographic Variables*

| Demographic Variables | HR Certification | Annual Salary | Organizational Commitment | Occupational Commitment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Age | .11 | .35** | .07 | .05 |
| 2. Sex | .01 | .18* | .11 | .02 |
| 3. Minority Status | - 0.08 | .07 | .03 | .08 |
| 4. Education Level | .11 | .16* | - 0.06 | - 0.02 |
| 5. HR Experience | .11 | .51** | .08 | .12 |
| 6. HR Depart. Size | .02 | .09 | - 0.05 | .13 |
| 7. Organization Size | .04 | .04 | - 0.08 | .10 |

Note. For sex and minority status, point-biserial correlations are reported. For sex, 1 = women and 2 = men, thus, positive correlations indicate that men are higher, while negative correlations indicate that women are higher. For minority status, 1 = non-minority and 2 = minority, thus, positive correlations indicate that minorities are higher, while negative correlations indicate that non-minorities are higher.

* $p < .01$

** $p < .001$

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

**Main Hypotheses**

In Figure 1, near the end of my literature review, I presented a model of HR certification. I posited three antecedents of HR certification: organizational strategy, organizational support for HR certification, and perceived benefits associated with HR certification. I also posited individual and organization consequences of HR certification. On the individual side of the equation, I predicted that HR professionals with certifications would make more money and advance faster. On the organizational side of the equation, I predicted that HR professionals with certifications would be more committed to their organizations and their occupations.

The results for the first hypothesis did not conform to Garza and Morgeson's (2012) or Toh, Morgeson, and Campion's (2008) expectations that the more innovative organizations would demand more of their HR employees to be certified. In fact, none of the three types of organizational strategies I examined (innovative-oriented, people-oriented, or traditional-oriented) were significantly related to whether an HR professional was certified or planning to become certified. One reason could be that HR is a staff position and not part of the line. Perhaps innovative-oriented organizations' need for more certified employees only refers to more essential line positions, not HR positions. Another possible explanation is that I might have had a poor measure of company types because I only listed a single item to measure strategy. Thus, when participants were taking the survey, they might not have been able to correctly indicate into which organizational strategy their organization fit.

My second hypothesis, that organizations that sponsor HR certifications for employees will have more HR employees who are either certified or planning to become certified, was supported. One reason for this result could be that sponsorship reflects an organization's investment in its employees' development and this could make the HR employees feel valuable. This sense of importance could serve as a source of internal motivation for employees to invest their time and mental energy to improve themselves. Another explanation could be that sponsorship is a way for an organization to communicate to an employee that it thinks HR certification is important. This could serve as a subtle form of external motivation in the form of "you do not have to do it, but it is recommended." Another reason organizational sponsorship is related to more certification could be the concern for money. When organizations are willing to pay the expenses for employees' education, training, and certification, HR employees may see this as an opportunity to take advantage of organizational resources to receive free training.

The three types of organizational support that were most related to certification were providing training materials, training classes, and exam fees. The fact that these were the three types of support that were offered most often implied that organizations may have some insight into the benefits of these three types of support. If an organization wants to have more of its HR professionals certified, providing these supports may prove effective. In Porter and Lawler's (1968) model of performance, they posited that performance is influenced by three factors: motivation, ability, and situational constraints. By offering its employees support, organizations are removing important situational constraints.

My third hypothesis was also supported. When HR professionals perceived that there were more benefits associated with being certified, such as better chances for promotion and greater sense of occupational identity, they were more likely to be certified or planning to get certified. While the participants saw who HR certification as a path to external rewards such as pay or promotion were more likely to be certified, the most powerful perceived rewards were gaining more respect from fellow HR professionals, a greater sense of occupational identity, and a greater knowledge of the HR field that drove HR certification the most. These results conformed to Blau, Fertig, and Zeitz's (2009) findings that the benefit of earning a professional certification is to change self-identity and to give professionals more control over their careers.

The results also agreed with Wiley's (1992) conclusion that obtaining a certification can benefit individuals because it helps them to have more self-confidence, self- satisfaction, and recognition. Many writers, such as Wiley (1995) and Lengnich-Hall and Aguinis (2012) believe that certified HR professionals possessed more HR knowledge and skills and, thus, are more effectiveness. While these writers have not empirically validated that certified HR professionals are superior performers, their opinions reflect the beliefs of many HR professionals, and these beliefs guide behavior. For example, Lester, Fertig, and Dwyer (2011) found that organizational leaders positive opinions about the benefits of having HR-certified professionals in their organizations. This can create a self-fulfilling prophesy where certifications benefit HR professionals because of other people's beliefs that certified professionals are better performers, even if that is not the case. For example, Lester, Mencl, Maranto, Bourne, and Keaveny (2010) found that those with PHR certificates were more likely to be hired than those without the

certificate. On the other hand, Aguinis et al. (2005) found that very few organizations ask for HR certifications when hiring HR professionals.

Hypothesis 4(a) was supported. HR professionals with certifications have higher salaries than HR professionals without certifications. Chatman (1989) observed that certifications can be used to determine whether employees can perform at an acceptable level of performance or whether they are appropriate for a position. Thus, organizations may be willing to pay more for an employee if they feel more certainty about what they are getting with that employee. This is consistent with Cohen's (2012) proposition that certified HR professionals should have higher salaries than uncertified HR professionals because they bring extra credentials which can enhance the trust of organizational stakeholders. Eck (1993), Lengnich-Hall and Aguinis (2012), and Blau, Fertid and Zeitz (2009) all argued that certifications can improve employees' likelihood for obtaining higher salaries. Blau et al. (2009) argued that certifications can provide barriers that eliminate incompetent applicants from entering a field. Subsequently, salaries can be driven up by having a tighter labor supply. Spence (1973) used signaling theory to explain how certification can be tied to higher salaries. He argued that certification can help to make an employee to look more competent. Another possible explanation for the results is that the certified participants were often certified SHRM members who had been working in high positions, such as HR managers and HR directors, in their organizations for a long time, while those without certifications may have occupied lower level positions.

Hypothesis 4(b) was not supported. Even though significant differences were found, they were in the wrong direction. This was because the certified, higher paid HR

professionals also had more years of experience, which brought down the career advancement ratio of salary divided by experience that I had created. In an effort to separate salary from years of HR experience, I conducted an ANCOVA with certification as the independent variable, salary as the dependent variable, and experience as the covariate. Although, the level of significance was reduced from that found in Hypothesis 4(a), significant differences still emerged ($F(2,273) = 5.27$, $p < .01$). The estimated marginal means for salary were 7.2 for those with certificates, 6.6 for those planning to get one, and 6.2 for those without one. Pairwise comparisons revealed a significant difference only between the two extreme groups ($p < .01$). Thus, after controlling for years of HR experience, those with a certificate made the most, followed by those planning to get a certificate, followed by those with no plans to get one.

The fifth hypothesis, that certified HR professionals would be more committed to their organizations, was not supported. Lee and Bruvold (2003) argued that organizations that invested more in employee development were more likely to have employees with higher affective organizational commitment because the employees should perceive the organizations as caring about their career development. Blau et al. (2009) argued that employees who worked hard to become certified would be more committed to their organization. Alas, I did not find this to be the case.

One possible reason for my result could be that many of the employees were already certified before joining their employer, so that they did not see certification as an organizational benefit. However, organizational commitment was the same for employees who were certified after hiring or prior to hiring. Another possible explanation for my result could be that employees might treat organizational support and sponsorship as part

of an organization's obligation for employees' development. They might think this is what their organization should do to increase employees' job competency. Employees might think if the organization wants outstanding and competent employees, the organization should pay and train and educate them. However, organizational support was a strong predictor of organizational commitment, and certification too, but certification was not related to organizational commitment. Thus, if an organization's end goal was a committed workforce, it is not certification that is key, but the act of helping employees get certified, if I could assume causal connections, which I cannot.

The sixth hypothesis, that certified HR professionals would have greater occupational commitment, was inspired by Fertig's (2012) research. Fertig found that employees with an internal motivation to certify had greater occupational commitment and job competency because they were more dedicated to their work and they pursued personal achievement in their career. Also, Blau et al. (2009) argued that employees who worked hard to become certified would be more committed to their occupation. My sixth hypothesis was supported. Perhaps it is the certified HR professionals' occupational commitment that drives them to become certified. Or perhaps the onerous act of becoming certified creates enough cognitive dissonance to make them justify their actions by becoming more committed to their occupation (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). Certified HR professionals must dedicate their time, money, and mental effort to get a certification.

**Exploratory Findings**

I found that the HR professionals who got more organizational support to pursue their HR certifications were more organizationally committed than those who received

less support from the organization. Combined with the results from the second hypothesis, HR professionals who receive more organizational support to pursue their HR certifications are not only more likely to be certified or working on certification, but they are also more committed to their organizations. Thus, support provides twin pay offs. According to Meyer, Allen and Smith (1993), employees have the strongest affective organizational commitment when their experiences with the organization are consistent with their expectations. Commitment is higher when organizations fulfill employee needs and provide employees with what they want. Also, when organizations value employees' development, it makes employees feel that their organizations care about them and they feel more valued and important. Subsequently, they feel better about themselves, hold stronger positive beliefs about their organizations, and are more emotionally attached to their organizations (Lee & Bruvold, 2003). In other words, when an organization can provide learning opportunities and invests in its employees' development to increase their occupational knowledge and skills, it will make employees more attached and loyal to the organization. Employees would like to choose a place where they can grow, prosper, and feel important. An organization that invests in its employees' investment, will receive a return on that investment in the long run in the form of better trained HR professionals who are more dedicated to the organization. In addition, word of mouth advertising about that organization's support of its HR professionals' development could also improve recruitment of quality HR people.

Another exploratory finding was that the HR professionals who perceived more benefits related to HR certifications had higher occupational commitment. These individuals are more likely to be self-motivated to continuously improve their HR

knowledge and skills. Meyer et al. (1993) found that employees with high occupational commitment develop an emotional connection with their occupation and frequently choose to stay in a desired company. HR departments and organizations may want to point out the benefits of certification to HR employees, such as gaining respect from peers, greater knowledge of the field, and a greater sense of occupational identity, so that employees will not only be more motivated to work towards certification, but also to foster an HR culture of continuous learning and development.

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

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

Regarding the sex of an HR professional, men make more money than women. It could be argued that HR is a female profession. For example, 73% of my participants were women. However, the men in this profession make significantly more money than the women. The subject of pay discrimination is beyond the scope of this study, but it is unfortunate that I must say, as a women entering the HR profession, that I was not surprised by this finding.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

One limitation of this study is the homogeneity of the participants. Most of them were SHRM members and many of them were selected from the mid-western states. The sample cannot accurately represent the entire population of HR professionals. I would have liked to have gotten more compensation and training professionals. Also, most of the participants were HR certified with years of HR experience and more than half of them were in the position of HR manager or higher. Therefore, my sample might underestimate the people who are in the HR field in lower level positions and who are not certified.

In addition to external validity issues, my study also had internal validity limitations. The main threat to internal validity was the fact that I did not manipulate any of my independent variables. Thus, I was unable to make any causal inferences with my data. Also, the new instruments that I developed to assess certification motivation and organizational support for certification are new and untested. While they had acceptable internal consistency, there may have been parts of each construct domain that my tests failed to capture (criterion deficiency) or my tests may have been contaminated. Finally,

all of my instruments were self-report measures, which made my findings subject to mono-method bias.

For future research, I would like to explore my non-significant results for my first hypothesis. Why did the innovative companies not have a higher percentage of certified HR professionals? Could it be that many organizations simply fail to appreciate the strategic impact good HR practices can have on their organizational missions? Does this lack of appreciation start with HR departments themselves? Are their industry differences in the strategic use, or non-use, of HR?

Another area I would like to see future researchers explore is how lower-level HR positioned participants view HR certification and how they view the importance of HR compared to HR professionals who manage and direct HR departments. These professionals might not value certification as much. They might also not realize the strategic importance of their jobs. If this is the case, they may need to obtain the information and knowledge about the importance of their mission.

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Appendix A

Demographic Information

**Directions:** Answer the following questions by checking the appropriate boxes below.

**Your Job Title:**
_____

**Do you have any Human Resource certifications?**
□ No, I do not, nor do I have any immediate plans to get certified.
□ No, I do not, but I certainly plan to get certified in the next year or two.
□ Yes, I am certified.

If you answered "Yes" to the previous question, what type of HR certification do you have?
*Check all that apply*

| SHRM/HRCI | ASTD | WorldatWork | IFEBP |
|---|---|---|---|
| □ PHR | □ CPLP | □ CCP | □ CEBS |
| □ SPHR | | □ CBP | □ GBA |
| □ GPHR | | □ WLCP | □ RPA |
| □ PHR-CA | | □ CSCP | □ CMS |
| □ SPHR-CA | | □ CECP | |
| | | □ GRP | |

If you answered "Yes" to the previous question, did you get certified before or after you entered your current organization?
□ Before          □ After          □ Some Before, Some After

**Salary:**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| □ less than $20,000 | □ $30,001-$40,000 | □ $60,001-$80,000 |
| □ $20,000-$25,000 | □ $40,001-$50,000 | □ $80,001-$100,000 |
| □ $25,001-$30,000 | □ $50,001-$60,000 | □ more than $100,000 |

**How many years of experience do you have in human resources?** _____ years

**Do you think HR professionals should be more concerned about the needs of the organization's employees or the needs of the organization? The focus should be**

| primarily on the employee's needs | 70% on the employees & 30% on the org. | 60% on the employees & 40% on the org. | 50% on the employees & 50% on the org. | 60% on the org. & 40% on the employees | 70% on the org. & 30% on the employees | primarily on the organization's needs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

**Approximately how many people work in HR in your organization?**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| □ 1 HR employee | □ 4 HR employees | □ 11-20 HR employees |
| □ 2 HR employees | □ 5 HR employees | □ 21-50 HR employees |
| □ 3 HR employees | □ 6-10 HR employees | □ more than 50 HR employees |

**What is the approximate size of your organization?**

□ 1 – 50 employees          □ 501-1,000 employees          □ 10,001– 50,000 employees

□ 51 – 100 employees        □ 1,001-5,000 employees        □ more than 50,000
                                                                employees

□ 101-500 employees         □ 5,001-10,000 employees


**On the three scales below, please indicate the degree to which each strategy describes your organization by circling the appropriate number between 1 (not at all) and 5 (perfect description).**

|  | Not at all my organization | Slightly describes my organization | Somewhat describes my organization | In many ways describes my organization | Perfect description |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Innovative Oriented Strategy (focus on developing new products/services) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. People Oriented Strategy (focus on relationship building with employees and customers) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. Stability/Traditional Oriented Strategy (focus on reliability and efficiency) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

**Education**

□ High School degree          □ Associate's degree or Some college

□ Bachelor's degree           □ Graduate degree

**Type of Degree**

□ specifically in Human Resources or Industrial-Organizational Psychology

□ Business

□ Behavioral Sciences or Education (e.g., psychology, sociology, education)

□ Other, please specify _____

**Gender**:    □ Female    □ Male          **Age**: _____

**Race: (please check one)**

□ White/Non-Hispanic                    □ African American

□ Hispanic/Latino                       □ Asian

□ Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander     □ American Indian/Alaskan Native

□ Other (e.g., a combination of the categories above)

Appendix B

Certification Motivation

**Directions:** Indicate the degree to which you disagree or agree with the following statements. Circle a number between 1 and 7 for each statement.

| I believe that an HR professional who has an HR certification | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Slightly Disagree | Neither Disagree nor Agree | Slightly Agree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. will be more likely to be hired. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 2. will be paid more. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 3. will advance faster. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 4. will be more respected by fellow HR professionals. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 5. will have greater knowledge of the HR field. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 6. will have a greater sense of occupational identity. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Appendix C

Organizational Support for Certification

**Directions:** First, please indicate what types of support your organization provides to HR professionals who want to obtain an HR certification by simply marking an "X" under No or Yes for each type of support. Then, please provide the estimated cost to your organization for providing an HR professional with that particular type of support.

| Does your organization provide its HR professionals with the following support if they want to obtain an HR certification? | No | Yes | Estimated cost of support for each employee. |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Training materials | | | $ |
| 2. Training instruction or classes | | | $ |
| 3. Time off for study | | | $ |
| 4. Exam fees | | | $ |
| 5. Travel fees for instruction or for taking the exam | | | $ |
| Total Contribution per Employee | | | $ |

Appendix D

Meyer and Allen's (1997) Affective Organizational Commitment Scale

**Directions:** Indicate the degree to which you disagree or agree with the following statements. Circle a number between 1 and 7 for each statement.

| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Slightly Disagree | Neither Disagree nor Agree | Slightly Agree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 2. I enjoy discussing my organization with people outside of it. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 3. I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 4. I think that I could easily become as attached to another organization as I am to this one. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 5. I do not feel like "part of the family" at my organization. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 6. I do not feel "emotionally attached" to this organization. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 7. This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 8. I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Appendix E

Meyer, Allen, and Smith's (1993) Occupational Commitment Scale

**Directions:** Indicate the degree to which you disagree or agree with the following statements. Circle a number between 1 and 7 for each statement.

|  | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Slightly Disagree | Neither Disagree nor Agree | Slightly Agree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. The HR profession is important to my self-image. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 2. I regret having entered the HR profession. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 3. I am proud to be in the HR profession. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 4. I dislike being an HR professional. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 5. I do not identify with the HR profession. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 6. I am enthusiastic about being an HR professional. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Do you have any final thoughts about the HR profession and/or HR certification?

Appendix F

IRB Approval Letter

Appendix G

Informed Consent Letter

**Cover Letter**

Dear HR Professional,

Hello, my name is Yushan Hsu and I am a graduate student at Emporia State University in Kansas. I would like to ask you to complete a short survey about human resource certifications and your job in human resources. The survey should take no more than twenty minutes to complete.

By participating in this research project, you will help identify whether human resource certifications have any value for the professional or for his or her organization. You will also help me to complete my Master's thesis. If you are interested in receiving a copy of the findings, you can email me at the email address listed below.

To maintain your confidentiality, the results will be used for research purposes only. Only summarized results of the data will be reported. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,


Yushan Hsu
shsu@g.emporia.edu

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I, Yushan Hsu, hereby submit this thesis to Emporia State University as partial fulfillment of the requirement for an advanced degree. I agree that the Library of the University may make it available for use in accordance with its regulations governing materials of this type. I further agree that quoting, photocopying, or other reproduction of this document is allowed for private study, scholarship (including teaching) and research purposes of a nonprofit nature. No copying which involves potential gain will be allowed without written permission of the author. I also agree to permit the Graduate School at Emporia State University to digitize and place this thesis in the ESU institutional repository.

_____
Signature of Author

_____
Date

The Benefits of HR Certifications for HR

Professionals and Their Organizations
_____
Title of Thesis

_____
Signature of Graduate Office Staff Member

_____
Date Received