

Defending CHRP's academic requirement

In Ontario, those pursuing the Certified Human Resources Professional (CHRP) designation must meet a coursework requirement before writing the national exams. This requirement, called the academic requirement, consists of completing nine required courses. It is often noted that Ontario is the only province with such a requirement. (However, Quebec has an equivalent educational requirement.)

The coursework requirement has often been the subject of rumours, usually that the Human Resources Professionals Association of Ontario (HRPAO) will drop this requirement altogether. To put it succinctly, HRPAO is not about to abandon its academic requirement.

HRPAO is of the opinion that its academic requirement is of value to CHRP candidates and the HR profession as a whole. This opinion is based on the following five points:

The academic requirement has a long history at HRPAO. HRPAO has long believed it is important for HR professionals to have a formal academic preparation. Indeed, the Certificate in Personnel Management (CPM) goes all the way back to 1979. HRPAO and its predecessor organizations had academic requirements before there was a designation. In fact, the CHRP designation evolved out of HRPAO's certificate programs. When the national certification framework was introduced in 2003, HRPAO did not add an academic requirement but simply continued an approach in place from the start.

Formal training requirements are a fundamental aspect of what it means to be a profession. If you refer to the body of research on professions and professionalization, you find that formal training is an essential component of what it means to be a profession. Eliot Friedson, in his book *Professionalism, the Third Logic*, lists five elements of professionalization of which one is "a formal training program lying outside the labour market that produces the qualifying credentials, which is controlled by the occupation and associated with higher education." (Friedson's framework was used in a research study by the Society of Human Resource Management in the United States, which also included the participation of a number of Canadian provincial associations.)

It can also be noted that the most respected and valued designations (such as those held by accountants and lawyers) all have formal training requirements. HRPAO is of the opinion that abandoning the academic requirement would be taking a serious step backward with respect to the professionalization of HR.

Formal training is the best way to acquire foundational knowledge. HRPAO believes there is no better way to acquire a foundation in HR than



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structured, comprehensive academic programs.

This is not to deny the usefulness of self-study and learning from experience, but to establish a foundation in HR there is no better approach than a sound academic preparation. In this respect, the nine-course requirement is really a minimum — well-designed programs can achieve much more. The coursework requirement does create a link between academic institutions and the profession that would otherwise be missing.

Formal training programs are important to the socialization process that reinforces the identity of the profession. There is more to formal training than just the learning aspects — these programs are also important to the socialization process that reinforces identification with the profession. Formal training programs anchor the profession. This is where professional networks are established.

Dropping the academic requirement doesn't make sense given the introduction of the degree requirement. Finally, dropping the academic requirement makes little sense given the introduction of the degree requirement. In fact, as HR evolves, the expectations in regards to training and education are likely only to increase. Consider, for example, the recent *Canadian HR Reporter* article on the demand for MBAs for HR positions (*MBA unlocks doors for HR*, Sept. 10, 2007. To view that article, go to www.hrreporter.com, click on "Advanced Search" and enter article #5426.)

In a nutshell, HRPAO is of the opinion that any weakening of this formal training requirement has the potential to damage the process of professionalization in HR.

Alternatives to the academic requirement

Having made such a strong case for the academic requirement and the formal training programs they are linked to, we need to address the

fact there are alternative ways of meeting the academic requirement.

For instance, documenting more than 10 years' experience at a strategic level in HR can be used as an alternative to the academic requirement. This should not be seen to contradict the argument for the academic requirement, but understood as an accommodation of the fact HR is a young profession and many of its senior practitioners entered the profession at a time when formal academic programs in HR were not strongly established. It should be noted that, by their very nature, these alternate ways of meeting the academic requirement are not available to those entering the profession. There may come a time where such accommodations are no longer needed, but we are not there yet.

Why HRPAO has an exam requirement

Having established the academic requirement has benefits for members and for the profession that cannot be derived from an exam-only approach, the argument could be turned and the question asked: "Why then does HRPAO have an exam requirement?" Perhaps HRPAO could follow the lead of Quebec which does not require passing the national exams when candidates obtain their degrees from one of the five listed programs?

HRPAO, however, does feel the need for a process that sets a common standard across institutions. The average National Knowledge Exam (NKE) score across educational institutions in Ontario ranges from the mid 50s to the high 90s. So, although the NKE is a requirement that covers the same ground as the academic requirement, it introduces a common standard that is also needed. HRPAO, therefore, sees value in both its academic requirement and the NKE.

All evidence suggests the academic requirement has served the profession well, and there are no plans to abandon the requirement at this time. In fact, as it has always been, HRPAO is vitally interested in the academic preparation of HR professionals. This is not inconsistent with plans to further recognize the experience element in the CHRP for mature practitioners, which would enable mature practitioners to bring their experience to the table alongside students who are completing their academic requirement.

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