The SHRM Assurance of Learning Exam: Assessing the Field's Awareness and Perceptions of this External Validation Test for Human Resource Graduates

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This study investigates the level of awareness and perceptions of the Assurance of Learning Exam (AOL) in the HR field. This exam is a substitute for students no longer eligible to sit for the Professional in Human Resources exam. Of the professional and student samples, 75% had little or no knowledge of the (AOL) exam—lower than test proponents would prefer. However, 75% of those familiar with the exam indicated that passing it would positively influence their hiring decision. Alumni (63%) indicated that passing the exam helped during their job search. Implications for both practitioners and academics are discussed.

One challenge recent college graduates face as they enter into a profession is that potential employers frequently seek to hire someone with previous experience. Being at the outset of their careers, these job seekers face an obstacle to getting their foot in the door to obtain this desired experience and demonstrate their ability to excel. One potential mechanism these individuals can use to prove their competency is to take an external validation exam. Some professional fields offer voluntary certification. A couple of examples include operations management (with the CPIM exam) and information technology (with a variety of targeted certifications). In the human resource management field, students preparing to graduate used to be allowed to sit for the Professional in Human Resources (PHR) certification exam, and if they passed the exam, to become fully certified after completing two years of exempt-level HR experience.

Recent research has demonstrated the value of the PHR for newly minted graduates who are entering the field for the first time. Lester, Mencl, Maranto, Bourne & Keaveny (2010) found that students who passed the PHR exam were two and a half times more likely than their peers who did not pass (or did not take) the PHR exam to get a human resources job upon graduation. In addition, Lester, Fertig, & Dwyer (2011) found that 90% of organizational leaders perceived voluntary HR certification for their HR professionals as beneficial for their company, and those leaders holding an HR certification indicated they use certification to a greater extent in their decision process when hiring employees.

The importance that employers are placing on candidates demonstrating competency across a broad spectrum of business areas is in part driven by the fact that HR professionals have earned a seat at the executive table and are relied on to address the human capital implications of strategic formulation and implementation decisions (Schramm, 2011). The breadth of knowledge required is evident from the major

topical areas evaluated on the current AOL exam which include: employee and labor relations, employment law, strategy, compensation and benefits, training and development, and workforce planning (SHRM, 2011). Human Resource degree programs are likely to have coursework in these areas as well as a core of business classes that span across other functional areas such as finance, accounting, marketing, and information systems.

Interestingly, right at the time when empirical evidence was showing the value of the PHR exam for individuals entering the profession, the governing body for the PHR, the Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI), decided to change the eligibility requirements such that students were no longer allowed to sit for the exam unless they had already satisfied the two-year, exempt-level experience requirement.

This decision to restrict student eligibility generated a great deal of debate as HR educators and some HR practitioners worried about the loss of this external validation tool for students who were going out on the job market. The Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) responded to the concerns that were raised by creating the Assurance of Learning (AOL) exam in 2010 so that students and recent graduates would have another mechanism for demonstrating their functional competency starting in 2011, when the PHR eligibility changes went into effect.

The Society of Human Resource Management is the most predominant professional association in the field. The association provides resources and educational and career opportunities for over 275,000 members in 160 countries (SHRM, 2014). Given that SHRM often provides direction for the field, it was not surprising that they took the lead to provide an alternative validation mechanism for students.

The PHR certification exam is the most widely taken certification exam in the Human Resource field and, consequently, has good name recognition. Creating a substitute for this exam is a major undertaking and SHRM was diligent in its efforts to create a new and reputable exam over the course of an 18-month time period. This is now the fourth year of the exam's existence, and those involved with the tool's development have completed the cross-validation process for the exam. While it is essential to test and confirm the exam's validity, there are additional questions of particular interest at this junction: (1) How aware is the HR field of this new external validation exam?, (2) How aware of the AOL exam are the educational institutions that are preparing HR majors for this profession?, and (3) How favorably is the exam being received by members of the profession? The following investigation will address these three questions, the answers to which will provide preliminary evidence regarding how valuable the AOL exam is (as a substitute for the PHR) for students graduating from HR programs.

The Society for Human Resource Management has demonstrated a firm commitment to human resource management education over the past decade. This organization has conducted a variety of survey-based research as well as focus groups to gather data from the field on what should be included in HRM curricula (Kluttz & Cohen, 2003). SHRM specified the most widespread HRM curriculum recommendations in its *SHRM Human Resource Curriculum Guidebook and Templates for Undergraduate and Graduate Programs* (SHRM, 2006). Over 100 HRM programs have met the criteria laid out in this Curriculum Guidebook and have been recognized as SHRM accredited programs (SHRM, 2010). These numbers clearly suggest that the Curriculum Guidebook was well-publicized and promoted, as it quickly gained traction, and universities responded to the proposed core content areas in the first few years following the publication of these program templates. With the creation of the AOL exam, SHRM provides a tool that can be used as a capstone measuring stick of how well an HR major has achieved competency in the recommended core content areas. SHRM encourages universities to have their students sit for the AOL exam and gives discounts on exam fees if universities buy blocks of exam seats.

Yet, for these aforementioned tools to add value for students, people must be aware of the AOL exam, as well as the competencies it represents. Additionally, those hiring must view the AOL exam favorably if it is going to assist recent graduates to obtain a position within the field. To address the research questions of interest, data were gathered from three different samples: (1) professionals in the field, (2) current students in HR programs that might be interested in taking the AOL exam, and (3) alumni that have gone through the job search process after passing the AOL exam. The professional sample were able to respond to both awareness and perceived value questions related to the AOL exam, while current students provided feedback on their awareness of the relatively new exam, and alumni who

have already taken the exam could assess the value of the exam as they embarked on their professional careers. The characteristics of these sample groups are described in more detail below.

METHODS

Sample and Procedure

The three targeted samples were all invited to participate through an electronic data collection effort. The research team conducted a thorough internet search to identify the e-mail addresses of as many professional SHRM chapter presidents as possible across the United States. The aforementioned search resulted in 369 usable e-mail addresses. A link to an electronic survey was emailed to these SHRM contacts. In addition to being invited to participate in the study, these individuals were also asked to forward the survey link to all the members on their current chapter roster. Recipients were told that the survey inquired about their awareness of, and perceptions of, the SHRM Assurance of Learning (AOL) exam. Recipients also were assured that their participation was confidential and that their responses to the electronic survey would go directly to a secure, third-party website that could be accessed only by the research team. One follow-up message was sent to remind recipients to complete the survey (and forward the link to their chapter members) if they had not already done so. This electronic survey methodology has been touted as an effective way to save cost, protect participant data, increase response rates and improve efficiency (Forrest, 2003; Burns & Bush, 2005)

The same procedural approach was used to gather feedback from HR majors from around the United States. An internet search was conducted to identify the faculty advisors of student SHRM chapters at universities and colleges. This search yielded 493 usable e-mail addresses. The advisors were asked to forward the survey link to all the students on their SHRM roster. It was surprising that more faculty advisors were located than professional chapter presidents, but further inspection of the list revealed some chapters had co-advisors. After the survey was initially sent to this sample, several e-mails were received indicating that some individuals were no longer affiliated with a chapter or that a chapter was not currently active.

The third sample was a group of HR alumni from the authors' university that had previously taken the AOL exam. While the larger student sample was able to provide feedback related to the overall awareness of the exam at learning institutions across the country, this targeted group of alumni was more familiar with the exam and better equipped to assess the perceptions that recruiters had of the exam and the extent to which having passed the exam facilitated their job search process. This third sample included 20 alumni responses (out of a possible 57 who took the exam in between spring 2011 - spring 2013), which equated to a 35% response rate. In the first two samples, there was no way for the research team to know how many chapter presidents (and faculty advisors) actually chose to forward the survey link. Thus, an exact response rate was unable to be calculated.

Two hundred and thirty-eight professional SHRM members responded to the survey, and 117 current student chapter members participated. While the total size of these two samples (355) was lower than hoped for, there was a good geographic dispersion of the responses. Specifically there were HR professional participants from 30 different states and student chapter participants from 16 different states. In terms of demographic characteristics, the professional sample was 78% female, 85% Caucasian, and 75% of the respondents had at least a four-year college degree. Fifty percent of these participants were from large companies (250 employees or more), 57% had been in the profession for less than 10 years, and 56% were over the age of 40. Seventy-seven percent of the sample indicated that recruiting and selection was part of their job, with 23% indicating that it was 40% or more of their job. The sample of current students was also 78% female, 88% Caucasian, and a large majority (70%) were traditionally-aged students (i.e., 18-24 years of age). The alumni sample was 95% traditionally-aged recent graduates (i.e., 22-25 years of age) with one student being slightly older but still under 30. Seventy percent of these alumni were female.

Measures

Awareness of the Exam

Both the professional sample and the current student sample were asked to indicate their level of awareness of the AOL exam on a scale of 1 = to no extent to 5 = to a great extent. If they were aware of the exam, they were then asked which informational sources were used to learn about the exam. The respondent could choose any of the following: The SHRM website, the SHRM Facebook page, the SHRM Twitter feed, a SHRM LinkedIn connection, a SHRM e-mail, an announcement at their SHRM chapter, from a fellow HR professional (or student), or from a SHRM mailing. In addition, they were asked to indicate their *primary* informational resource regarding the AOL exam. Finally, they were asked to indicate (from the aforementioned list) which SHRM resources they used to stay current on issues affecting the HR professional (they were allowed to select all that apply).

Perceptions of the Exam

The professional sample was asked to assess the percentage of time that the SHRM AOL exam entered into the discussion when conducting job interviews with recent graduates. Furthermore, they were asked to indicate who initiated the discussion (the applicant or the interviewer) when it did come up. The professionals were also asked the extent to which passing the SHRM AOL exam impacted: (1) the hiring decision, (2) the starting salary, and (3) the responsibilities given to the new hire. One question had the professionals indicate whether they would hire someone who had passed the AOL exam over someone who had not (all other things being equal). Finally, they were asked one question regarding whether they would view someone passing the Professional in Human Resources (PHR) exam more or less favorably than someone who passed the Assurance of Learning (AOL) exam.

Like the professional sample, the alumni sample was asked if the AOL exam entered into their job interview discussions, and if so, who initiated that conversation. They were also asked to assess the extent to which passing the exam helped them in the job interview and the extent to which the exam helped them to prepare for their current position. Finally, alumni were asked the extent to which the AOL exam paved the way for them to receive additional developmental opportunities.

RESULTS

The means and standard deviations for the variables of interest can be found in Table 1.

A major finding from this study is that 75% of both the professional sample and the student sample indicated that they had either "no knowledge" or "very limited" knowledge of the SHRM Assurance of Learning exam. Sixty percent of the professionals indicated that they did not know anything about the exam. Furthermore, there was no significantly greater awareness on the part of those professionals who spent a greater percentage of their job recruiting. Forty-eight percent of the current student respondents said they did not know anything about the exam. While the sample size is on the comparatively small side, the SHRM organization would likely be disappointed that awareness is not higher now that the exam has been on the market for three full years. Given that there is room for improvement on the awareness side, it is important to look at which communication mechanisms might be most effective in increasing awareness.

When asked about the primary source by which they learned of the AOL exam, both the professional sample and the student sample indicated that the SHRM website, a SHRM e-mail, or an announcement at a SHRM meeting were the top three sources of information. When asked about the sources they use to stay current on HR issues, again both the professional sample and the current student sample revealed that SHRM chapter meetings were the most frequent choice followed by the SHRM website and the SHRM newsletter. Table 2 shows the frequency with which each information source was chosen by both the professional and the current student sample.

TABLE 1
MEANS FOR VARIABLES OF INTEREST

	N	Mean	StDev	N	Mean	StDev	N	Mean	StDev
Awareness of AOL[a]	238	1.81	1.20				117	1.88	1.07
AOL discussed in interview[b]	235	1.32	.90	18	1.39	.70	114	.52	.52
Discussion initiator[c]	228	1.3	.64	16	.94	.68	114	6.39	6.52
AOL factor in the hiring decision[a]	233	2.64	1.21						
AOL & starting salary[a]	227	2.19	.99						
AOL & new hire responsibilities[a]	231	2.41	1.03						
AOL vs PHR in hiring[d]	231	1.96	.84						
AOL preference in hiring[e]	221	1.16	.37						
Desire to learn more about AOL[e]	206	1.56	.50				115	1.22	.41
Plan to take AOL[f]							116	2.20	.89

[a] Scale of 1 -5, 1 = no extent, 5 = a great extent
[b] Percentage of interviews, with increments of 20%; 0 = none, 6 = 81 – 100%
[c] 1 = neither, 2 = interviewer, 3 = candidate
[d] Scale of 1 -5, 1 = PHR much more attractive; 5 = AOL Exam much more attractive
[e] Yes = 1, No = 2
[f] Undecided = 0, Yes = 1, No = 2

TABLE 2
SHRM RESOURCES: FREQUENCY OF USE

	Professionals		Students	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Panel A: Primary Source for information on AOL Exam				
Unaware	128	53.8	49	41.9
SHRM chapter email	25	10.5	13	11.1
SHRM website	21	8.8	13	11.1
Announcement at chapter meeting	20	8.4	10	8.5
Fellow student/HR professional	20	8.4	7	6.0
Chapter mailing	5	2.1	7	6.0
Other	17	7.1	18	15.4
Panel B: Sources used to stay current on HR issues				
SHRM chapter meetings	165	67.6	65	55.6
SHRM website	163	66.8	61	52.1
SHRM newsletter	91	37.3	33	28.2
SHRM LinkedIn connection	59	24.2	21	17.9
SHRM Facebook page	23	9.4	19	16.2
SHRM Twitter feed	14	5.7	8	6.8
Other	24	9.8	9	7.7

For those professionals who were aware of the AOL exam, the second focus of interest was how favorably they viewed the exam as an external validation and the extent to which it would influence their hiring and placement decisions. When asked whether the exam was discussed during interviews, only one-fifth of participants gave affirmative answers. These numbers could trigger the concern that if the student did not mention the exam it would not be discussed. To proactively address this concern, we included a question that asked the participant to indicate who initiated the AOL exam discussion. Interestingly, of the 46 individuals who said the exam was part of the conversation, 24 indicated the interviewer brought it up with 22 indicating the applicant initiated the conversation. The professionals familiar with the AOL exam appear to accept it as a good assessment of competency. Seventy-five percent of professionals indicated that it would influence their hiring decisions; furthermore, 25% of

respondents indicated that it would impact their decision to a considerable or great extent. All other things being equal, 85% of respondents indicated they would hire someone who passed the AOL exam over someone who did not. Interestingly, 37% of the professional respondents indicated that passing the AOL exam would influence the starting salary they offered to some extent. Also, 47% reported that passing the AOL exam would influence the responsibilities given to a new hire. While the successful completion of the AOL exam was viewed favorably, 70% of these same respondents indicated that if they were comparing a candidate who passed the AOL exam to one who passed the PHR exam, the candidate with the PHR on their resume would be seen as "somewhat" or "much more" attractive.

Looking forward, one encouraging sign was that 44% of the professional sample indicated that they were interested in learning more about the AOL exam. Therefore, if SHRM thinks carefully about how to distribute AOL-related information to its professional members, it should be able to increase awareness since they appear open to learning more. This desire to learn more was even stronger within the current student sample. Seven-eight percent reported that they would like more information. Furthermore, when asked if they planned to take the AOL exam, only 18% said "no", while 31% said "yes" and 51% were still "undecided." Marketing the exam more effectively and getting information out to these students will likely lead to a higher number of undecided students taking the exam.

The alumni sample did perceive value in passing the AOL exam. Fifty percent of these respondents indicated that the AOL exam did come up in job interviews, and 56% said they proactively mentioned their test-taking experience. Five out of every eight respondents felt that it helped them during the job interview and somewhat prepared them for the job. Sixty percent of these alumni respondents currently held HR jobs and 45% of them had their HR position at the time of graduation. Not only did these participants see the AOL exam as a means to assist them in obtaining an HR job, 50% of them also indicated that passing the exam assisted them in getting additional development opportunities with their employer once they were hired. These opportunities included access to management trainee programs and advanced training modules, invitations to serve on special task forces, and greater responsibility for work decisions and outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this investigation suggest that those somewhat familiar with the SHRM Assurance of Learning Exam tend to have positive perceptions of the exam. The biggest concern is that, at least within this data sample, awareness levels are rather low, with only 25% of respondents having more than limited knowledge of the exam. This was true both among professional SHRM members as well as student SHRM members. One reason why these numbers are lower than expected is because of SHRM's affiliation with the exam. SHRM members would be expected to have a greater likelihood of hearing about the exam compared to HR professionals who are not active SHRM members.

One of the most encouraging findings is that those who know of the exam tend to incorporate it into their hiring decisions. The exam appears to be one of those factors that would help recruiters decide between two similarly qualified applicants. It is important to note, however, that recruiters did not indicate the exam as one of the top contributors to their decision. Our survey did contain one "rank-order" question where respondents were asked to list in order of importance 12 factors that could influence their hiring decision. The average ranking for the SHRM AOL exam was 6.63. The three most influential factors according to this sample were: (1) professional experience, (2) interviewing skills and (3) internships. Interestingly, the fact that HR professionals still place the most emphasis on professional experience reinforces the importance of SHRM creating this external validation mechanism for HR graduates since the PHR exam is no longer a viable option for them under the new eligibility requirements.

One's immediate response might be to focus on interviewing and internships. In fact, 63% of graduating senior have completed at least one internship (Internships.com, 2014). Additionally, most universities have a career services department that provides interview skills training. This suggests that

external competency exams, while not the primary factor, may be an important distinguishing factor in assisting students in obtaining employment.

While this study provides some preliminary evidence regarding the awareness of and perceptions of the AOL exam within the profession, it is important to recognize the limitation of a relatively small sample size. Even though it came from a broad cross-section of geographical areas, the total number of respondents was rather low. The total numbers of respondents could have been low because a high percentage of SHRM presidents and SHRM faculty advisors chose not to forward the link. However, this explanation appears to be unlikely since a similar methodology was used by Lester & Dwyer (2012) to gather perceptions of the Professional in Human Resources (PHR) exam, and the same methodology generated over 2000 responses. Another possibility is that SHRM members who received the link were unfamiliar with the exam and therefore chose not to complete the survey after receiving the link.

While this study did ask the professional sample several demographic questions, future research could benefit from including more detailed questions such as whether the respondent had a degree in HR, had obtained voluntary HR certification, and how long they had been in the profession. This information would help to gauge their likely receptivity to a new exam. Furthermore, our coding scheme of the gender variable as either male or female did not take into account transgender populations and should be broadened in future research.

While HR educators are eager to see the AOL exam assist their students in the same way that the PHR did prior to 2011 (Lester et al. 2010), it is also important to recognize that expectations for a quick ascent into familiarity across the field may not have been realistic. AOL exam developers at SHRM were told by test development consultants that it usually takes 5-10 years for a new certification-type exam to gain traction and take off within the field. In addition to gathering feedback from the field, it was also important to touch base with those who are most familiar with the use of the exam—those involved with SHRM's academic initiatives. SHRM reports that the actual number of AOL examinees has gone from 114 in the spring of 2011 to 394 in the spring of 2014. In addition, while the authors' university was one of only four to send their cohort of HR majors through the exam in 2011 and 2012, SHRM reports that in the Spring of 2014 the number of university cohorts taking the AOL exam jumped up to 25 (N. A. Woolever, personal communication, May 8, 2014).

In summary, it appears that SHRM and others affiliated with the launch of the Assurance of Learning Exam have made some progress in getting word of the exam out to the profession. Despite this progress, the results of this investigation show that the organization cannot rest on its laurels as a large portion of the profession still has a limited understanding of the exam or no knowledge of the exam at all. Hopefully the SHRM organization and HR educators across the nation will continue to work to promote this validation tool for students as it is important for graduates to have a way to set themselves apart in the job market. Additionally, it is important for graduates to be able to obtain an opportunity to gain professional experience. Our findings show that professional experience has the most influence on recruiters' hiring decisions, often placing promising new graduates at a disadvantage. The AOL exam provides an objective mechanism that allows recruiters to assess applicants' competency in the absence of prior professional positions. Thus, the AOL exam has the potential to serve both recruiters and graduates well.

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