

# Episode 332: Passing your HR Certification exam - What was your experience like?



**Intro: [00:00:00.39]** Welcome to the Workology Podcast, a podcast for the disruptive workplace leader. Join host Jessica Miller-Merrell, founder of Workology.com as she sits down and gets to the bottom of trends, tools, and case studies for the business leader, HR, and recruiting professional who is tired of the status quo. Now here's Jessica with this episode of Workology.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:00:25.71]** Welcome to the Workology Podcast, sponsored by Upskill HR and Ace the HR exam. I'm all about providing resources and support for HR and workplace leaders, and that includes HR certification. Your HR certification exam, whether it's SHRM or HRCI is hands down the hardest test you will ever take in your HR career. I can say that with absolute certainty for myself. I've found with the right support and preparation, you can ace that HR exam with flying colors. At Workology, we provide SHRM and HRCI certification prep courses through our podcast sponsors Upskill HR and Ace the HR exam. Both are designed to support HR leaders in different ways. In addition to these courses, I also work hard to provide our HR certification community with the support and resources they need. I do this by creating a safe space and community for HR leaders to connect, share and collaborate in our HR Certification Study Group on Facebook. In today's episode, I wanted to share with you some excerpts from interviews with previous HR certification test-takers on their experience on taking and passing their HR certification exams, along with some advice for how you can succeed. I know many of you have exams upcoming. Our first interview is with Patrice McFarquhar, who took and passed the SHRM-CP exam.

**Patrice McFarquhar: [00:01:50.76]** I took the SHRM-CP because, to be honest, that's the only one that I knew about when I was looking to go back into the field. I did not learn about the, the PHR until after. So, I was already in it. I already started taking the courses, so I kind of just continued with it. And my testing experience, honestly, this is my second time, was my second time taking the exam. The first time I did remotely, and that was very difficult because the security system was just really, really, really secure. And I felt like I understood why they needed to be extra secure to ensure that there was integrity with me taking my exam. However, I felt that it was the biggest distraction with me focusing on my exam because you had a proctor that was watching you the whole time. And I actually had some experiences where just my nerves were just going a little bit and I was like shaking my pen, like just unconsciously shaking my pen one time. And then the proctor stopped my exam to tell me, Listen, you can't do that or you can't do this. I mean, it was to the point where I couldn't even, like, breathe too hard. So I think that really had an impact with my performance as well. So the second time around, I decided to do it in person. And mind you, I took my first exam in, in, in the height of the pandemic. It was July of 2020. So now that things kind of winds down with the pandemic, I decided to go in person and my experience was the total opposite of what people say that it is. The people greeted, that greeted me was really nice. The security check process was good. Obviously, we know that SHRM exam is four hours long, so it's really, really, really hard. Some people take breaks. I didn't take any break. I just did my exam straight through just because I was just afraid of running to the restroom and not making it back in time. So that was kind of like my testing experience.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:06.15] Did you, did you have to wear a mask during your test or?

Patrice McFarquhar: [00:04:10.18] I did. I did. But I think at this point, I'm still used. We're so used to wearing a mask all the time. I think that I was able to bear doing so, and I think my focus was so much on the exam that I kind of forgot I even had a mask on, to be honest.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:29.52] Good.

Patrice McFarquhar: [00:04:30.12] Definitely. There were some topics that did strip me up the most. I don't know why. I don't know if it's just the way that I learned. But the globalization topics, I had a really, really, really hard time with that one, even during my study sessions. I just, I don't know. The questions that I had. I did have some questions on globalization, but even the questions that I did through the SHRM learning system to test my knowledge and my understanding, I didn't do too well on those. So, I, I don't even know why, but that's basically the topic that stripped me up the most and I wish I had more time studying about, I would just say the competencies in general. I feel like I got so like caught up on the different sections, like the workplace section, the people section, and things like that, that when it was time to take my exam, I didn't go back into really, you know, going back into learning the different competencies, you know, relationship management, communication, consultation, that type of stuff. And I would definitely say the metrics. I didn't spend a lot of time on that, and I wish that I did.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:05:44.34] You had a couple of questions on metrics then?

Patrice McFarquhar: [00:05:46.71] Honestly, I didn't. But I feel like as an HR professional, that is something that I need to know, right? So, I think it was really more for my experience on my hands-on experience as an HR professional. That is something that I should know. But fortunately, I didn't. Not one, not one I didn't have. Most of my questions were based on, I would say, the business acumen, and I would think I would say the organizational section. I had a lot of questions, recruitment, things like that, workforce analysis. That's, that's kind of I would definitely say I had most questions on that, and advice that I would offer for someone who is studying the exam is take it one step at a time, right? Don't try to rush through it. Make sure that you're retaining the information. And I think the best way to retain information is to not study for a long period of time. I would recommend no more than an hour a day, like a half-hour to an hour a day. I felt like when I did that, I was able to understand the information and retain it a little bit better. But the first time around when I took the exam, I find myself studying for like a large amount of time. And then it was, when it was time for me to test my knowledge and my retention, I didn't do well on the quizzes. So that would definitely be my, my advice, and also too, if you're like me and you don't pass the first round, I know the feeling. You feel very defeated or you feel like you're just not competent as an HR professional. Those are just thoughts that were going through my mind. But don't let that keep you from trying again because it definitely is possible. You

just have to basically figure out what works for you and what are some things that you need to do differently in order to pass, but the exam is definitely possible. And, you know, just keep that in mind.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell:** [00:07:50.40] Our next interview is with Anna Calhoun, who took and passed the aPHR. Let's listen in to an excerpt of a conversation with Anna.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell:** [00:07:59.08] Let's talk about your testing experience. What was that like for you? Did you do in-person or remote?

**Anna Calhoun:** [00:08:05.07] I did in-person only because I'm used to just the setting. When I, when I got my X-Ray certification, it was the same. I had to go to the Pearson VUE and take it there. So I was very comfortable with that. And I do because I don't know, maybe because I'm older, when I test and when I study, I need to not have any distractions, so I did not want to be here. I didn't want to have my husband bothering, my kids, the cats, the dogs. I just, I wanted just some peace so I could concentrate. So I did go to the center and like I said, I was very comfortable with that setting.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell:** [00:08:43.50] Were there any surprises on the exam that you weren't prepared for or, or maybe even just like when you were in the exam itself, the length, the questions, any of those things?

**Anna Calhoun:** [00:08:56.04] I did not expect, though it clearly afterward, I went back and read it and I'm like, Oh, I did not expect the fill in the blank. I'm not going to lie. I totally went in thinking, Oh, multiple-choice, I'll be able to eliminate a few. Figure it out. There was fill-in-the-blanks, though. So afterward, of course, I read and I'm like, Oh, it does say fill in the blank. But I did not expect that, so that caught me a little off guard.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell:** [00:09:21.84] Did the exam for you have like the strikeout feature or did you use any of those the notepad online or, or any of that?

**Anna Calhoun:** [00:09:30.78] Well, they gave me a, a wipe-off board, which I did use. I did use to write down just some mental notes for myself as I was going through. And then, of course, there was some math. So, of course, I used it and it was just, I don't know, like I said, I like the pen to paper. I need to write it down. The computer things, yes, I can do that, but I'm just more comfortable with writing it down, looking at it, and referring back to it.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:10:00.09] I am the same way, but I feel like my daughter who's 12, she's not going to want to write anything down.

Anna Calhoun: [00:10:05.25] No.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:10:05.27] Her whole world is all online. They're not teaching cursive anymore in, in schools where, for her anyway.

Anna Calhoun: [00:10:11.16] Right, right. And that's why I say, because I'm in my mid-40s, even going through X-Ray school in my mid-30s, I was like, everybody was way younger. So the way everybody else studies and the way I study is harder for me to remember as I age. So I like to put pen to paper and look at it, so it's just easier for me.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:10:34.20] What topics or questions, you mentioned the fill-in-the-blank, but was there any other topic that tripped you up more than, more than most?

Anna Calhoun: [00:10:42.15] Not really. Though I was prepared like I knew the answers. I didn't expect it. So because I did study a lot of the numbers as far as how long you need to keep documents, what different acts are, are valid depending on the number of employees, things like that. I really studied numbers for that. The one thing that tripped me up, it was very as I, like I said, as I came across, some like some math questions, like in your mind, like, Oh, that's easy, went right through it. I do like to, I, I finished it pretty quickly, so I actually went through the whole test again. And when I did it, I looked at the math and I'm like, Why did you do that? Like, they kind of trip you up like it's, it may not seem as easy as you think, and I actually changed a few things because when I went through, I'm like, That's not right. That was very silly. So, very carefully.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:11:38.70] I didn't know you had enough time to go back and review everything. Finish this sentence. I wish I had more time studying about, blank.

Anna Calhoun: [00:11:52.32] Numbers. Like I said, how many employees are certain laws. How many years you have to keep certain things. It's just a big, a big numbers.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:12:05.50] Good, good, what about advice that you would have for someone who is studying for their exam, their aPHR, any tips or suggestions to help them get through it?

**Anna Calhoun: [00:12:17.40]** Use a variety of learning materials. I was, I had first scheduled take this test the end of last year. There's a timeline. The place that I went through that was paying for my test said, you have to take it within this, this amount of time. So I schedule it right away. But then life happens. You know, when you're when you, you have a job, children, a family, like life happens. So I kept pushing it off. And then it was very last minute like, Oh my goodness, I have to take this test. So I did buy a variety of, of things, different testing books from different people. I find that I learn best with note cards. So I did find a little note card study thing, but again, I was like, I don't want to say I felt unprepared, but it was one of those panicky like, am I going to pass this? And I found one of the best resources for me was the Workology Audio. I have a 40-minute commute to work every day. That is the perfect time to listen to one lesson. So I out every day, I listen to a lesson driving to work and I listen to a lesson driving home from work. And I found that I'm like, Oh, I don't have to make time for this. I'm alone in the car. I can concentrate on this. I don't have my husband asking, what's for dinner? I don't have the, the cats bothering me. Like, What's for dinner, mom? You know my kids calling me, What are you going to make for dinner this weekend when I come home? The car was my time. And so that, that audio helped me so much.

**Break: [00:13:51.12]** Let's take a reset. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell, and you were listening to the Workology Podcast, sponsored by Upskill HR and Ace the HR exam. We're sharing some excerpts from interviews and conversations that I've had with previous HR certification test-takers on their experience in taking and passing their HR certification exams, SHRM as well as HRCI exams. Our final interview excerpt is with Darlene Rasmussen, who also took and passed the SHRM-CP exam.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:14:20.37]** Let's talk about your testing experience. Did you do remote? Was it in-person? What was that like?

**Darlene Rasmussen: [00:14:25.67]** No, I actually went to a Prometric testing facility, and I have to say it was a little disheartening because the day that I was scheduled for January 8th, you know, I put all this work into studying, preparing, I get out there. They couldn't get the exam to load and I couldn't take it. And I literally, I literally broke down into tears. I was like, No, you can't do this to me. Like, This is not fair. But anyway, I think it was the universe's way of telling me, take the extra days, study some more. It was four days later that I took it and I passed. So and this was my second time taking it. The first time I took it was June of 2019. I did not pass it and then come to find out my score was a 190 which you needed 200. So I literally just missed passing. But you don't know that and it's you really just have to study, you have to really study all the competencies because you don't know what to expect when you sit down and you hit start on that exam.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:15:23.16]** Yeah, the questions are not the same really for any, any person who takes the exam.

**Darlene Rasmussen: [00:15:28.92]** Right.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:15:29.46]** Well, so what topics are questions tripped you up the most, or did you feel like you struggled with?

**Darlene Rasmussen: [00:15:35.51]** Uhm, you know, the toughest thing, I think, are the situational questions, and what I did was I did as many practice tests as I could prior to taking the exam. I have all the Workology material, which was I can't even tell you how valuable that was for me. And I'm not just saying this because Jessica's interviewing me. I'm saying it because it really is true. She really goes above and beyond carving out all the different information that is, that has the potential to be on the test. So with the situational questions in my practice test-taking, Exam Edge is another, another one. I use their online test. You're able to go back and see, you know, review what you got wrong and understand why you got it wrong. And I'm going to give everyone a great example of something so simple that could trip you up. So there was a question about a non-union employee that had an investigative hearing and something about what was, what was their eligibility, or something along those lines. So of course, we all know what Weingarten Rights are. So of course, that's the answer I chose and I got the question wrong. I'm like, How did I get that wrong? This is impossible. So when I went back and reread it, they asked about a non-union employee. Non-union employees are not entitled to representation, so one little word. That's what I found in a lot of things that I got wrong, that I was I really had to go back, read the passage twice to understand it. Read the question carefully two times so I can understand specifically what they were asking because sometimes it's a question within a question that you're answering. So you have to read all the context of the questions to understand it, which sounds confusing, but.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:17:17.43]** And it's crazy because for someone like you, like you and me have been in HR for a long time, it used to be Weingarten Rights used to include non-union employees and it's, it's, went back and forth a little bit. So that's really sneaky.

**Darlene Rasmussen: [00:17:31.17]** It was. So you have to be really, really careful. And another, you know, another piece of advice that I can give typically right off the bat, there's two answers you can eliminate. Use your strikeout option to cross them out if puts a red line through them, so they're not kind of hanging off in the distance. Get rid of them and really go back and read the question and look at your two remaining answers. And then a lot of cases could technically be either of the two answers, but they're looking for the best one. So again, rereading the question a couple of times to understand what they're looking for will give you a better idea of how to answer the question.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:18:06.36]** So you said that this is your second time taking the exam. What, what do you think was the difference-maker for you to go from fail to pass the second time?

**Darlene Rasmussen: [00:18:15.63]** So this time around, I really, I put so much effort. I took, I took a study course through one of my local community college, which it was just me. There was no other, no one else in the class that was just myself and the professor. So I had one-on-one attention for 10 weeks. The Workology

information, because you have the audio files available, which in the summer I walk my dog for almost an hour. We do a two-mile walk every day so the headphones will go on, and that's when I would do my listening, if I was in the car. Another thing that I did that, that was helpful for me. I went through every single of the competency books and I, you know, looked for specific terms and I wrote them out because I think writing them out also gives you a better opportunity to absorb them. All the different HR laws they, they go back to like the 1800 up until present time. So understanding all of them because there was, there was just a couple of questions like that that were covered, but you don't know what it's going to be. So you really have to, you have to really have a, just a little bit of an understanding of each of them. And then what is the, oh, HR theories is another thing. I think there was only one or two questions, but understand each of the theories and what they were used for because that, that is going to come up.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:19:36.63] Good, good. Well, I want you to finish this sentence for me. I wish I had spent more time studying on, blank.

Darlene Rasmussen: [00:19:44.42] That's, that's hard to say. I wish I spent more time. I'm trying to think of which of the, really union relations because I, I mean, I do have union experience, but not a ton of it. So really having a better understanding of that, I worked with a couple of different companies that had, you know, union divisions. So I do have the experience. But again, when you're being tested on something and ask questions, it's a lot different than your day-to-day hands-on work that you're doing. So for me personally, I think I think that's what it would be.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:20:15.90] And I think you hit you also hit the nail on the head, too. It's like you if you have even if you have hands-on experience in that area, we have to think like SHRM or HRCI and how we answer the questions. We can't answer them the way we would normally do it in our everyday life, unfortunately.

Darlene Rasmussen: [00:20:32.52] Correct. Right. And that's the, that's the, that's the, the part where people struggle. That's where I say take as many practice, practice exams as you can to really understand the way the questions are formatted and the way they're asked. And you have a lot of a lot of great ones on your site that I've used repetitively over and over again I went through them.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:20:51.00] Yeah, and I think the more that you can do, the better because the questions are positioned in different ways. There's different authors of the questions like you don't know what you're going to get come exam day, and I'm not going to know either. You know, I'm not SHRM. So even, you know, the test writers, I'm sure there's different voices, and they agonize hours to make the test as challenging as it is, right?

Darlene Rasmussen: [00:21:16.38] And then you have the 30 questions that are just being piloted and you don't know what they are. So they just throw another wrench in. You're not tested on those or you're not

scored on those, but, but they're still in there. And it could be, it could be anything you just don't know. But it is when you hit go on that, when you hit start and the clock starts ticking, it's, you know, just take your time, focus. Be as relaxed as you can. You get there that day to your training facility. You know, my daughter was great. She's like, mom, when you go there, sit in the car for a minute, take a couple of deep breaths and then give it over to the university's nothing else you can do once you walk in that room and she's absolutely right. Like you can't stress yourself out over, you know. I know this is something major. It's a very difficult exam, but you have to constantly have positive reassurance in yourself too that you're going to do it.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:22:05.70] A couple more questions since you took yours in the, in the Prometric testing center. Were you able to bring paper and pencil into the testing center with you to take? Or did you have a paper?

Darlene Rasmussen: [00:22:16.93] No, they, they, she did give me some scrap paper, they give you a pen. The only thing I told, leave everything home your purse, everything. Bring your ID, your glasses if you have them. They will have a locker so you can lock your phone up. Obviously, you can't bring your phone into the testing center. They'll give you a locker for your coat, any personal belongings. I say just make it easy. Maybe if you want to bring your notes in while you're waiting, there's not a big waiting gap. They, they process everyone pretty quickly. But if you want that last couple of minutes to kind of go through your notes, but walking in there, it's going to be your ID, the key for your locker, the pen that they give you, and the piece of paper.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:22:52.69] So it's no water or anything like that. You're not bringing that in.

Darlene Rasmussen: [00:22:55.63] I don't think, no, I don't think you or, I didn't bring anything, but I don't think you're allowed to.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:22:59.92] Yeah, I think the locker is, I think for a lot of people, it's like, Oh, you know, I got a giant bag with all my books in it. How am I going to, you know, not, not thinking things through. So I think that's a good advice. What any other advice you could offer with somebody for somebody who's maybe just getting started to study, they're going to go ahead and take their SHRM exam or their HRCI, more SHRM since you took the SHRM. Where should they start? What do you suggest?

Darlene Rasmussen: [00:23:27.22] So I think getting the, the body of knowledge. Get the books with the competencies and check your local SHRM chapter because mine did offer a free study class. It was once a week for 10 weeks. They were three hours. So it was a lot of time you have to invest, but there was a different instructor for each of the competencies and they specialized in that competency. So you were getting there like I remember the gentleman who taught compensation. I just got a lot of really good information. Take

notes, but you have to put the time aside to study. Don't wait until the last minute because, you know, it's not a sprint, it's a marathon. So you have, you really you have to, you have to really be prepared walking into it.

**Closing: [00:24:08.58]** For me, working towards your HR certification starts with not only setting the goal, but creating a plan to work towards that goal. Depending on the exam you pick, the pass rate varies, which is why I suggest at least a 12-week study plan that allows for 60 hours of study time, and that includes reviewing your materials, using HR practice test questions, and working with a study group to review the HR topics you are learning. You might not know, but kinesthetic learning and teaching others allows for the highest form of knowledge and retention come exam day. The test is tough, but the reward is great. Thank you for joining the Workology Podcast, sponsored by Upskill HR and Ace the HR exam. If you're interested in learning more about our HR certification prep courses, you can go to [Learn.Workology.com](https://Learn.Workology.com). This podcast, the Workology Podcast, is for the disruptive workplace leader who's tired of the status quo. My name is Jessica Miller-Merrell, and until next time, visit [Workology.com](https://Workology.com) to listen to all our podcast episodes.

**Closing: [00:25:13.02]** Personal and professional development is essential for successful HR leaders. Join Upskill HR to access live training, community, and over one hundred on-demand courses for the dynamic leader. HR recert credits available. Visit [UpskillHR.com](https://UpskillHR.com) for more.