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Assessing the value of human resource certification: A call for evidence-based human resource management

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ABSTRACT

We are delighted that our article on the value of human resource (HR) certification (Lengenick-Hall & Aguinis, 2012) has generated so much interest. In this brief response, we identify two key similarities across all of the articles published in this special issue (including our own). First, all commentators care deeply about the field of human resource management (HRM). Second, all commentators believe that additional empirical research is needed to assess the value of HR certification for stakeholders inside and outside of the field of HRM. We offer a concrete course of action. Specifically, we issue the following challenge to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) Foundation: Issue a call for proposals for empirical research on the value of HR certification. Such a call would provide funding so that teams including both researchers and practitioners are encouraged to conduct research on this topic. Moreover, such a collaborative approach involving the SHRM Foundation, the HRM scholarly community, and the HRM practitioner community is likely to elevate the field of HRM and produce valuable knowledge about the value of HR certification for stakeholders inside and outside of the field, which in turn will also help narrow the much-lamented science–practice gap.

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1. Introduction

We are delighted that our article on human resource (HR) certification (Lengenick-Hall & Aguinis, 2012) has generated so much interest. Given the articles published in the present special issue of *Human Resource Management Review*, it is obvious that the topic of certification is an important issue for the field of human resource management (HRM), including both researchers and practitioners. The overall goal of our article (i.e., Lengenick-Hall & Aguinis, 2012) was to propose a research agenda that would serve as a starting point for a much needed debate on the value of HR certification. We are extremely gratified that our article has been able to achieve its goal.

In alphabetical order, the present special issue includes articles by Cohen (2012), DeNisi (2012), Garza and Morgeson (2012), Latham (2012), and Paxton (2012). Each of these articles includes reactions to Lengenick-Hall and Aguinis (2012). We could choose to write our response such that we would focus on what we find at fault with the reactions to our work. Moreover, we could also choose to focus on what we believe are misunderstandings or misinterpretations regarding Lengenick-Hall and Aguinis (2012). However, such an approach would entail a “we said, you said” framework that we believe is unproductive and a waste of valuable journal space and readers' time. Accordingly, our approach in the present article is quite different. First, in the next section we provide a brief summary of each commentary. Then, in the following section we note that, in spite of their apparent

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differences, all of the articles published in this special issue (including our own) share two fundamental commonalities. Finally, in the third section of our article we offer a concrete and actionable proposal to fulfill the collective aspirations of all commentators—as well as our own.

2. Brief summaries of commentaries

Cohen (2012) provides a description of the relationship between the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and the Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI). She argues that there is a “firewall” between these two organizations. However, Cohen also notes that “SHRM (formerly ASPA) did give birth to the HR Certification Institute (formerly PAI)” (p. 260), “SHRM derives revenue from the sale of learning materials” (p. 259), and “both the Institute and SHRM financially support the SHRM Foundation.” In short, “there is no question that both SHRM and the Institute have benefited by the strategic partnership between the two organizations” (p. 259). Then, Cohen (2012) offers her personal views on the logic and feasibility of testing each of Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis's (2012) 12 theory-based propositions that comprise their suggested multi-level model to guide a research agenda regarding the value of HR certification.

DeNisi (2012) describes some of the main issues raised by Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis (2012) regarding the history and background of HR certification. Then, DeNisi (2012) offers several comments regarding Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis's (2012) proposed research agenda regarding HR certification. A central point in DeNisi's (2012) article is the need to consider valid criteria against which we could assess the value of HR certification. Specifically, he extrapolates from the assessment center literature to argue that the use of performance ratings may become a self-fulfilling prophecy and, hence, may not be informative regarding the value-added contribution of HR certification. Specifically, the assessment center literature shows that managers make decisions about promotions and raises on the basis of the ratings the person received in the assessment. Consequently, such decisions are contaminated from a psychometric standpoint. Similarly, he argues that performance ratings of individual employees may be affected by a rater's knowledge regarding the ratee's HR certification status. Accordingly, DeNisi (2012) concluded that for a research agenda on HR certification to be successful, “it is critical that one can state with some certainty, that certified HR managers will behave differently than non-certified managers, and that this will lead to improved firm performance—however that is ultimately measured” (p. 267).

Garza and Morgeson (2012) “build upon and extend Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis' multi-level model by incorporating organizational values” (p. 272). Specifically, Garza and Morgeson (2012) review the literature on organizational values and argue that they are a critical driver of whether an organization chooses to use HR certification in employee selection decisions and individuals choose to pursue HR certification. Garza and Morgeson (2012) argue that a research agenda regarding HR certification should include an assessment of values because they are important predictors of organizational practices as well as individual behavior. Accordingly, Garza and Morgeson (2012) offer 6 theory-based testable propositions that specifically refer to organizational values and can be used to guide future empirical research regarding the value of HR certification. In short, they “propose that the organizational values of innovation, people orientation, and stability will directly influence perceptions of the value of HR certification” (p. 276).

Latham (2012) conceptualizes certification from the perspective of test validation. Specifically, he argues that a central question for the HR profession is whether the HR certification tests are content valid. That is, “to be content valid, a test must contain items that are representative of the knowledge a person must possess to perform effectively on the job” (p. 269). In addition, Latham (2012) argues that HR certification tests also need to be valid regarding criterion-related evidence. That is, there is a need to know whether achieving an HR certification designation is associated with important criteria (e.g., job performance). Overall, Latham (2012) argues that “the HR certification process... appears to be highly worthwhile based on the extant scientific evidence” (p. 270).

Finally, Paxton (2012) notes that Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis (2012) “have laid the foundation and established a structure for further debate and scholarly research to determine the value of human resource certification” (p. 279). In writing his article, Paxton (2012) considered his “experience of over more than 15 years as a HR officer and leader in large global manufacturing companies” (p. 279). Based on his experience, he derives three conclusions. First, certification exams measure knowledge about the HR function, but not necessarily an individual's ability to apply that knowledge to affect business results. Second, the differentiating factors for outstanding HR practitioner performance are the application of business acumen, the development of influential relationships, and driving a talent mindset. Third, Paxton (2012) notes that he has not “hired, fired, promoted or made any other employment decision solely on the basis of someone's certification status” (p. 279).

3. Diversity in approaches and perspectives, but fundamental commonalities

Based on the aforementioned brief summaries of each of the commentaries on Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis (2012), there is substantial heterogeneity in approaches, perspectives, and conclusions. Cohen (2012) focuses on attempting to separate SHRM from HRCI and provides her personal views regarding each of the research propositions offered by Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis (2012). DeNisi (2012) argues for the need to use valid and accurate criteria against which we can assess the value of HR certification. Garza and Morgeson (2012) make the point that a research agenda regarding HR certification should consider the role of organizational values. Latham (2012) frames the assessment of the value of HR certification through a test validation lens. Finally, Paxton (2012) relies on his personal experience as an HR practitioner to offer his views regarding the value of HR certification.

As in the parable of the blind men and the elephant, each of the commentators focuses on a different aspect of HR certification. In spite of the heterogeneity of perspectives, each of the commentaries, as well as Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis's (2012), shares two key commonalities. First, all of us share the same high level of commitment to the field of HRM and to research that is both rigorous and relevant so that it can help narrow the much-lamented science–practice gap (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008). For example, Cohen (2012) noted that “it is clear that the authors (Lengnick-Hall & Aguinis, 2012) care about the HR profession and that their desire is to make the profession better by raising important, yet difficult, questions” (p. 258). Similarly, DeNisi (2012) asserted that “the points (Lengnick-Hall & Aguinis, 2012) raise about why assessing whether certification is worth it, why people chose to become certified, and why efforts to demonstrate the usefulness of such certification have not been carried out before, are all useful” (p. 266).

The second crucial commonality across all commentaries is the collective desire to learn more about the value of HR certification. Each of the commentators offered excellent suggestions for expanding the research agenda proposed by Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis (2012). Specifically, Cohen (2012) analyzes each of Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis's (2012) propositions and offers additional suggestions for questions that should be asked. Overall, she concludes that “research does need to be conducted and should be based on a logical approach to learn what is best for the profession” (p. 261). DeNisi (2012) highlights the need for further research specifically regarding outcome measures because “if all that HR certification tests can do is to ascertain that managers have mastered a certain body of material, they may still be useful... but, the fact that someone knows what they should do, does not necessarily mean they will always do what is needed” (p. 267). Garza and Morgeson (2012) propose the addition of organizational values to the HR certification research agenda and conclude that “much research remains to be done, and we hope that our paper helps advance work in this important domain” (p. 277). Latham (2012) concludes that studying HR certification “is a research agenda that should prove valuable for doctoral students in HRM who are searching for a dissertation topic of practical significance” (p. 270). Similarly, Paxton (2012) argues that more research is needed because “until a stronger correlation becomes evident between certification and the performance impact that stems from certification, it is unlikely HR executives will rely solely on certification as the endorsement to assure an HR professional's capability to impact the business” (p. 279–280).

4. Moving forward: a challenge to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) Foundation

There is a growing body of literature exhorting managers to practice evidence-based management (Latham, 2009; Locke, 2009; Rousseau, 2006, 2012). Rousseau and Barends (2011) recently described the more focused need for evidence-based HR management. Evidence-based human resource management means “making decisions, promoting practices, and advising the organization's leadership through the conscientious combination of four sources of information: the best available scientific evidence; reliable and valid organization facts, metrics and assessments; practitioner reflection and judgment; and the concerns of affected stakeholders” (Rousseau & Barends, 2011, pp. 222–223). As it is clear from the articles included in this special issue of *Human Resource Management Review*, there is an urgent need for empirical research on the value of HR certification to enable human resource professionals to practice evidence-based human resource management.

The first step in an evidence-based approach to human resource management is to formulate an answerable question—a focused question based on a practical issue or problem. Paxton (2012) clearly provides us with some questions that HR professionals want to know. He says, “...what I want to understand is whether employing an individual who is certified will make a difference in how my HR organization will grow the firm's shareholder value. In other words, should I make an investment in developing my staff to become certified or should I hire candidates that are certified because they are better able to deliver solutions that increase the performance and profitability of the organization?” The study by Aguinis, Michaelis, and Jones (2005) served as a starting point for follow-up research published in peer reviewed journals including Lester, Fertig, and Dwyer (2011, 2010); Lester, Mencl, Maranto, Bourne, and Keaveny (2010); and Lyons et al. (in press). Thus, it seems that, although nascent, there is some momentum regarding this research stream.

Given the collective aspirations of all authors of articles included in this special issue, including our own, we issue the following challenge to the SHRM Foundation: *Issue a call for proposals for empirical research on the value of HR certification*. The SHRM Foundation is a nonprofit affiliate of SHRM that “advances global human capital knowledge and practice by providing thought leadership and educational support, and sponsoring, funding and driving the adoption of cutting-edge, actionable, evidence-based research” (Society for Human Resource Management, SHRM Foundation, 2012). As noted on its website, “The SHRM Foundation is a leading funder of HR research. Over the past three years, the SHRM Foundation has awarded more than \$1.8 million in grants to fund rigorous, original academic research with practical implications for HR management practice.” Thus, the SHRM Foundation is in a privileged position to serve as an important catalyst for future empirical research on the value of HR certification.

Much like the SHRM Foundation has issued special calls for research proposals in the past on various topics such as “Identifying and Mitigating Human Capital Risk in Enterprise Risk Assessment” (Society for Human Resource Management, SHRM Foundation Research Grants, 2012), it could also issue a call for proposals on the topic of HR certification value. From our perspective, for such a call for proposals to be most effective in generating valid and actionable knowledge, it could include the following features:

1. *Research team composition*. Research teams should include both researchers and practitioners. Such diversity in team composition would help improve the chances that the study will address issues of concern to both theory and practice.

2. *Conflict of interest disclosure.* Individuals submitting proposals should disclose any potential conflict of interest. Specifically, will they benefit directly or indirectly, financially or otherwise, from a result showing evidence in favor of the value of HR certification? Such disclosure would improve the chances that the study will be free of bias and thus more credible to both researchers and practitioners.
3. *Dissemination of results.* Research results should be disseminated in peer-reviewed outlets including conference presentations as well as journal articles. The SHRM Foundation and its “major donors, the HR Certification Institute, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and the J. J. Keller Foundation” (Society for Human Resource Management, SHRM Foundation, 2012) will give complete freedom to the research team in terms of which peer-reviewed outlets they choose to target to disseminate their results. This type of dissemination maximizes quality control in terms of research rigor and also minimizes potential conflicts of interest.
4. *Data sharing.* Once the data have resulted in a published peer-reviewed article, they should be made available to any other team of researchers with the purpose of replicating the analyses as well as extending them. This type of data sharing process maximizes reproducibility of results and maximizes the value of the data that have been collected.

5. Concluding remarks

Once again, we are delighted and gratified that the topic of HR certification value and our article (Lengnick-Hall & Aguinis, 2012) has generated such interesting and thoughtful commentaries. In spite of apparent differences in approaches and perspectives, all articles published in this special issue reflect a deep commitment to the field of HRM and the desire for further empirical research on the topic of the value of HR certification. Our challenge to the SHRM Foundation involves a collaborative approach involving the SHRM Foundation, the HRM scholarly community, and the HRM practitioner community. We are confident that the ingenuity of the HRM scholarly and practitioner communities together with funding from the SHRM Foundation will provide the needed answers so the debate about the value of HR certification is informed by rigorous empirical research that is also relevant. The collaborative approach we describe is likely to produce evidence about the value of HR certification for stakeholders inside and outside of the field, which in turn will also help narrow the much-lamented science-practice gap.

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