This study investigates the impact of passing the Professional in Human Resources (PHR) certification exam on the early career success of recent college graduates. Data were gathered from alumni of three midwestern universities who had majored in human resources. The survey was designed to measure early career success variables including starting salary, number of promotions, and job satisfaction. Results reveal that the probability of one's first job after graduation being in human resources was significantly greater for those who had passed the PHR exam compared with those who did not pass or did not take the exam. Passing the PHR exam was not associated with significant differences in starting salary or in early career promotions. Implications, study strengths and limitations, and suggestions for future research are discussed.

1. Introduction

Today's employers face increased competition and an economy in transition. In this changing environment, many employers are concerned that their new hires have the competencies to be productive contributors. As a result, there is a need to standardize the definition of professional competency and to identify those who possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for managing current and future business arenas (Hosman, 2006; Way, 1999). The need has led to the proliferation of professional and technical certification programs, which demonstrate an individual's mastery of a specified body of knowledge and their qualifications to successfully and competently perform in his or her job (Korstan, 2007; Way, 1999).

Some certifications are mandated by federal or state regulations, requiring individuals in certain occupations such as teachers, public accountants, lawyers or pharmacists to pass the relevant standardized test and maintain the certification to work in the occupation. In contrast, voluntary certifications provide individuals with a choice to take exams designed for particular professions, including those in information technology, financial management, and human resources. Passing these voluntary certifications can benefit an individual's career, such as the practice of acquiring a credential (Way, 1999). However, the practice of acquiring a credential (Way, 1999). However, the practice of acquiring a credential (Way, 1999). However, the practice of acquiring a credential (Way, 1999). However, the practice of acquiring a credential (Way, 1999). However, the practice of acquiring a credential (Way, 1999). However, the practice of acquiring a credential (Way, 1999).