1

HOW SHOULD YOU USE THIS BOOK?

There are over 50 industries employing more than 125 million people in the United States. Across those industries, you'll find approximately 4,000 industry certifications—exams delivered by independent agencies that assess the competencies of industry professionals. As more certifications are created, more and more employers know to ask about them. As of January 2018, a search for the exact phrase "certification required" on Indeed yielded nearly 65,000 results. In the same time frame, LinkedIn had nearly 40,000 "certification required" jobs.

Why are so many employers in so many industries interested in professionals who have completed an industry certification? Sometimes it's required by an external governing agency—like a medical specialty. Sometimes it's an industry standard, like project managers who obtain their PMP or HR professionals who pursue a SHRM certification. In other cases, a certification may not yet be commonplace, but it certainly sets you apart as a committed professional. The completion and maintenance of a certification demonstrates a level of commitment and understanding that can't be conveyed on a resume, in an interview, or through a conversation with a prospective client. It's no surprise that more and more individual organizations and entire industries are requiring certifications.

The Internal Challenge

To prepare for a certification, you have to study; to obtain a certification, you have to pass an exam. Yet, as exams are becoming more prevalent and more important for professional success, self-motivated learning among adults seems to become worse. Why is it so hard to prepare for an exam?

- Once we leave a traditional education environment, most of the study skills we developed in school—reading comprehension, study plans, and test-taking— begin to decline. We simply don't need them, so most people naturally focus their time and attention on other things and let those study skills disappear.
- Parkinson's law states that "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion." I've found that this adage applies to the lives of most adults. In fact, when I surveyed about 200 people who had completed their certifications

or were hoping to complete a certification, more than 80% of both groups cited the number one obstacle was a feeling that they simply didn't have—or couldn't make—the time to study.

- Many people also express that, while they see the need to complete their certification, it simply isn't enough to motivate them to study. A study plan for a certification typically requires you to repeatedly choose to study instead of completing any number of other activities. The absence of immediate gratification for their hard work in combination with the ability to convince themselves there will be time to study later often causes a study plan to fall to the bottom of a to-do list.

The External Challenge

Despite the known facts that busy adults struggle to manage their time and that the demand for certified professionals has increased, certification prep materials are still often designed as large quantities of reading materials and practice tests. Who can blame the certifying organizations? Materials have to be created and maintained—more challenging for some industries than others—so it makes sense to create content that can be easily updated and is universally accepted by learners. After all, reading books and taking tests is the exact way many of us learned in school. But, for most people, there are better ways to learn.

Our goal is to provide readers with a process for creating an effective study plan based on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. We believe that understanding how you prefer to process information can help you create a plan that you'll actually use—whatever industry you're in and no matter how busy you are. A study plan you enjoy and a feeling of making progress are some of the greatest motivators adults can experience.

By helping people understand Gardner's nine identified intelligences and how individuals best absorb information, readers can create a plan that includes a variety of learning approaches, such as watching videos on their lunch hour, sketching concepts on the bus ride home, leading study groups, and participating in discussion boards—techniques that are more enjoyable, easier to schedule, and more effective for information retention based on their unique approach to learning.

For example, a personal trainer might be pursuing her second certification—perhaps she wants to obtain a Powerlifting certification offered by the Coaching Committee. She might remember how she white-knuckled her way through studying for the first exam and had to retake it three times before she passed. After reading *Certification Success: Create Your Personalized Study Plan*, completing her learning assessment, and determining that she prefers both kinesthetic and musical learning instead of reading and completing practice tests, she might create a study plan that includes role-playing to learn client assessment techniques and coloring models to refresh her understanding of anatomy and physiology. She might also choose to sing a long list of terms she needs to remember to a familiar tune. Those small changes to her study plan will increase her chances of remembering important information for the exam and in her work environment. They will also make the whole process of studying more enjoyable.

Where Did the Idea for This Book Come From?

Understanding how Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences applies to you won't guarantee you pass your certification exam. There's no easy answer, and the advice in this book isn't going to make the challenging task of preparing for an exam an effortless one. To become certified, you need wit and grit—knowledge and determination.

This book will help you get that knowledge—and even your determination. I got tired of hearing talented people tell me they *couldn't* take tests well and that it was simply impossible for them to study rigorous certification materials. In some cases, they even said they *wouldn't* take the certification exam they needed to get the job they wanted. I was done watching talented people who were passionate about their work resign themselves to the fact that, because they believed they couldn't pass an exam, they didn't even try.

In nearly two decades of teaching, I've worked with college students taking classes immediately after they graduated high school, senior citizens using their retirement to learn a new skill, high school students tackling college curriculum, and students changing careers after 15 years in the workforce. I've encountered adult learners on a wide variety of paths to furthering their education, each with their own unique considerations. Whether they were telling me how much they despised APA citation or gazing wondrously at a deed—a test, a paper, or a project—they never imagined they could complete, the one thing they all had in common was that their journey to my classroom was driven by their own choices and influenced by their environment.

Many of my students come to my classroom with their study habits fully formed; they have a routine that works well enough for what they need to accomplish. Other students seem to be getting through the material largely on grit. Assignments are difficult. They work twice as hard as some of their classmates for half the results. They vacillate between thinking they aren't working hard enough and believing they just aren't smart enough to be in school. A student who's found a healthy balance of both is rare.

I used to point out to students that if continuing education were easy, everyone would do it. But it's challenging—it's supposed to be—and the people who are really passionate about their field of study make it through the hard times because they understand it's what they need to do to make their contribution to the world. That always seemed to make people feel better. I think the idea that they weren't the only ones struggling or that these things don't come easily for anyone was both comforting and motivating.

But over time, I noticed something else—an even more important contribution to the success and challenges of the students in my classroom. When I gave my students a single set of study materials, each student had one of three potential responses. They either used the resources I gave them, found supplemental materials, or didn't use any materials at all. As you might guess, the first two options yielded positive results—even if the experience wasn't ideal—and the third typically did not. While those results were obvious, *why* the students made the choices they did took me longer to figure out.

Through informal discussions and observations throughout the years, I have noticed that the students who found the supplemental materials had the best *experience* in my classroom—even better than the students who just used the materials as I created them. With that realization, I began to encourage everyone to find alternate formats for learning. What I didn't fully realize for years was that I was helping students tap

into their top intelligence—their most successful way of processing information. They had to be able to tell me what worked for them; as a teacher, I could only provide them with resources. But if they could articulate that they were open to exploring alternate learning tools, their educational journey was more enjoyable and more effective than either of us could have imagined.

What Are Intelligences?

Later in the book, you'll have the opportunity to learn about the nine intelligences Howard Gardner, a well-respected developmental psychologist, has identified and studied for more than three decades. The intelligences include verbal/linguistic, mathematical/logical, musical, visual/special, kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist, and existential.

But what exactly is an intelligence?

". . . the capacity to solve problems or to fashion products that are valued in one or more cultural setting"

(Gardner & Hatch, 1989).

If you had to read that a few times and still aren't quite sure you know what it means, you're not alone. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences is a big idea—and it often takes some time to really understand. It might help to hear a little more from Gardner himself.

". . . we are all able to know the world through language, logical-mathematical analysis, spatial representation, musical thinking, the use of the body to solve problems or to make things, an understanding of other individuals, and an understanding of ourselves. Where individuals differ is in the strength of these intelligences— the so-called profile of intelligences—and in the ways in which such intelligences are invoked and combined to carry out different tasks, solve diverse problems, and progress in various domains."

The Unschooled Mind: How Children Think and
How Schools Should Teach

We all "know the world" in many ways; none of us is void of any of the intelligences even if you think or have even been told you are. We are simply stronger in some areas than others. (For example, you may think you don't have any of the kinesthetic intelligence if you believe you aren't good at sports. You can use and even develop your kinesthetic intelligence if you choose to.) As you may have already guessed, this book is about helping you identify your greatest strengths and how you can leverage them in your certification prep.

Intelligences Aren't Learning Styles

When I began researching this book, I ran across an article in *The Washington Post* titled "Howard Gardner: 'Multiple intelligences' are not 'learning styles.'" I had heard Gardner dispute several uses of his theory—even going so far as to write *Responsibility*

at Work: How Leading Professionals Act (or Don't Act) Professionally, a book dedicated to addressing how to manage the misinterpretation and misuse of your work. But until I read this article, I had never heard him so adamantly dispute using multiple intelligences and learning styles synonymously. After all, they're undeniably similar, so what's the harm?

In *The Washington Post* article, Gardner explains his research and theory. It was clear that it was important to Gardner for people to understand that no one has one way of approaching information.

> *"We all have the multiple intelligences. But we single out, as a strong intelligence, an area where the person has considerable computational power. Your ability to win regularly at a game involving spatial thinking signals strong spatial intelligence. Your ability to speak a foreign language well after just a few months of 'going native' signals strong linguistic intelligence."*

He went on to explain that, in contrast to your computational power, how you approach material is your learning style. For example, you may prefer to work alone while your coworker may have shared that her most beneficial exam prep technique was when she studied with a group. The confusion between intelligences and learning typically comes from the categories that are similar (e.g., both have kinesthetic as a designation), even though the term has different meaning when applied to how you compute exam content versus how you approach studying.

I realized two things when I read Gardner's clarification. First, he was right to work to help people understand the difference between intelligences and learning style. Second, where a person has "strong computational power" is important to know for endeavors related to professional development—as well as many other aspects of self, of course.

Will identifying your strongest intelligence—really knowing the way you best compute—be what allows you to successfully prepare for and pass your certification exam?

The Plan

The heart of your certification success will be creating a study plan that works for you. With this book, you'll have the opportunity to consider the many different factors that have the potential to influence your success, and apply them to your life. It's up to you to make a good plan, but our hope is that this book will make that process easy.

The Future of Education and Certifications

A trend has emerged in the American workforce relating to certifications. When talented professionals need a way to demonstrate their knowledge—typically in a specific area of expertise—they sought proof of their skills from an external organization like a university or another institution. Previously, people relied solely on a professional reputation and a formal degree, but as quickly as many industries change, it became clear that a more agile approach to professional development was needed.

The addition of a certification to anyone's resume is a way to show an area of specialty that is current (as certifications require continuing education). It can help a person be more effective in their current job, adjust to a new trend, or even stand out from the crowd if they are looking for a new job.

In the United States, there is another interesting trend in education that is making certifications more desirable. As people consider entering the workforce, the time and money required to complete a formal degree may seem unappealing. Whereas previous generations followed the traditional path with little question, more high school graduates are seeking alternative ways to establish themselves in a career. Certifications often provide an excellent way to obtain a desirable job in a shorter period of time and with less monetary investment. If nothing else, it provides people the opportunity to work as a professional in a field before investing in a more substantial amount of formal education.

Learning Disabilities: Risks at Both Ends of the Spectrum

It was important to me as an educator to include a brief message about learning disabilities for two reasons. The first is probably the most obvious. If you have a learning disability, you need to include the support tools you've identified as useful in your certification prep plan. For example, if you were diagnosed with dyslexia and part of your educational experience included struggles with your short-term memory, you probably had a teacher, parent, or counselor who advised that you carry a small notebook with you at all times. If this technique helped you—even if you abandoned it after you were no longer a full-time, traditional student—it will likely help you as you prepare for your exam.

The second reason we wanted to talk about learning disabilities is probably less expected. We wanted to share the frequency with which I hear people self-diagnose a learning disability and—either intentionally or not—use that self-diagnosis as an excuse to not even try to complete challenging tasks. Studying is hard. Staying motivated is challenging. If you experience those or similar feelings, recognize that they are normal and not an indication that you can't study for and pass your exam.

If you have been diagnosed with a learning disability, take the time to consider what you need to process information and combine what you learn with what Gardner calls your "computing" power. Together, they will make your study plan more effective and more enjoyable.

If you think you may have a learning disability that has never been diagnosed, seek help from a professional before undertaking a challenging task like a certification exam. If you are able to identify a learning disability, make the necessary changes to your study plan.

Finally, if you don't have a learning disability, erase the negative self-talk from your vocabulary. Acknowledge your hard work. Spend extra time where you need to. Remind yourself that you are tackling a big challenge—and that you can be successful!

Making the Book Work for You

One of the greatest criticisms I have of the majority of certification exam prep materials that are available is that they come in one format: a book to read and practice tests to complete. As you work through this material, you'll learn that reading and writing as a way to prepare for an exam only works for a percentage of students. The rest of us need to experience the materials in a different way—we need to hear the concepts, practice the techniques, sing the terminology we're supposed to memorize, and so on.

Yet, despite my criticism of the singular approach offered by certification organizations, I am sharing my ideas with you in a book . . . that needs to be read.

This is for a good reason, of course, as is the decision certifying organizations make to create written materials to support their test-taking community. It is the most efficient, cost-effective, and widely accepted approach to learning currently used. It still isn't the best fit for everyone, and you will improve your study approach and experience as you move through this book, but here are a few easy ideas everyone can apply to understanding the material in this book while they identify the best specific approach for their study plan.

Attitude

If you don't like to read, if you've been told you're not a good test taker, or if somewhere in your academic or professional career you decided to believe that you can't study or take a test—change your mindset. Put a note by your bed every morning that says you're a solid student. Share your study successes—however small—with your partner once a day. Create a checklist you can update as you accomplish your goals. Do whatever it takes (even if you're faking it at first) to believe that you can get this study plan done.

Energy

Work on these materials when your energy level is high—typically, first thing in the morning is your best option. Successful students I've worked with have adjusted their schedule so that they could wake up an hour earlier than normal a few days a week and go immediately to their study area at home. Others have simply started their day earlier and studied for an hour at their office before beginning their real work day. Another common choice is the lunch hour—eating and studying is, for some people, a great pair. The key is to find the setup that will work best for you.

Environment

Once you know *when* you'll study, put some careful thought into *where* you'll study. I've always found the story of Goldilocks to be an excellent guide in this situation. Look for a space that is comfortable—but not so comfortable that you will struggle to stay awake. Find a place that's quiet, but bring music or white noise if too much quiet will make you uncomfortable. Play with the variables in your environment until you find the setup that's just right.

Practical Tips That Work for Almost Everyone

You may be able to sit down and read this book from cover to cover without any issues, creating your study plan as you go. If that's the case, you may not need the following ideas. But if you're concerned about your ability to stay focused and comprehend the material you're reading, try a few of these techniques to help you stay engaged with the material (until you identify the approach that will work best for you).

Try reading the materials out loud. If you find your attention drifting every time you're halfway through a page, try reading the content out loud. This requires you to be in an environment that allows for this approach, but in many cases, reading out loud (even mumbling quietly) not only helps you stay engaged, but also provides you with a second way of absorbing the information: you're hearing what you're reading.

Keep moving. In 2017, fidget spinners took over classrooms (and meeting rooms) across the United States. The concept is simple: They allow the user to *move* and thereby release stress. Whether you use a fidget spinner, pace the room, or squeeze a stress ball doesn't matter. If releasing physical energy helps you focus on written content, find an activity that works in your environment. Be sure to be safe, though. For example, if you're going to pace, make sure your path is clear of obstacles. While being confined to a hospital bed may prove to be a way to stay focused, we want to provide you with alternatives that don't involve an injury!

Sketch, draw, and doodle. If you believe for any reason that there is one way that "serious students" take notes, let that go now. You may find concepts are easiest for you to remember if you take the idea you're reading about and draw a picture that represents the idea. You may also find that doodling unrelated art helps keep you grounded in the material you're reading. Be careful not to let the activities get away from you; don't convince yourself you need to spend an hour creating a chart so you can avoid reading. But do let your creative energy out.

Highlight, jot notes, and summarize. Whatever exam you're studying for, you're sure to be covering large amounts of information. When you sit down to review the content, identify core concepts and summary points as they emerge. Be careful not to highlight everything or copy so much content you essentially just rewrite the materials.

Taking notes is a skill, and if you think your note-taking ability is a little rusty, check out the various online resources that offer tips. For example, Study.com offers four simple steps:

- Deciding what to delete or leave out
- Deciding what to add in so information makes sense
- Deciding what to substitute, or how to reword things to increase comprehension
- Deciding what to keep as is

If this approach doesn't resonate with you, there are hundreds of other individuals and groups who have shared their ideas. Taking the time *before* you begin studying to identify a note-taking system that will work well for you will pay off.

An important part of studying for any exam—or of learning in general—is to embrace multiple approaches to learning. If you determine your greatest strength is

a kinesthetic approach, don't abandon all other ways of studying materials. Consider that your great "computational strength" and make sure you're making the most of it when you can. For example, you might invite your study group to go for a walk while you discuss one of the concepts on your exam. A group member may share that the concept has a great deal of graphs and images, so studying the topic "on the move" would be difficult. Should you abandon the group? Is this now an impossible concept for you to learn? Of course not. You inquired about an alternative learning approach that didn't pan out; you can make an adjustment (like squeezing a stress ball) and use your idea for another concept in the future.

Career and Pathways

If you're preparing for a certification exam, you probably have a pretty strong idea about the work you'd like to do—at least for the next phase of your professional life. Your *Achieveworks Intelligences Report* will provide a list of potential career options recommended for your intelligence type, and you may be wondering how these can be beneficial for you. There are at least three—though you may find more—options for you to consider.

1. The career you're pursuing may be listed in your report summary. This can serve as a confirmation that you're following a path that aligns well with your interests.
2. You may see a career path related to your interests that could be a long-term goal. For example, you may be a counselor interested in pursuing psychiatry. You may use this consideration in long-term planning.
3. Areas of interest that aren't part of your career path may be volunteer opportunities you're interested in exploring. Volunteer work can be incredibly fulfilling—especially if it is aligned with your natural strengths and abilities.

These career ideas are in the report primarily to help individuals in choosing a direction for their work life. Typically, people pursuing a certification already have that direction, but as you can see, there are still ways to benefit from the information.

Figure 1.1 Sample Human eSources Report