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Getting Ready to Take the Exam

Neil Kiely, CHP

So. You’ve decided to take the plunge and get after getting your certification. I certainly wish you (A) success and (B) a quick and relatively painless experience. Unfortunately, for most people, A and B are mutually exclusive objectives. As I’m sure you realize, your probability of success is directly correlated to your preparation. You have only to put in the time, and use your time effectively, to have success. It is truly that simple! Of course losing 20 pounds is simple too and how often does that work out? I see many people who partially prepare and then hope, somehow, things will work out (I think there’s a life corollary in there somewhere as well), however they don’t and they won’t. If this is you . . . You’re doomed to failure.

What Works

Plan to put in the hours to prepare for the exam. Schedule (actually write on a calendar) days, times, and durations to study and practice and then follow your schedule. Communicate, up front, this commitment to your family and business associates. Do not deviate, do not put off, do not reprioritize—follow your plan and track your progress in terms of hours per week. I believe that the Part I exam requires 100 to 300 hours of preparation and the Part II exam requires about the same.

Effective Use of Your Time

Part I

The biggest thing on Part I, given that you have the comprehensive knowledge required to pass it, is maintaining a pace sufficient to complete the exam in the time allotted. I believe using the various practice examinations that are available are a good practice tool for developing your pace. However, they are not a substitute for comprehensive knowledge—too many folks rely on memorizing these questions in the hope that this memorization, along with what they already know, will be sufficient to get them through the exam. In truth, this

may well be enough, but I think it’s a waste of time. I recommend using Part I to build or refresh your comprehensive knowledge base for Part II. You shouldn’t start taking practice exams until you have put at least one-half of your total study time behind you, say 100 hours. I also recommend taking a Part I preparation course if you have the time and can afford it.

Part II

I believe it’s important to build in your base prior to getting into exam strategies and such. Spend the first half of your scheduled study time completing several chapters in a board-based fundamentals text or texts such as Herman Cember’s *Introduction to Health Physics*. Develop a set of flash cards of equations and how they are used as you cover each major area of applied health physics (for example, shielding, decay properties, dosimetry, activation, plume dispersion). Start with 10 flash cards or less at one item per card. You should run through your flash cards daily if possible. Continue to add to your flash cards throughout the term of your preparation—you may end up with 75 or so cards, each containing two or three items to remember, by the time you’re done. When you feel like you have your HP exam legs well under you, you should sit down and take a past exam under exam conditions—timed with no breaks.

Practice Your Exam Strategy

I recommend scanning all the 100-point questions right off the bat and picking the four you are going to answer. You have approximately 51 minutes per 100-point question. Record your start time and scheduled stop time for each as you start—do not run long no matter how close you are to finishing. You must develop an appropriate pace and a sense of timing. Do not be tempted to over answer a question you happen to

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know a lot about. Get to the point and move on. At 3.4 hours (204 minutes) into the exam, start on the 50-point questions. I just started at the front and worked to the back at 26 or less minutes per question. Your first practice will likely be difficult.

Grade your exam against the past exam answers to get a feel for how you did—suggested answers are available on the ABHP Web site. You may note weaknesses to help guide your further study.

Depending on how you did you may need more fundamentals work. I also recommend going pretty

much cover-to-cover through a Part II exam-preparation text, such as Dr. Joseph Bevelacqua's—I found his text to be excellent. If you are able to attend a Part II course that focuses on completing scenarios in a logical and timely manner, I believe it would be beneficial. Once you are about three-fourths through your scheduled term of study, take another timed examination. You should be able to gauge your progress at this point. If you're not scoring in the low 70s, you need to redouble your efforts in the time you have left.

Good luck.

