



Candidate Handbook

Sponsored by
the Society of Professional Asset-Managers & Record Keepers (SPARK)
and
Professional Development Solutions (PDS)
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www.sparkeducationcenter.com

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Welcome

This handbook is designed to provide information you will need to apply for, earn and maintain the Accredited Retirement Plan Specialist (ARPS) designation. The information in this handbook was developed to serve as a reference to candidates for certification. Candidates are strongly encouraged to become familiar with the contents of this handbook.

Purpose of the ARPS Program

The purpose of the ARPS certification program is to recognize individual proficiency in the retirement plan industry. The ARPS designation is earned by plan record keeping and administration professionals who help employers sponsor plans that enable employees to effectively save and plan for retirement.

Benefits of Certification

The ARPS designation:

- ▶ Verifies your knowledge
- ▶ Demonstrates professionalism
- ▶ Enhances credibility
- ▶ Demonstrates proficiency

Requirements for Certification

Individuals interested in earning the ARPS designation must be able to:

- ▶ Document 1 year of full-time experience in the retirement plan industry
- ▶ Provide a letter of recommendation from a current work supervisor
- ▶ Pass the ARPS exam

Contact Information

For questions or additional information,
please visit www.sparkeducationcenter.com
or contact the Professional Development Solutions, LLC Certification Manager at
r.graham@profdevsolutions.com

Eligibility

Eligibility Requirements

To earn the ARPS credential, applicants must meet all of the following criteria at the time of application to take the exam:

- ▶ Document 1 year of full-time experience in the retirement plan industry (see Definitions below)
- ▶ Provide a letter of recommendation from a current work supervisor. The letter must include verification of both the length of time of employment and the type of work experience(s). Letters from previous supervisors may also be included.

Service Definition

One year of full-time experience is defined as at least 2,000 hours of experience in financial services, during which at least 25% of the employee's time is spent on retirement products. Qualifying work experience includes plan installation, record keeping, plan administration and providing customer service to sponsors or participants.

Application and Exam Fees

Candidates are responsible for submitting an accurate application form with payment of the application and exam fees. Incomplete applications and/or applications without payment in full will be returned to the applicant without consideration.

Candidates will be notified after their application has been reviewed and accepted. To maintain the integrity of the certification process the program reserves the right to verify information supplied by each candidate.

An application and fee schedule are available in the Appendix of this handbook.

Eligibility Appeals

An appeals process is available to individuals found to be NOT eligible to take the exam. See the Appeals policy on page 11 of this handbook for information on how to file an appeal.

Candidacy Period

Candidates will have 12 months to schedule and successfully complete the exam. The candidacy period will begin on the date of the approved application notice and end 12 months later. Upon expiration of the candidacy period, the applicant may re-apply.

Scheduling the Exam

The ARPS exam is a computer based exam administered by Comira, a Division of Computer Assisted Testing Service, Inc. The exam is scheduled by appointment only on a first come, first served basis at Comira testing centers throughout the United States.

Scheduling Your Exam

After you have received written approval of your candidacy for the ARPS program, you can schedule your exam date and test site location by calling the Comira Candidate Services Call Center (CSCC) at 800-947-4228. The Call Center is open from 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (ET) Monday through Friday and from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 pm (ET) on Saturday.

You must call to schedule your exam at least 3 business days in advance of your preferred test date. You will be asked to supply the ID number provided on your candidacy approval notice.

Special Accommodations

If you have been approved for special accommodations for a disability, you must call the CSCC to schedule your exam at least 30 days in advance of your preferred test date.

Site Locations

Test site locations are scheduled by calling the CSCC, but you may review the available locations at www.comiratesting.com.

Changing Your Exam Appointment

To change or cancel an exam appointment, call the CSCC at 800-947-4228 at least 3 business days in advance of the scheduled exam date. Any change to an appointment must be made and confirmed directly by a CSCC representative. A voicemail message is not sufficient to confirm a change.

Missed Appointments

Missed appointments occur when a candidate:

- ▶ Changes or cancels a scheduled exam within 3 business days of the scheduled appointment,
- ▶ Fails to appear for an exam, or
- ▶ Arrives more than 15 minutes after the scheduled exam start time and is refused entry to the exam.

Any candidate with a missed appointment will be charged a reschedule fee which must be paid before scheduling another appointment. A fee schedule is found in the Appendix of this handbook.

Preparing to Take the Exam

Exam Format

The ARPS exam is a 100 question multiple-choice exam. Candidates are given 2 hours to complete the exam. Each question contains four answer options, only one of which is the correct or best answer.

The exam questions cover the topics listed in the Exam Outline located in the Appendix.

Exam Study Guide

The Exam Outline is provided as a study guide.

Retirement plan conferences, training courses and written materials covering the topics in the Exam Outline are available in the industry to help you develop or refresh your knowledge of the material covered in the exam.

Strategies for Taking Multiple Choice Exams

As you prepare to take the exam, we recommend that you keep the following tips in mind:

- ▶ Plan your time. You will have 2 hours to complete 100 questions.
- ▶ Read each question carefully and read all of the options before choosing an answer.
- ▶ Do not “over think” or try to “read into” a question. Exam questions are not intended to be tricky or deceptive.
- ▶ Answer easy questions first. Skip questions that are difficult and come back to them later.
- ▶ If you must guess at an answer, first eliminate any options that you would not select.
- ▶ Don’t look for patterns. The order of responses is randomly generated.
- ▶ Plan time at the end of the exam session to review difficult questions or to complete any questions that you skipped.

Taking the Exam

The ARPS exam is a computer based exam, but computer or typing skills are not required.

Arrival Time

On the day of the exam, plan to arrive at the test center *at least* 15 minutes prior to your scheduled exam time.

Identification Requirements

To take the test you will be required to show a government-issued photo identification such as a valid driver's license, current passport, travel card or a state ID card. Failure to provide proper identification will be considered a missed appointment. You will also be asked to supply the ID number provided on your candidacy approval notice.

Copyrights

All exam questions are the copyrighted property of Professional Development Solutions, LLC.

Individuals are prohibited from copying, reproducing, recording, distributing, or displaying any exam questions by any means, in whole or in part, or to prepare any derivative work based on them. Doing so may subject the candidate to severe civil and criminal penalties.

Test Site Security

To ensure that all candidates receive the same opportunity to complete the exam in standardized conditions, Comira enforces the following security standards at all exam locations:

- ▶ Exam sites are monitored by trained proctors at all times.
- ▶ Candidates who exit the exam at any point will be considered finished.
- ▶ Candidates who exit before they are finished cannot restart the exam.
- ▶ Cameras, tape recorders, PDAs, cell phones, or any other device that can be used for recording or that has memory capabilities are not allowed in the exam area.
- ▶ Programmable calculators are not permitted.
- ▶ Only authorized exam candidates are permitted in the exam area.
- ▶ Candidates must operate the testing equipment with reasonable care.

Misconduct

Candidates may be dismissed from an examination session and their scores may be withheld as a result of misconduct during the exam. Examples of misconduct are provided on page 13.

After the Exam

The passing score for the ARPS exam was selected based on a systematic standard setting study that uses the expert judgment of subject matter experts. To establish the passing point, experts use a widely recognized, psychometrically sound and accepted standard-setting methodology. Using this technique, subject matter experts evaluate the exam questions to determine a score that best differentiates competent candidates from those who have not demonstrated sufficient knowledge.

Passing the exam is determined by the amount of knowledge you display in relation to the passing point, and not on other candidates taking the exam. All candidates must demonstrate the same amount of knowledge to pass the exam.

Score Report

You will receive your exam results immediately following the exam. Your score report will indicate if you have passed or failed the exam and will also include information on your performance for each of the major exam content areas. This information is provided to assist you in deciding when to retake the exam and how to plan additional study time.

Understanding Your Score

The exam is designed only to distinguish individuals who have the basic level of knowledge determined for competence from those who do not. Receiving a very high score on the exam is not evidence that an individual will perform better on the job than someone who scored slightly above the passing point.

Retesting

Candidates who do not receive a passing score on the exam will be provided with a report indicating the areas of strength and weakness to assist in preparing for a retake. These candidates will have two opportunities to retake the exam within the candidacy period:

- ▶ First retake: At least 30 days from the initial exam date
- ▶ Second retake: At least 90 days from the first retake (120 days from the initial exam date)

Candidates who do not receive a passing score by the second retake may re-apply upon the expiration of the 1-year candidacy period.

Appealing Score Results

An appeals process is available for individuals who fail the exam and believe their exam was scored improperly. For more information on appeals, see page 11 of this handbook.

Maintaining Your Certification

ARPS certification status is granted on a calendar year basis. Certification renewal is due at the end of each calendar year following the year in which you earn your initial certification. The 1-year renewal period was established based on the high frequency of changes in the rules and regulations in the retirement industry.

The annual renewal requirement was developed to ensure that individuals holding the ARPS designation remain up-to-date with current industry rules and regulations and continually expand their knowledge of industry issues and practices. By requiring a minimum of 10 continuing education credits each year, individuals who hold the ARPS designation are continually exposed to current information directly related to advanced topics in the retirement planning industry.

Continuing Education Requirements

To renew, individuals must earn credit for at least 10 hours of continuing education as an attendee or a presenter each calendar year. CE credit will be accepted for:

- ▶ Successful completion of a course, seminar, or workshop that is related to retirement plans and covers advanced topics. Courses may be taken online or in person. Examples of acceptable courses include: plan design, plan investment strategies, and enrollment programs.
- ▶ Attendance at a national or regional industry conference directly related to retirement plans. Examples of organizations that host acceptable conferences include: SPARK, ASPPA, CFDD, and NIPA.
- ▶ Participation in employer retirement plan educational sessions. CE credit for employer sessions is limited to a maximum of 5 hours.

Annual Renewal Fee

The annual renewal cost is provided in the fee schedule located in the Appendix.

Verification of Documentation

To ensure the integrity of the ARPS certification program, all renewal applications must be submitted with proof of attendance for each CE event. Professional Development Solutions, LLC reserves the right to request additional documentation of any continuing education credits claimed on the renewal form. Failure to adequately document CE credits may result in loss or suspension of the designation. Acceptable proof of attendance includes an attendance certificate, a signed letter from the presenter or event sponsor, and a seminar outline or agenda with a supervisor's verification of attendance.

Expired Certification

Individuals who allow their certification to expire may recertify within 1 year of their expiration date if they submit a renewal form documenting at least 10 CE credits per year and pay both the renewal and reinstatement fees. Individuals whose certification has been expired for more than 1 year must re-apply, meet all of the eligibility requirements in place at the time of re-application, retake the exam and pay the exam and application fees.

Policies

ARPS Directory

SPARK and Professional Development Solutions, LLC (PDS) publish a directory of individuals who have earned the ARPS designation. The directory is available online at the SPARK website:

<http://www.sparkusa.org/accreditation.php> and at the SPARK Education Center website:

<http://sparkeducationcenter.com>. The directory includes the name, designation and employer of each certificant who has provided written authorization to publish that information.

Appeals Process

Candidates and/or certificants may appeal adverse decisions made by the Certification Manager. These decisions may include, but are not limited to, denial of eligibility, denial of certification renewal, denial of certification, or disciplinary actions.

The Certification Manager may appoint an Appeals Committee to review appeals. When an appeal is received, the Certification Manager will appoint a three-person committee to conduct the appeals process.

The individual filing an appeal must comply with the following procedure:

- ▶ Appeals must be received within 60 days of notification of the adverse decision being appealed. Appeals must be submitted in writing to the Certification Manager and must include: the individual's name, statement of facts giving rise to the appeal, identification of any violation of applicable policies, and any applicable documentation.
- ▶ Appeals may be made on the basis that the certification program has:
 - Failed to follow its established certification eligibility requirements
 - Failed to follow its established policies and procedures
 - Failed to consider relevant documentation as presented
- ▶ Appeals will be reviewed within 90 days of receipt. The appellant may be invited to appear at a meeting of the Appeals Committee; however, an in-person meeting is not required.
- ▶ The appellant will be notified of the final decision of the Appeals Committee within 45 days of review. Notification will be made in writing via certified mail.

The decision of the Appeals Committee is final.

Cancellations and Refunds

Certification application and recertification fees are generally nonrefundable except as allowed by the exam cancellation/rescheduling policy. A processing fee may be applied to any refunds made.

Change of Contact Information

You are responsible for notifying PDS of any change of address or other contact information. Failure to keep your information up-to-date may prevent recertification reminders and other notifications from reaching you.

Confidentiality

The ARPS certification program protects the confidential information of candidates/applicants and certificants. In addition to personal information submitted in the application, exam results are also considered confidential. Confidential information will only be released to the individual candidate/certificant and their employer unless a signed release is provided. Candidates are informed that their employer will be notified of their pass/fail status in situations where the employer pays the examination fee for the candidate.

The name, employer, and state of residence of individuals who hold the ARPS designation are not considered confidential and may be published by PDS or SPARK. Aggregate exam statistics (including the number of candidates, pass/fail rates, and total number of certificants) will be published periodically. Applicants are required to read and sign a confidentiality agreement as part of the application process.

Complaints and Disciplinary Action

Written complaints related to the conduct of an ARPS certificant may be submitted, in writing, to the Certification Manager for review. Written complaints should identify the alleged conduct in sufficient detail and should include any available and appropriate documentation. The name and contact information for the individual filing the complaint should be included. Complaints may also be initiated by the Certification Manager.

The Certification Manager may revoke or suspend certification, or take other disciplinary action, in the following circumstances:

- ▶ Ineligibility for certification
- ▶ Violation of exam administration and/or security requirements
- ▶ Any instance of exam cheating, including improper use or distribution of exam items
- ▶ Fraud or significant misrepresentation
- ▶ Gross or repeated negligence in the conduct of the individual's work
- ▶ Conviction of a felony or misdemeanor
- ▶ Failure to comply with ARPS policies and requirements

Sanctions may include one or more of the following:

- ▶ Denial or suspension of eligibility
- ▶ Revocation or suspension of certification
- ▶ Non-renewal of certification
- ▶ Reprimand
- ▶ Required corrective action

The Certification Manager will review all complaints and disciplinary matters and may appoint a 3-person Review Committee to consider the complaint.

Within 60 days of receipt of a complaint, the Certification Manager will determine if good cause exists to further investigate the complaint.

- ▶ If the Certification Manager determines that no good cause exists in relation to the complaint, no adverse action will be taken.
- ▶ If good cause is determined to exist, the individual who is the subject of the complaint (hereafter referred to as applicant/certificant) will be notified of the complaint by certified mail, return receipt requested. The notification will include the allegations made in the complaint, but will not include the identity of the individual filing the complaint.

The Certification Manager will call a Review Committee to initiate an appropriate investigation. At the discretion of the Review Committee, the applicant/certificant may be invited to attend a hearing at the next scheduled meeting of the Review Committee. This hearing may be conducted in person, via teleconference, or by any method that allows all participants to hear each other.

The applicant/certificant will be notified of the Review Committee's decision within 120 days of the receipt of the original complaint. In the case of an adverse decision, the notice will include notification of the individual's right to appeal.

Examples of Misconduct

Examples of test misconduct discussed on page 8 include, but are not limited to, the following:

- ▶ Failure to follow the exam administrator's/proctor's directions
- ▶ Creating a disturbance during the exam session
- ▶ Giving or receiving assistance during an exam
- ▶ Attempting to take the exam for someone else
- ▶ Leaving the test area without permission
- ▶ Use of unauthorized electronic equipment (cell phones, PDAs, etc.)
- ▶ Attempting to record exam questions in any manner
- ▶ Removing, or attempting to remove, items from the test center
- ▶ Use of any unauthorized aids or reference materials
- ▶ Tampering with the computer

Nondiscrimination

The ARPS certification program does not discriminate on the basis of age, gender, race, religion, national origin or disability.

SPARK Membership and Training

Membership in SPARK or completion of any SPARK/PDS courses is not a requirement for earning the ARPS designation.

Special Accommodations

The ARPS Certification Program is committed to equal access for all certification candidates and complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Reasonable examination accommodations will be made at no extra charge to individuals with documented disabilities. Documentation must be submitted by candidates from a qualified professional and must include a written list of the requested exam accommodations. Should you require special accommodations, please contact the Certification Manager at r.graham@profdevsolutions.com.

Verification

PDS and SPARK obtain written authorization before listing a certificant's name on PDS and SPARK websites. Information on the current certification status of an individual will be provided upon request.

Use of the ARPS Logo

The ARPS certification logo may only be used as long as certification is valid and the certificant remains in good standing. Authorized use of the designation includes the right to publish the designation on business cards, stationery and other professional documents.

Individuals may not use the ARPS designation until they have received notification that they have met all eligibility requirements and successfully passed the exam. To continue use of the designations, individuals must comply with all recertification requirements.

Appendix

- ▶ Candidate Application Instructions, Special Accommodations and Fee Information
- ▶ Candidate Application
- ▶ Candidate Order Form
- ▶ ARPS Exam Outline (Available January, 2012)

Application Completion Instructions

A completed application must be submitted to apply for approval as a candidate for the SPARK Accredited Retirement Plan Specialist (ARPS) designation. The application must include the following forms which have been completed, signed and dated:

- Candidate Application
- Candidate Order Form

Important:

To demonstrate that you have completed the eligibility requirements, you must define your eligibility period (1 year of full-time experience in the financial services industry with at least 2,000 hours of which 25% of your time was spent on retirement plan products and services) and attach a recommendation from each of your supervisors during that period.

Incomplete applications will be returned to the applicant without consideration.

Complete applications will be reviewed for approval. Notification of approval/disapproval of the application will be provided by email within 10 business days of the receipt of the application.

Notification of approval of your candidacy will include instructions on how to schedule the ARPS exam.

Special Accommodations

The ARPS designation program is committed to equal access for all certification candidates and complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Reasonable examination accommodations will be made at no extra charge to individuals with documented disabilities. Documentation must be submitted by candidates from a qualified professional and must include a written list of the requested exam accommodations. Should you require special accommodations, please contact the Certification Manager at r.graham@profdevsolutions.com.

Fee Schedule

Nonrefundable Exam Fee	\$150
Application Fee (waived with purchase of SPARK online training program)	\$300
Retest Fee	\$150
Annual Renewal Fee (waived with purchase of a SPARK online CE course)	\$125
Reinstatement Fee	\$ 50
Optional Training Fees*	
ARPS Manual (hardcopy)	\$125
Online courses including ARPS Manual (electronic)	\$800
Annual online CE course	\$125

*For information regarding discounts and classroom training options, contact v.henry@profdevsolutions.com

Return your completed application and order form to:

Professional Development Solutions, LLC, 6 Edgewood Drive, Barrington, RI 02806

Email: r.graham@profdevsolutions.com or Fax: 401-429-6135

Applicant Contact Information

First Name	MI	Last Name
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Company Name

Position Title	Mailing Address
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City	State	Zip
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Phone Number	Email Address
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Applicant Eligibility Information, Certification and Signature

- I have completed 1 year of full-time experience in the financial services industry (at least 2,000 hours, of which 25% of my time was spent on retirement plan products and services) during the following period:

Eligibility Period: _____
Start Date Completion Date

- I certify that all information provided in this application is accurate and complete, authorize verification of this information and apply for acceptance as a candidate for the SPARK Accredited Retirement Plan Specialist (ARPS) designation.

Applicant Signature	Date
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Supervisor Information

First Name	MI	Last Name
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Position title	Mailing Address
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City	State	Zip
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Phone Number	Email Address
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Supervisor's Certification and Recommendation

- I certify that I am/was the applicant's supervisor, and while reporting to me, the candidate had, in the positions identified above _____ years of full-time experience in financial services, with at least _____% of that time spent working on retirement plan products and services. (I understand that 1 year of full-time experience is defined for these purposes as at least 2,000 hours, and that qualifying work experience includes sales of retirement products, providing customer service related to retirement products, marketing, and providing participant servicing.)
- I recommend this applicant for acceptance as a candidate for the SPARK Accredited Retirement Plan Specialist designation, and certify that all information provided on this form is accurate and complete to the best of my knowledge. I am willing to be contacted by SPARK for verification of this information.

Signature	Date
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Return this completed application and attached order form to:

Professional Development Solutions, LLC, 6 Edgewood Drive, Barrington, RI 02806

Email: r.graham@profdevsolutions.com or Fax: 401-429-6135



Exam Outline

The Accredited Retirement Plan Specialist (ARPS) exam outline is currently under development and will be available in January, 2012.