

Keeping the Value in Job Descriptions

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Many HR practitioners have struggled with the effort of creating and maintaining accurate job descriptions, and have questioned the value of not only the job description but also the underlying processes of job evaluation (i.e., ranking a job in relation to all jobs) and job analysis (i.e., analyzing the requirements of a particular job). With the emergence of new jobs and new roles in almost every organizational sector, HR practitioners want a classification system that serves as a foundation for equitable compensation programs, fair and reasonable performance management systems, and focused training and development programs. They also want job descriptions that help in complying to the myriad of laws, guidelines, and court decisions concerning equal employment opportunity. What they don't want is a job description for every employee, nor the inflexibility of historic approaches to job descriptions, such as functional job analysis, position analysis, critical incident technique, and job element methods. Most importantly, they don't want to have job descriptions that are so cumbersome and time consuming to create, modify, and manage that the HR practitioner is not providing value added services due to the burden of HR administrative processes.

While there are numerous software systems and off the shelf products that can create generic job descriptions for organizations, these systems and products typically cannot address the multiple needs of an organization. They may address the compliance issues, but not the compensation equity issues. They may meet the requirements of a functional organization, but not the emerging decentralized, cross-functional, team oriented company. Alternatively, companies that are using job descriptions successfully have designed a simple process of identifying the elements of a job, created a consistent format for the elements on the job description form, limited the amount of verbiage that details unnecessary or non-essential activities, and moved more to "role descriptions" to articulate progression within a role as well as progression to other roles.

Here's an efficient, cost-effective process to create job descriptions that can be used for selection, compensation, performance, and promotion, and can also be used as a collective system for managers to both better understand the relationship between jobs and to identify emerging jobs required for the future:

One: Start with clustering all of the current jobs into job families. Job families are a series of jobs involving work of the same nature, but requiring different levels of skill and responsibility. For example, many organizations identify job families as clerical, marketing, sales, information technology, finance, fulfillment, etc.

Second: Cluster the clusters ... break down each job family into job roles, which may include several individual jobs. As an example, there may be three roles in the clerical job family, i.e., clerical, secretarial, and administrative assistant, rather than 20 clerical jobs assigned to various functional groups. There may be five roles in the marketing job family, i.e., research, communications, operations, product management, and customer proposition, rather than 40 marketing roles assigned to every product line. Or there may be six roles in the information technology job family, i.e., analyst, designer,

developer, engineer, programmer, and consultant rather than 60 roles for different platforms and business units.

Third: Identify simple, easily recognizable job titles for each job role. This is the tricky part, since there will undoubtedly be some “single roles” that are unique and independent of other roles, and will require a unique and independent job description. Keep in mind that it is the job title that draws in an external candidate to the job, which won’t happen if the title is complex (e.g., too confining) or too unique (e.g., no career progression). Job titles are also used for comparing jobs in market studies, so if the job title is too distinctive, it will be difficult to match a similar job in competitive markets. By going through the process of job families, job roles, and job titles, companies can also avoid the cavernous “job description for every employee job syndrome” that creates inefficiencies in many Human Resource programs and systems.

Fourth: Develop a simple framework for the job description. While a job description needs to include the duties and responsibilities within the role, this will be more task oriented for the hourly wage role and more competency oriented for the manager and executive role. Additionally, job descriptions need to include elements required by federal and state laws governing employment, such as hours to comply with FLSA and exempt/non exempt status, physical demands and work environment to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, etc. Remember that job descriptions can be a matter of conjecture and/or judgment, which is why some companies have chosen to still use external, job analysis professionals to write exhaustive content for their job descriptions. What is needed is sufficient content about the threshold requirements, e.g., education, certification, or experience, and detail about the primary activities in the role, preferably measureable or observable activities that will influence group and/or organizational results.

We have provided an example of a job description format, with some accompanying guidance as to the various elements within the description.

Hopefully more and more organizations will use the value add of job descriptions, and eliminate the burdensomeness of exhaustive forms that serve little purpose other than take up space.

Elements of Job Descriptions

- Job Family – This will categorize jobs that handle similar types of work and require similar types of training, skills, knowledge and expertise. A job can only reside in one job family and a job family may not be unique to just one department or division.
- Job Title – This will be useful for both advertising jobs externally and comparing jobs in industry compensation and benefits surveys. Thus, it is important to use words that are highly recognizable in the external market and common to each profession and industry.
- Reporting Relationship – This will clarify who is responsible for managing the employee and for conducting his/her performance appraisal. Rather than adding more words to a title, consider adding a division, location, or other clarifying word next to the title, such as Foreman, Electrical or Dealership Manager, Cadillac.
- Supervisory Responsibilities – This will identify all of the direct reports for the role, and will assist in identifying comparable roles in compensation surveys.
- Salary Grade, Type of Position, and Hours – Most companies use salary grades within their compensation program, which is noted on the job description. Additionally, this section clarifies the type of position (e.g., full time, part time, seasonal, contractor), and the hours and exempt/non-exempt status for FLSA purposes.
- Education/Certification/Experience/Skill Requirements – This will identify specific requirements or “must haves” for selection into the job. While an incumbent may meet more than the identified requirements, this section is not for “nice to have” but only for the minimum requirements of the job.
- Travel Requirements – This may be a relevant section if an incumbent will consistently travel away from his/her home to perform his/her job responsibilities.
- Role Description – This is a broad statement about the job that distinguishes it from other roles in the company and is written in a specific and concise manner, indicating what work is done, how it is done, and why it is done.
- Essential Activities – This is a listing of duties and responsibilities that are delineated in a logical sequence. They can be listed in the order of performance, or in order of importance from the highest to the lowest. However, the lesser duties should be kept to a minimum. Each job element should begin with an action verb and describe the nature of the activities of the job.
- Physical Demands – This is a listing of physical demands of the job, and may include a listing of specific equipment and tools. It may also include such items as required protective clothing.
- Work Environment – This describes the working environment for the incumbent, including unpleasant conditions such as offensive odors and temperature extremes, and may also identify definite risks to the incumbent such as noxious fumes, radioactive substances, hostile and aggressive people, and dangerous explosives.

Sample Job Description

DEPARTMENT:		
LOCATION:		
JOB TITLE:		
REPORTS TO:		
SUPERVISORY RESPONSIBILITIES:		
SALARY GRADE:	TYPE OF POSITION:	HOURS: # hours/week
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Full-time	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Exempt
	<input type="checkbox"/> Part-time	<input type="checkbox"/> Nonexempt
	<input type="checkbox"/> Contractor	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Intern	
EDUCATION/WORK EXPERIENCE/SKILLS REQUIREMENTS:		TRAVEL REQUIREMENTS:
ROLE DESCRIPTION		
ESSENTIAL ACTIVITIES		
PHYSICAL DEMANDS	WORK ENVIRONMENT	