Job Descriptions
Work Design

How to Write a Job Description.

Outcomes

- Learn what to consider when writing a job description.

How to Write a Job Description

This guide focuses on how to write a job description. A job description is the same as a role description or position description in this context. These terms are used interchangeably.

This how to guide will cover:

- Issues to consider when writing a job description.

Introduction

Clarity around expectations and deliverables underpins all organisation design, recruitment, talent and performance management activity. However, the central repository for this, the Position Description (PD), has become a most maligned piece of documentation, primarily because, in many organisations, it serves many masters. For example, the PD is used:

* to 'size the role' for pay and benefits.
* for recruitment, and to advertise the role.
* in the employment agreement.
* as part of the induction and onboarding process, and, in some cases,
* it also serves as the foundation for the performance management process.

As a result, some position descriptions run to five, six, seven or more pages, and are often, in the end, just a pile of meaningless jargon. A professionally written, thoughtful and concise Position Description can serve several organisational purposes, from benchmarking the role to recruiting to supporting organisational and individual development initiatives.

What is a Job Description?

A job description is a written statement of facts about the scope, responsibilities, and organisational relationships of a job. A well written and up-to-date job description should communicate an overall picture of the nature of work performed and the position's role in the organisation. It should determine the kind of work, level of difficulty, responsibilities and working conditions required of the job. It should focus on the job requirements and not any specific incumbent who might fill the position.

The job description should be written to describe the job as it currently exists. A good job description provides a factual summary of:

* the purpose of the position
* the scope of the position
* the main responsibilities (accountabilities) of the position
* key relationships (internally and externally), and
* the knowledge, skills and abilities required to fulfil those responsibilities.

An organisation chart may accompany a job description to identify the reporting relationships relevant to the job being described and of other jobs that may have an impact on the work of the job being described.

Key Components of a Job Description

This section details WHY the role exists. A good purpose statement is much harder to craft than it sounds. The components below describe WHAT the job does. But there must be a WHY right up front. If you cannot say why the job exists, then you may wish to question why you need the role in the first place. An example of a WHY, would be the role "leads the finance team."

Key Result Areas (KRAs)

This is where you list the three to five ongoing deliverables the role is ultimately responsible for. These should be hard measures such as Sales, New Customer Acquisition, Profit, Market Share, or Safety. Another way of establishing outcomes is to ask the question, 'what business performance factors could the incumbent get fired for?' These may be fixed in multi-incumbent roles, e.g. Account Manager, Production Manager.

When writing, KRAs use a verb to appropriately indicate the level of responsibility associated with the work, for example, plans, organises and conducts.

Describe "what" is done to effectively clarify the level of responsibility, for example, the procurement of high value, high profile commodities, and explain "why" it is done to define the objective for accomplishing the work, for example, "to ensure the purchasing process is carried out effectively, efficiently and supports departmental programmes."

Describe what work is involved in the position but avoid long lists of duties. The job description is meant to be a generalisation of what the position encompasses. Also, the job description should reflect the responsibilities of the position, not the personal qualifications or attributes of the incumbent in meeting the expected end results of the job.

Key Result Areas - Immediate Challenges

In addition to the above, it is important to know the three to five key outcomes this role must deliver in the next 12-18 months, e.g. bring new warehouse on-line, move from #3 share to #2. This is especially important in multi-incumbent roles where the deliverables are fixed and the Position Description stays relatively stable over time. For the purposes of recruitment, knowing the challenges of a role is critical to both marketing the role and assessing candidates effectively.

Delegated Authorities

High performers want to get on with the job, so it is critical to be clear on what decisions the role can make independently, including any financial delegation. Likewise, it is important to be clear on decisions the role makes in conjunction or consultation with others. In today's working environment the need to describe how roles will collaborate and network is crucial. Use the Delegated Authorities section (or key relationships section below) to describe these.

Key Relationships

This section needs to cover individual and shared accountabilities and interdependencies. While they will probably be self-evident to anyone either doing a similar role or aspiring to it, it is essential to be clear on the accountabilities or tasks to be undertaken to deliver the outcomes. An Account Manager in one company may have a different focus than the same role in another company. In addition, in this age of the matrix organisation and multiple projects, it is also essential to be clear on the main tasks this role shares with others in the same or other functions, regions or offices.

Experience, Knowledge, Skills & Education

When you recruit a role, either internally or externally, to get the widest selection of candidates, the key is to identify people who can do the role as opposed to only those who have done the role. However, there may be one to two critical (essential) experiences the candidate must have 'under their belt,' e.g. Mergers and Acquisitions, turnaround, big team, International, start-up. The key is to keep these to a critical few. If educational levels are required or stated, avoid over-inflating the requirements to prevent bias and create systemic barriers to applicants. Ask yourself whether there are any essential occupational requirements for the job. When describing skills and abilities, avoid using terms or words that may influence gender bias such as "maternal", "sensitive", "caring", "strong", or "aggressive." Instead use terms like "ability to recognise and respond to client needs", "ability to lift large, heavy objects", or "ability to clearly define department needs and influence clients." Finally, avoid using value statements or opinions about the level of knowledge, skill and abilities with words such as "excellent", "solid", "good", or "fair.". Keep in mind that the knowledge, skill, and abilities support the responsibilities which in turn, identify the level of the skill required.

Competencies

Many companies will have their own 'competency model', and this will probably end up stated in every position description along with the company values. However, for the purposes of selection and development, it is important to discriminate between the competencies that would be regarded as the 'price of entry' versus the 3 -5 competencies, which will make a difference in the performance of this role. The EMA has several guides on competencies and capabilities. Refer to the related documents below.

Components That Make a Job Description Compelling

The following are components that help make a job description compelling

Organisation Overview

- Include information about the company's mission, goals, industry and headquarters location. Other useful details could include the number of countries where the company is present, number of employees, annual sales / revenue.
- Provide details about any recognition received by the company for being a "Great Employer," e.g., certifications and awards.

Work Relationships

- Indicate who will the person in this role report to and others that they will be required to interact with.
- Provide information about the style of the company's managers and skills and qualities of the broader team to give candidates a sense of the team they might be joining.

Inclusivity

- Ensure the job description does not contain words that reflect one gender over others (for example, workmanship, he / she).
- Ensure the job description does not feature a culturally exclusive language or words / phrases that may have a racial bias.

Performance Expectations

- Provide clear and specific details about the desired level of performance (e.g., Achieve quota within 90 days, manage multiple projects in a month).

Structure

- Use bullet points to make the job description more readable.
- Add sub-headings between sections to make it easy for quick scanning.
- Ensure the job description is not too text heavy.

Format

- Make the format mobile friendly as most candidates read / access job descriptions on phones.
- Add your own brand colours to reinforce the employer branding message.

Articulation

- Use short sentences.
- Keep the tone conversational.

Final Proofing

- Have someone else check for spelling and grammatical errors.
- Ensure there are no formatting inconsistencies.