

Job Descriptions - The Foundation of Employee Management Programs

Writing job descriptions may not seem like fun, but it's sure important. In fact, job descriptions can provide the foundation for an entire HR strategy. And if you don't devote time and resources to developing good job descriptions, you'll leave yourself vulnerable to charges of discrimination from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).

How to Think About Job Descriptions

A job description defines a job. It's not the job itself. That's a fine but important distinction. In today's challenging economic environment, where productivity reigns supreme, employees are required to be highly flexible in what they do and how they do it. The bottom line is that actual responsibilities of a given job are likely to shift like the sands of the Sahara.

Nevertheless, by carefully creating and maintaining job descriptions, you can track changes in your organization and the development of your people, and identify what staff needs you must meet to achieve your overall goals.

What the EEOC Wants

The EEOC wants job descriptions to identify the essential functions of a job. There are a number of functions that can be considered essential to a given job, among them:

- Functions specific to the position (for example, the person is hired to write press releases, so writing press releases is an essential function)
- Functions that other employees could or do perform, but don't have the time to perform to the level you require (for example, responding to customer e-mails is an essential function even though there are two other people in the customer service department, because the two others have many other responsibilities)
- Specialized functions that require specific ability (for example, the position requires expertise in HTML, so knowledge of HTML is an essential function)

In assessing whether or not a function is essential, consider how much time the person will spend on that function, the availability of others to fill in to perform that function, and your own judgment. Identify the results you need, too—different people may employ different methods to achieve results, and that's fine. Describe the results that will be required in a given position.

Other Considerations in Creating Job Descriptions

Beyond identifying the essential functions of a job, you want your job descriptions to help shape your organizational chart, filter candidates, and draw in people who can succeed at your firm. More than anything, you want your job descriptions to make your life easier, as well as the lives of the managers you're recruiting.

Job Descriptions as HR Strategy Tools

Obviously, job descriptions play a role in notifying and attracting applicants. But they can do far more. Lavishing attention on your job descriptions at an early stage in your company's growth—and continuing to attend to them over time—can help you understand who's doing what as your company grows, help you develop your employees, and improve retention.

Also, Job descriptions are part of the design and implementation of a Salary Administration Program. When developing salary and compensation programs, written job descriptions can be used within the organization provide a framework for job evaluation, pay hierarchy, and salary comparison.

Marketing Your Company's Culture

Think of job descriptions as communication tools for your organization. Give them personality. Candidates want more than a dry exposition of the requirements and essential functions of a job. They want a chance to look into your organization and see whether or not it's a place they'd enjoy working. Say something about your offices, your office culture, and the actual day-to-day work. The more specific you can be about what the person will be doing, the better the candidate can visualize the work. The better that job seekers can visualize the work and the environment, the better they will know if they want to be there and do it.

Building Your Organization

Well-designed job descriptions should cover essential and nonessential functions thoroughly. But don't think that once you've written a job description, posted it, and filled the opening, the job description has finished fulfilling its purpose.

As roles change, job descriptions should change along with them, allowing managers to track who's doing what and how each employee's work is evolving. In smaller organizations where the organizational chart is often highly fluid, this information can be particularly valuable because it helps managers understand how the organization is evolving, and allows them to reassess people and redefine roles to help achieve the company's long-term goals.

Managing Your People

Keeping job descriptions updated doesn't have to be the responsibility of HR. That responsibility should fall to the employee. By making every employee an owner of his job description, you'll be able to track who's taking on more responsibility and who's shirking. You'll also be able to figure out who is at risk of burnout and where new jobs should be created and filled. In a rapidly growing organization, it's common for people to quickly take on more than they can handle. Tracking their responsibilities can help managers deploy their most valuable people more effectively, and get help when a role grows too big for one person to handle alone. And, keep in mind that teams and managers can be held accountable for results outlined in job descriptions.

Developing Your People

Job descriptions set expectations and lay the roadwork to allow for promotional opportunity and career development within an organization. Don't forget this critical feature.

Feedback about performance should be ongoing. However, regular performance reviews scheduled at four-, six-, or 12-month intervals can provide a more systematic and thorough evaluation. Examining how each employee's job description has changed, and how well each employee has met the requirements of his or her job, gives management a better understanding of the organization's growth. It also helps set expectations for responsibilities, and provides management a chance to talk through what other roles the organization might need to create to meet its goals.

Retaining Your People

Maintaining job descriptions plays a role in retaining employees. Doing so helps you track where people start in your organization, and how they develop over a period of time. They also allow you to give employees information about how they can reach the next level—which, of course, will help keep your employees challenged and engaged. When roles change in your organization, you'll know, and that will open up productive conversations with employees who may or may not like the new roles they find themselves in. Rather than lose a good but unhappy employee, you'll have a place to start a discussion.



Having written job descriptions for every employee also establishes clear expectations about who does what. That way, when somebody steps outside of his or her role, others will be able to acknowledge it.

Eight Tips on How to Write an Effective Job Description

1. Each description should provide clearly written information that includes why the job exists, what the incumbent in the job is responsible for accomplishing, and what skills are required to be able to effectively perform in the position.
2. Make sure that job descriptions are consistently written and used for each job within the organization
3. Make sure each job description is properly evaluated for exempt or non-exempt status under the Fair Labor Standards Act and ensure that timekeeping and pay are properly aligned with that status.
4. Each job description should include the following elements:
 - A brief section that outlines job purpose, who the position reports to, whether the position is full time, part time, or temporary, and whether it is Exempt or /nonexempt
 - A section that details the essential functions of the job, and the knowledge, skills and abilities required to successfully perform the job, certifications, languages required, ongoing education requirements, licensing, and a statement pertaining to results expected.
 - A section that defines the physical and mental requirements, information relative to ADA, the working conditions associated with the job.
 - Any legal requirements or those specific to the policy of your company, including drug testing, and medical pre-certifications required.
5. Consider updating the job description each time there is turn over. Use information from the exit interview to reevaluate the job description.
6. The job title should accurately reflect the responsibility, but must not demean or exaggerate. A title of manager should not be applied to a job whose responsibilities do not reflect mostly managerial-type duties.
7. When hiring, the offer letter should include two original job descriptions. Instruct the new employee to sign both copies and return one to your HR Department to keep in the incumbent's personnel file. If the job description changes, the incumbent should sign the updated description and again place a copy in their file
8. If applicable, include responsibilities such as safety requirements, EEO, budget, and other important job requirements as part of your job descriptions.

Summing Up

Job descriptions can be the foundation for an integrated recruiting, development, and retention strategy. Setting clear objectives from the outset, updating roles as people take on more work, and regularly discussing job descriptions gives you the tools to understand the dynamic evolution of your firm, and better manage it.