

Prepare and use job descriptions

Job descriptions serve three main functions:

1. They help organisations outline clearly the roles, responsibilities and other specifications associated with particular positions.
2. They help candidates and employees gain accurate ideas of jobs and their associated roles and responsibilities.
3. They help recruiters – in-house or external – to match candidates with particular positions.

If you are developing new job descriptions, or reviewing the effectiveness of your existing job descriptions, the following lists some essential considerations:

1. Conduct preliminary research

Ideally, the best job descriptions will satisfy the needs of everyone involved in, or affected by, the description. For this reason, it is best to resist the temptation to copy one outright from another business. Instead, when you're preparing a job description, ask yourself three questions:

1. What does management want from the job?
2. (If the position already exists) What will the job holder actually do – as opposed to thinking what he or she will do?
3. (In addition to what may already be stated) What do workplace colleagues think the job holder should be doing?

The responses to these questions will help you assemble information for use in preparing a draft job description.

2. Compile the description's three key features

Most job descriptions consist of three parts – basic information, objectives of the job and key areas of responsibility.

Basic information will include:

- The job title and description recorded in clear, straightforward language.
- The main location – if this may change from time to time, state this.
- Reporting responsibilities and to whom – manager, supervisor, mentor.
- Responsibilities for whom – employees and their reporting structure.
- Functional relationship – as represented on an organisation chart showing how the job relates to others and fits into the organisation as a whole.

Objectives of the job should be a clear, concise statement describing why the job exists, to ensure that key areas of responsibility form the main part of the job description.



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Ideally, these activities should:

- Include no more than 10 tasks. Restricting the list to 10 or fewer encourages you to define clearly the areas of responsibility. A broad, open-ended statement preceding the list can be included to indicate that the list is not definitive. The statement might read: “These duties are considered essential for undertaking this job effectively”.
- Be put in some sort of order with each task described in a sentence or two explaining what is to be done and accompanied by any other relevant details. Begin each sentence with an action word (eg “manage” or “co-ordinate”) – this leaves people in no doubt about what is required.
- Be accompanied (where possible) by appropriate measures that are concrete, specific, easily understood and attainable.

3. Involve the job holder in its compilation

Make sure that the job description is a useful and well-used document. If the person is already acting in the position for which a description is being prepared, that person should be involved in the drafting process. Discuss issues such as:

- Appropriate lines of authority.
- Appropriate reporting structures and numbers of people involved.
- The different levels of authority.
- The suitability of the existing structure.
- Current task allocation.
- Tasks for which responsibilities have not been allocated.

If a description is being prepared for a new position, involve the person who may have been previously undertaking those tasks. Or, if the description is for a new position on a team, invite input from members of that team.

4. Review regularly

Job descriptions must be kept up to date. A review can occur as part of the annual performance appraisal, or when the job falls vacant and you intend to advertise the vacancy. Another appropriate time is after a jobholder has been in a position for a few months –any significant changes in the job holder’s duties can be considered as part of a probationary review.

5. Monitor its effectiveness

Ineffective or dated job descriptions are capable of creating problems for your organisation by:

1. Restricting the initiative of a job holder.
2. Promoting a “not-my-job” attitude among job holders.
3. Stifling delegation.

If you observe any of these, it’s a sure sign that now is the time to reassess your current job descriptions. Of course, when job descriptions are to be updated, make sure that those who will be affected by any changes are informed and consulted.



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6. Maximise your use of job descriptions

Having gone through the preparation process, you will identify a variety of ways in which the job descriptions can be used. In addition to its hiring function, you might consider using a job description as:

- A tool to help identify specific training needs.
- A measure by which an employee can monitor his or her performance standards.
- A touchstone document for use during staff performance appraisals.
- An aid to structure project teams and various committees.
- A reference to inform planning during an organisational restructuring.

Further information

The following fact sheets provide further information on these issues:

- Hire the right person for the job
- Improve your interviewing skills
- Job advertisements