

Why Are Job Descriptions Important?

Magpie Consulting



Why Are Job Descriptions Important?

Job descriptions seem like another one of those paperwork things that businesses “should” have but that really only make sense for big corporations where supervisors aren’t doing the hiring. In a small company, where the boss is setting the tasks and doing the hiring, there is no need for writing it down, right?

No, you don’t need job descriptions - as long as you never have a problem with an employee. However, if you are like most businesses and occasionally have a disgruntled employee quit, job descriptions can save you a lot of money and time in court. On top of that, good job descriptions can make managing your people easier, giving you more time to run your business.

Developing and using job descriptions has a range of benefits:

- Productivity is enhanced when roles and responsibilities are delineated.
- Hiring is easier and more efficient.
- Annual reviews are more effective.
- Wrongful discharge claims are easier to defend against.
- Termination for lack of ability to do the job is easier.

Additionally, for ISO-certified companies, developing and using job descriptions is a good way to meet the standards for personnel skills and standards (ISO-9001 6.2.2).

Efficiency

Good job descriptions make work more efficient. Writing them gives you a chance to sort out roles and responsibilities, to specify who does what, eliminate overlap, and make sure nothing is falling through the cracks. Clarifying who reports to whom also tends to reduce confusion and frustration, increasing productivity.

If you aren’t sure about how well your work is organized, ask your employees to write their own job descriptions. Usually they will produce material with a lot of overlap when it comes to roles, responsibilities and deliverables. This indicates confusion and wasted effort; cleaning it up will enhance productivity and improve morale. The improved communication between management and employees is also likely to improve employee engagement.

Wage comparisons

Clear job descriptions make it easier for employers to run wage comparisons within their industry, giving them an idea of how their pay scale ranks. It also makes it easier to compare internal pay levels and make sure that equal responsibility and skill receives equal pay across the business.

Hiring

Good job descriptions lay out the hiring criteria for any position; often filling a position is what gives rise to writing the descriptions in the first place. By writing the descriptions, you will analyze what the job entails and have a chance to make any changes or



adjustments before filling the position, so that you hire the right person for the right job.

Using the description in your ad allows candidates to screen themselves for qualifications, essential functions, and physical demands, leaving you with a larger percentage of qualified candidates.

Once you have thought through what is really needed for the job, it is easier to evaluate candidates' resumes and interviews. You will also have an easier time coming up with good interview questions based on the requirements. Write these down and ask them of every candidate; write down their answers so that you have objective evidence of qualifications when you are ready to make a decision.

Share your written job description with applicants. Then, ask them if they are able to perform the essential functions of the job with or without reasonable accommodation. A good place to ask this question is on a job application that applicants sign and date. If someone says they can do the job and it later turns out that they can't, even with reasonable accommodations, then you have grounds for letting them go.

Once an employee is hired, the job description is a list of what training they might need and what they are expected to do, making the training period easier for everyone.

Performance reviews

If your job descriptions are kept up to date, they will form the basis for performance evaluations. Is the employee doing everything on the list? Are they performing all the essential functions effectively? Are they doing any additional tasks, and if so, should it be added to their job? When both sides know what standards are being applied to each employee, there are fewer unpleasant surprises during the evaluation.

Wrongful discharge /Disabilities/ADA

Job descriptions that make clear, in the hiring process, what is expected for each position mean that people are less likely to be surprised by a task that they can't do; this reduces the poor fit that causes many terminations – by employer or employee. A surprised employee is likely to feel betrayed and may take it out on the company by filing a wrongful discharge claim.

It's not just terminations, either. If you don't hire or promote someone, they can file a charge that you discriminated against them because they are female/too young/too old/black/disabled. Using job descriptions in the hiring process allows you to show that your hiring decision is based on consistent, objective criteria. With good documentation, you will be able to support why you hired one applicant over another, why you paid one employee more than another, or why you terminated an employee for poor performance.

In order to use job descriptions as a defense against wrongful discharge suits regarding disabilities, you need have identified the essential functions of the job, which are the basic job duties that an employee must be able to perform. (See below for more detail.)



Courts generally take the employer's assessment of the essential functions of a job seriously (most recently in *Knutson v. Schwan's Home Service Inc.*, 8th Cir., No. 12-2240, (April 3, 2013), where the court the court relied on the written job description, the company's judgment and the experiences of all employees in a position in determining the essential functions of the position).

Careful evaluations of the essential functions of a job will help with ADAAA compliance by allowing for different ways to accomplish a task while specifying that it has to happen somehow. For example, making it clear that the job requires the ability to move objects from one place to another, without specifying the method, allows room for accommodations where reasonable.

Firing

Someone who can't perform the essential functions of the job, with or without reasonable accommodations, can be let go without it being wrongful discharge, or not hired without it being discrimination. But you have to have a job description that lists the essential functions of jobs to gain this protection.

What are they?

A job description is not a list of tasks someone does, although that can inform it. It is a list of the skills, knowledge, experience, training, and characteristics required for the job, the physical demands of the job (e.g. lifting 50 pounds, working in confined spaces), and a summary of the job tasks.

How detailed the list of tasks is will depend on many things: how stable the tasks assignments are (more stable in larger companies, usually), how much education employees are expected to come with, and where the company has had trouble in the past. Specify the goal of the task, not the details of how to accomplish it; details change more often than goals, and should go elsewhere, in an operating procedure.

As an example, here is a job description for an office manager in a small professional business:

The Office Manager is responsible for reception, bookkeeping, and office management tasks. In particular, the Office Manager performs the following tasks:

- Receive and appropriately direct mail/phone calls/faxes/people that come into the office for the staff.
- Assist in the administration of information during the Bidding phase of projects. This is an important task that includes, but is not limited to, organization of the document distribution system, distribution of Bidding Documents, tracking of planholders during the bidding process, and distribution of addenda. Delivery of large, heavy documents to the post office or similar facility may be required.
- Deliver documents to consultants.
- Track and procure office/design supplies.
- Enter vendor invoices and run checks; run payroll after approval by the Managing Principal; enter and deposit client payments; edit, print, and



mail client invoices; file/organize financial and general office information; reconcile bank accounts, and other bookkeeping tasks.

- Perform Human Resource duties related to bookkeeping and payroll.
- Gather and provide information for the company accountant (monthly and yearly).
- Organize project materials and library.
- Organize staff events such as birthdays, going-away parties, etc.
- Other duties as assigned

Note that “Other duties as assigned” bullet. It should always be included, although for managers it may be “Other tasks as needed”. This provides the flexibility to handle new tasks as they arise, to cover a short-term overload in one department, or to fill in for an absent employee.

In small companies, an employee can have more than one job description, if they fill more than one discreet role. For instance, an office manager may also spend some time helping with shipping; in this case, add “Assist with shipping as needed” to the description, rather than listing all the duties (assuming that shipping has its own job description – if not, write the tasks down here).

Contents

The first thing to get in a job description is its essential functions: the basic job duties that an employee must be able to perform, with or without reasonable accommodations. Focusing on the essential functions of the job without specifically stating how these functions must be performed will help you stay out of trouble.

To figure out a job’s essential functions, consider what the point of the job is. Project materials need to be organized, but the filing system is not specified. Someone who works with spreadsheets needs to be experienced with them, but not necessarily familiar with one particular spreadsheet program – they may be able to learn that as they go. Someone in purchasing needs to be able to order materials, but not to run up stairs.

Essential functions can include the following:

- Physical demands (e.g. transport objects weighing up to 80 pounds, wear a respirator)
- Environmental demands (e.g. confined spaces, ladders)
- Unusual hours (e.g. 4 10-hour shifts)
- Travel required
- Attendance

But don’t just put this list in without thinking about it. On-time attendance on site is clearly required for a job working directly with customers, but is less essential for office duties that just require a task to get done by a deadline. Only list something if it is essential to getting the job done (well).



Include the chain of command. Who supervises this position? Who reports to them? Use job names, not people, even for the boss; this prevents you from having to rewrite the descriptions every time there is a personnel change.

Include lateral cooperation. Who does this position interact with? Who do they work closely with? Specifying this will cut down on (although nothing will prevent) complaints that someone won't work with someone else and therefore the job is late.

List the skills, knowledge, experience, training, and characteristics needed for a job. Think about the people who currently hold the job, but don't tailor the description just for them. What would your ideal candidate look like? What is preferred and what is required? Too many requirements can dramatically cut down on the number of successful applicants passing the first hurdle, so think carefully about really is mandatory. But don't ignore something that could be a deal-breaker for considering an applicant, either.

Think through the various categories. Does the job really require a college degree? Or is appropriate experience more important? How much training can your company provide (or prefer to provide, so employees do things your way) and how much must an applicant have first? Do you weight attitude or skills more heavily? A cheerful attitude is generally required for working with the public, but not for someone who works alone most of the time. What personality characteristics make for success in this position? A bookkeeper needs different traits than a sales person in order to be successful.

Avoid requirements that tend to eliminate a group of people unless there is a solid, defensible reason for including it; some examples are "man", "attractive", and "Christian" (although there are a few jobs in which each of the above may be appropriate). Also avoid words like "recent graduate" or "mature", as these can be interpreted as age discrimination; think through what they are shorthand for and use words like "up-to-date skills", or "reliable".

List a summary of tasks performed by the position, using goals, not details of how it is achieved. Opt for general rather than detailed tasks, "Track and procure office/design supplies" rather than "Track office supplies using the XXX software. Check all cupboards every week to see what is empty. Purchase supplies at Joe's Office Supply and get a check approved by the boss. Restock cupboards promptly." The former allows for finding better ways to achieve the goal and doesn't need to be rewritten if Joe goes out of business.

Build in as much flexibility as your business realistically needs, by pointing to other job descriptions whenever possible, and always include "Other tasks as assigned".

How do I write one?

The best way is to find a good sample from your industry. If that isn't available, a good source is <http://www.careerinfonet.org/jobwriter/default.aspx>. This site has a good template that covers



most of the above items and incorporates national data. Just be aware that this is generic and you will need to customize it to your company and culture, especially if you have a small business.

You can also collect standardized information about a job description from secondary sources such as the Occupational Information Network (O'NET) (the site above uses this same information). O'NET is a comprehensive overview of worker characteristics, requirements, and work activities as well as outlook and earnings. Again, it is a great place to start, but not everything will apply to your company, nor will it include everything you might want; you will need to customize it.

Job descriptions should be written in brief, clear sentences. The basic structure for sentences is "verb/object/explanatory phrase if needed." (Example: Compiles statistical reports) Use action verbs to describe the physical and mental tasks to be performed.

Set up a template that works for your company, with slots for all the relevant types of information, so that you can be sure that you haven't left anything off; this makes it easy to write new descriptions as needed. Add your logo so it looks nice. Give yourself time to get them done; writing a full set of job descriptions for even a small business takes time to do well.

Once you have a full set of descriptions, be sure to review them periodically (every year or two, or as changes occur) to make sure that they are still accurate and useful. And make use of them regularly, rather than leaving them in an HR file until it is time to hire someone again.

Although writing job descriptions can take a lot of time at the beginning, they increase productivity and make running a company easier in the long run.

Note: This advice assumes that you are not dealing with a union. If you are, you should probably talk to an attorney before getting too far along in the process.

