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Writing Effective Job Descriptions

A job description describes the major areas of an employee's job or position. A good job description begins with a careful analysis of the important facts about a job--such as the individual tasks involved, the methods used to complete the tasks, the purpose and responsibilities of the job, the relationship of the job to other jobs, and the qualifications needed for the job.

It's important to make a job description practical by keeping it dynamic, functional and current. Don't get stuck with an inflexible job description! A poor job description will keep you and your employees from trying anything new and learning how to perform their job more productively. A well-written, practical job description will help you avoid hearing a refusal to carry out a relevant assignment because "*it isn't in my job description.*"

Realistically speaking, many jobs are subject to change, due either to personal growth, organizational development and/or the evolution of new technologies. Flexible job descriptions will encourage your employees to grow within their positions and learn how to make larger contributions to your company. For example: Is your office manager stuck "routinely ordering office supplies for the company and keeping the storage closet well stocked " or is she/he "developing and implementing a system of ordering office supplies that promotes cost savings and efficiency within the organization?"

When writing a job description, keep in mind that the job description will serve as a major basis for outlining job training or conducting future job evaluations.

A Job Description should include a:

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Job Title

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Job Objective or Overall Purpose Statement - This statement is generally a summary designed to orient the reader to the general nature, level, purpose and objective of the job. The summary should describe the broad function and scope of the position and be no longer than three to four sentences.

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List of Duties or Tasks Performed - The list contains an item by item list of principal duties, continuing responsibilities and accountability of the occupant of the position. The list should contain each and every essential job duty or responsibility that is critical to the successful performance of the job. The list should begin with the most important functional and relational responsibilities and continue down in order of significance. Each duty or responsibility that comprises at least five percent of the incumbent's time should be included in the list.

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Description of the Relationships and Roles the occupant of the position holds within the company, including any supervisory positions, subordinating roles and/or other working relationships.

When using Job Descriptions for recruiting situations, you may also want to attach the following:

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Job Specifications, Standards and Requirements - the minimum qualifications needed to perform the essential functions of the job such as education, experience, knowledge and skills. Any critical skills and expertise needed for the job should be included. For example, for a receptionist, critical skills may be having 1) a professional and courteous telephone manner, 2) legible hand-writing if messages are to be taken 3) the ability to handle a multiple-lined phone system for a number of staff members and 4) the patience and endurance to sit behind a desk all day.

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Job Location - where the work will be performed

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Equipment to be used in the performance of the job. For example, does your company's computers run in a Apple MacIntosh or PC Windows environment?

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Collective Bargaining Agreements - agreements and terms that relate to job functions, if applicable, such as when your company's employees are members of a union.

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Non-Essential Functions - functions which are not essential to the position or any marginal tasks performed by the incumbent of the position.

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Salary Range - range of pay for the position.

Keep each statement in the job description crisp and clear.

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Structure your sentences in classic verb/object and explanatory phrases. Since the occupant of the job is your sentences' implied subject, it may be eliminated. For example, a sentence pertaining to the description of a receptionist position might read: "Greet office visitors and personnel in a friendly and sincere manner."

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Always use the present tense of verbs

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If necessary, use explanatory phrases telling why, how, where or how often to add meaning and clarity. For example: "Collects all employee time-sheets on a bi-weekly basis for payroll purposes."

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Omit any unnecessary articles such as "a", "an", "the" or other words for an easy to understand, to the point description. Using the above example, the statement could have read, "Greet all visitors and the office personnel to the building in a friendly and a sincere manner."

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Use un-biased terminology. For example: use the "he/she" approach or construct sentences in such a way that gender pronouns are not required.

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Avoid using words which are subject to differing interpretations. Try not to use words such as "frequently," "some," "complex," "occasional," and "several."

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