



Compensation Matters™: Job Descriptions: Format & Critical Elements

Job Description Definition: A document that summarizes the primary purpose of the job and lists its reporting relationships, principal responsibilities, job qualifications, specific working conditions, and other relevant information that is a direct outcome of the job analysis process.

Job descriptions are important documents in themselves as well as critical building blocks for numerous other HR programs including recruitment and selection, compensation administration, training and development, performance appraisal and career planning. Since they are foundational documents with broad use and impact within the organization, it is important to invest the time to do them right, ensure that they include the necessary information for the many HR programs that they support, and to keep them up to date.

Job descriptions are typically broken down into several sections. The first section includes **identifying information** such as the job title, reporting relationship(s), department, location (particularly helpful for global companies), FLSA status (exempt or nonexempt), full time/part time status, and the date that the job description created/revised.

Job titles should be descriptive of the job's responsibilities. They should identify the relative position of the job within the organizational hierarchy, i.e. Payroll Manager, Accounting Supervisor, Operations Assistant, etc. In addition to reflecting the job's level of responsibility, they should not exaggerate importance (Global Marketing Guru), or be demeaning (Junior Clerk). If possible, they should be similar to a standard or benchmark job title as this will make it easier to match the job to market data later on.

Do job titles matter? You bet they do! In a typical hierarchical organization, job titles are the primary means of communicating a person's role to others both inside and outside of the organization. As such, employees often think of their job titles as an extension of themselves and as "who they are" within the organization. Keep in mind that once a job title is given, it is difficult to take it away. Likewise, once a job title comes into use within a department, other departments may want to use it as well. For these reasons, organizations should give careful thought to their selection, use and hierarchy of job titles and if possible, establish criteria for each job title (i.e. what does a "Coordinator" mean in our organization?)

Reporting Relationships should indicate the title of the individual the job reports to rather than the individual's name. While jobs typically have one position to which they report, in matrix organizations there may be a secondary reporting relationship. These dual reporting relationships are sometimes referred to as solid lines and dotted lines, or functional and administrative reports. While organizations apply these differently, an example might be an HR Business Partner who has a solid line reporting relationship to an HR Director and a dotted line reporting relationship to a director in the department that it serves, in each case, the reporting relationship listed on the job description should be to an exempt manager, i.e. the person who exercises full management control over the job and has the authority to hire/fire, promote, manage performance and rewards, and determine training and development needs, rather than to a nonexempt supervisor who may give only input into these processes.

The next section of the job description is a **summary statement** that describes why the job exists. The *Job Summary* should be a short paragraph that captures the essence of the job in a few sentences. By reading the job summary, you

should have a fairly good idea of the purpose that the job fulfills within the organization and a general sense of where it fits into the company's job hierarchy. Tip: Sometimes it is easier to write the job summary *after* you have written the main portion of the job description and have already given some thought to synthesizing detailed job analysis information.

The main body of the job description will include the **job's essential functions**. Sometimes referred to as the job's *primary responsibilities*, this section should provide a numbered or bulleted list of the job's principal responsibilities or tasks. Individual responsibility statements should be limited to one to two sentences and be listed in order of importance or in sequential order if job's activities follow a specific procedure. The individual job responsibility statements should be clear and concise and avoid unnecessary verbiage. Typically, responsibility statements are short declarative sentences that use action verbs, i.e. manages, coordinates, organizes, oversees, etc. rather than "the purpose of the job is to manage...". Special emphasis should be placed on *what* is done rather than *how* it is done. In other words, the statement should describe the outcome of the responsibility rather than all the specific steps that are needed along the way to accomplish the task.

In order to maintain consistency between job descriptions, it may be helpful to develop a series of *boilerplate statements* to cover universal responsibilities such as human resource management, budgeting, planning, keeping up to date with trends and developments, etc. Not only will this save significant time in having to describe these duties time and again, but it will also help to ensure consistency of the descriptions across the organization. Also, since it's impossible to list all of the job's responsibilities in detail and/or to foresee every possible new responsibility, it's a good idea to include a catch all phrase as the final responsibility that says: "*Assumes additional responsibilities as requested.*" This can save a lot of headaches when managers need to ask their employees to do something that may not be explicitly listed on the job description. One caveat is that managers should not be allowed to confuse this occasional request to perform additional duties with ongoing added responsibilities that are not listed on the job description. If this is the case, then the job description should be revised to include these other duties as part of the job's primary responsibilities.

The next section of the description should contain specific **job specifications or requirements**. These include special knowledge, skills and abilities such as specific educational requirements, technical skills or certifications, special training or experience (i.e. management experience), and the number of years of experience required. Please note that job requirements should be expressed as the *minimum* amount of experience required in order to fulfill the job's duties at a satisfactory level. Requirements may also be expressed as *preferred* with the minimum requirement listed first, such as: Associate's Degree (Bachelor's Degree preferred). Job requirements should give a good sense of what is required to be successful in the job and will be used when posting the job internally and recruiting external candidates. They should relate directly to the job's responsibilities and above all be accurate and defensible.

An **approval section** is often included with signature lines for the department manager and human resources representative. This helps ensure communication between HR and the functional area and to document that the job description has been approved by both parties.

Finally, a **disclaimer statement** is often included at the end of the job description to indicate that the document is representative of the types and level of job responsibilities but is not an exhaustive list. The disclaimer recognizes that the job description is finite and does not attempt to include every detail that the job may be responsible for on a regular or periodic basis. The disclaimer provides some leeway to all parties to exercise discretion and judgment when using the job description in a department setting.