Compensation Matters™: Job Descriptions: Format & Critical Elements

Job Description Definition: *A document that outlines the primary purpose of a job, detailing its reporting relationships, key responsibilities, required qualifications, specific working conditions, and other relevant information. This document is a direct result of the job analysis process.*

The Importance of Job Descriptions
Job descriptions are critical documents that serve as the foundation for numerous HR programs, including recruitment, selection, compensation, training, performance appraisals, and career planning. Given their broad impact, it's essential to take the time to develop them properly, ensure they contain the necessary information to support critical HR functions, and keep them updated.

Identifying Information
Typically, job descriptions begin with identifying information such as the job title, reporting relationships, department, location (particularly important for global firms), FLSA status (exempt or nonexempt), full-time or part-time status, and the date the job description was created or revised.

Job Title
Job titles should be descriptive of the job's responsibilities and indicate the relative position of the job within the organizational hierarchy. Titles such as "Payroll Manager" or "Operations Assistant" not only reflect the level of responsibility but also provide clarity. It's important to avoid exaggerated or demeaning titles and aim for standard or benchmark job titles to simplify market comparisons later on.

Job titles are an important means of communicating a person's role, both inside and outside of the firm. Employees often view their job titles as an extension of their professional identity, making it essential for firms to thoughtfully select and consistently apply job titles. Once a job title is implemented, it can be difficult to change. Similarly, once a title is adopted in one department, others departments may want to use it as well. To avoid confusion, organizations should establish criteria for job titles, ensuring consistency across the firm.

Reporting Relationships
Reporting relationships should indicate the title of the person the role reports to, rather than the individual's name. Typically, a job will report to one position, but in matrix organizations, there may be a secondary reporting relationship, often referred to as "solid line" and "dotted line" reports. These should be carefully noted to reflect the true management structure. In most cases, the solid line reporting relationship listed on the job description should point to an exempt manager who has full management control over the role, rather than to a nonexempt supervisor who may only provide input.

Job Summary
A job description typically includes a job summary—a brief 2-3 sentence paragraph that captures the essence of the role. This section should explain why the job exists and offer a general understanding of its purpose within the organization. While the summary is typically short, it should provide enough information for someone unfamiliar with the position to grasp its fundamental significance and role within the firm.

Essential Functions
The main body of the job description outlines the essential functions or primary responsibilities. These are usually listed as bullet points or numbered statements, written in concise, action-oriented sentences. It's important to focus on what the job accomplishes rather than the specific steps involved. For example, instead of detailing how tasks are completed, the description should focus on the desired outcomes. Additionally, a catch-all phrase, such as "Assumes additional responsibilities as needed," can provide flexibility to capture less significant or occasional duties that may not be ongoing responsibilities of the job.

Job Specifications/Requirements
In addition to listing essential job functions, job descriptions also outline job specifications or requirements, such as education, technical skills, certifications, and years of experience. These should reflect the minimum qualifications necessary to perform the job satisfactorily. Preferred qualifications can be included but should follow the minimum requirements. For example, you might list an Associate's degree (Bachelor's degree preferred) to indicate a range of acceptable education levels. Additionally, there is often a trade-off between formal education and experience, so it's best practice to include 'or equivalent' when specifying required knowledge and experience.

Approval Section
Some organizations include an approval section with signature lines for the department manager and HR representative. This ensures communication between HR and the department and serves as documentation that the job description has been reviewed and approved by both parties.

Disclaimer
Finally, many job descriptions conclude with a disclaimer that clarifies that the document covers the job's main responsibilities but is not an exhaustive list. This allows for flexibility in the role as the organization or job evolves. The disclaimer provides a safety net, giving both managers and employees room to adjust to changing needs without needing to immediately revise the job description.

Job descriptions, when done correctly, are not just essential HR documents but strategic tools that influence many facets of an organization's success. They provide clarity, consistency, and a solid foundation for the various HR functions they support. By investing the time to create well-crafted and up-to-date job descriptions, organizations can improve communication, streamline HR processes, and set the stage for long-term growth and development.