Write a job description

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A job description is probably one of the most neglected and underrated documents in employment. When they do exist job descriptions are often poorly written and out of date. In many instances they are non-existent—strange treatment for such an important document which, if used properly, should represent the essential foundation on which employer and employee relations are built.

Importance of the job description

Recruitment and selection of staff—At the outset of the recruitment and selection process it is important to have an accurate and up to date job description. This gives the recruiter, who is often not directly concerned or familiar with the particular post, an appreciation of the duties and responsibilities of the job and helps in deciding on the most appropriate method of recruitment, advertising media, and interview techniques and, finally, in considering the suitability of the applicants. A job description is also useful for the applicants, giving them a better appreciation of the extent of the job.

Job grading—Any system of job grading, whether formal or informal, relies heavily on the existence of job descriptions, which often provide the most effective means of understanding the extent of duties and the relative values of various jobs within an organisation.

Appraisal of performance—In its simplest form an appraisal of performance aims at assessing performance against the agreed duties of the job. Absence of a detailed job description can lead to misunderstandings and uncertainties, which often contribute to poor performance.

Training—In the development of a structured training programme the job description provides a useful starting point in establishing the skills and knowledge required to complete the tasks of the job satisfactorily, and this in turn should help to highlight individual training needs.

Supervisor-staff relations—Often a breakdown in relations can be traced to a lack of understanding of or disagreement about the extent of the duties and responsibilities of a post—a problem that is usually overcome or avoided by the existence of a detailed job description.

Content and format

There is no set approach for writing a job description that is suitable for all jobs, and generally a more senior and complex job requires a more detailed job description than a junior and fairly simple job. As a general rule aim at keeping it as brief as possible. Usually only the main duties and responsibilities would be included.

Although the format varies considerably, most job descriptions cover certain main areas. (1) Personal and organisational information is given—including the job title, the location of the job and the department, the title of the person to whom the employee reports, and the name of the person who prepared the job description and the date of its completion. If appropriate the

ABC Corporation

Job description

Job Title: Secretary

Department: Finance

Relationships:

- (a) Immediate supervisor: head of department
- (b) Subordinates directly supervised: none
- (c) Other persons with whom you have regular working contact: all members of Finance Department. Limited contact with members of other departments. Telephone contact with suppliers

Main purpose of the job:

To provide secretarial support to the head of department

Main duties and responsibilities:

- (a) Typing of correspondence, memos, and reports
- (b) Keeping diary, arranging meetings, and organising travel
- (c) Maintaining filing and bring forward systems

Education and training and experience required:

“O” level English and Maths minimum

Secretarial training and secretarial experience at a senior level

Confident shorthand—90 words per minute or more (used recently). Word processing skills preferred

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number of people reporting to the employee should be mentioned. In many organisations the name of the current job holder would also be included. (2) A brief statement—usually restricted to one or at most two sentences—encapsulates the main purpose of the job. (3) For senior management posts the description usually includes some of the main dimensions associated with the job—for example, the number of people employed, the size of revenue, the turnover, and the capital controlled. (4) The main section of the description identifies the main duties of the job—usually as a detailed list of duties or in narrative form—in both cases the aim is to specify clearly the main tasks. (5) Many descriptions also include details of the qualifications and level of education, experience, and skills appropriate to the job. Although this is more of a “person specification” than a description of the job, it nevertheless fits quite comfortably within a job description as it helps in forming an overall impression of the job. There is an increasing tendency to include details of certain terms and conditions of employment—for example, hours of work, rates of pay, on call arrangements, but unless the case for doing otherwise is particularly strong, this type of information should more properly be left to the contract of employment. (6) In large complex organisations it is often advisable to attach a copy of the departmental or divisional organisation chart as an aide to clarifying precisely where the job fits into the organisation.

Who writes job descriptions

There are several options as to who should write a job description, and the determining factor is usually the size and structure of the organisation. A job

XYZ Institute

Job description

Job title: Librarian *Location:* London

Department: Central library

Principal purpose of job:

To lead the development of information services in the institute's library

Staff supervised:

Library services manager, three assistant librarians

Responsibility for equipment:

Extensive microcomputing equipment, including DEC Micro Vax 2000, IBM and BBC micro-computers, CDROM mass storage device, optical character reader, photocopiers, and other office equipment

Financial responsibilities:

Yearly budget in excess of £250 000

Capital equipment and library stock (nominal) £800 000

Main duties:

Planning and implementation of policies to provide cost effective library services

Liaison with librarians of other national and international university and professional libraries to develop strategies of library services

Initiation and management of new information storage and retrieval projects

Planning and implementing library routines to achieve optimum utilisation of stock for the benefit of members

Representing the institute at national and international meetings on librarianship and information science

Statutory duty (under copyright legislation) to recover costs of providing photocopies; setting up a computer invoicing system to ensure recovery of money owed

Responsibility for the storage, use, preservation, and refurbishment of old and valuable library books

Education, training, and experience:

Degree or postgraduate diploma in librarianship or information science

Fellow or associate of the Library Association or equivalent qualification

Proved ability to initiate and manage information science projects

Prepared by: Date.

instance be too subjective or may not be doing the job correctly, when the resultant description is probably inaccurate. Although the manager should have the advantage of having an overall view of the job, this may not be sufficiently detailed to do justice to a detailed job description. The joint approach is probably the most effective, the employee preparing a first draft which is vetted and eventually approved by the manager, through a process of open discussion. Of course, in the case of a new job this option would not be available. Larger organisations often employ specialist job analysts, some of whose duties are to write job descriptions. This approach has some obvious advantages, such as consistency, impartiality, and experience, but substantial input by the employee and his or her manager and the authority of the manager for final approval are still advisable. Although rather uncommon, in some organisations job descriptions are written and approved by a committee. This can be cumbersome and should be avoided when possible.

Whatever the system maximum uniformity of format, terminology, and the amount of detail is important, particularly when job descriptions are used to evaluate jobs or for grading, when there is a danger that the length of the job description will influence its rating. Also the job description is intended to describe the job—not the person doing it.

When to write job descriptions

Ideally, a job description should be completed before the job is filled, but this may not always be possible in a business that is introducing a system of providing job descriptions. In this case the right time is "as soon as is practicable"—having first cleared the necessary staff communications and agreed the system and method to be adopted. One word of caution, however—starting and maintaining an effective system of job descriptions is not easy and requires much effort and a disciplined approach. The potential pay off, however—in terms of greater efficiency, better quality of recruitment and selection, greater job satisfaction, and improved staff relations—makes the investment well worth while.

Writing job descriptions

- Decide on the system best suited to your business
- Ensure appropriate communication with staff concerned
- Aim at consistency
- Ensure maximum involvement of current employee
- Keep descriptions as brief as possible
- Ensure effective maintenance and updating of relevant records.

description may be written by the current employee, by his or her manager or jointly, by a specialist job analyst, or, in some cases, a committee.

The employee should have a better understanding of the job than anybody else and should therefore be well placed to write the job description. There are, however, several possible pitfalls—the employee may for

ANY QUESTIONS

How reliable is the identification of individuals by their hair? What variations are found between hairs taken from different body sites?

It is not possible to identify positively any individual from a microscopical examination of head hair because of considerable variation between the hairs on a person's head. This can approach the range of variation in the population. Given a large number of hairs, especially if unusual natural or cosmetic features are present,¹ a match with a known sample can be close. Statistical studies on the significance of hair matches in forensic examinations have not, however, been universally accepted.² In the United Kingdom experts are cautious in giving opinions on the identity of the source of a hair even when there is a match with a known sample, particularly if the colour and other features are common.

When a hair is pulled from the head it may retain a rootsheath. These cells may be used for sex determination, enzyme polymorphism typing, or, more recently, for obtaining deoxyribonucleic acid profiles. The latter technique can give a good identification, sometimes to one person in

several million, from a few freshly plucked hairs.³ These options are often not available, however, because insufficient root sheath material is present. Other factors, such as poor storage conditions, may also preclude such methods.

Hairs from different parts of the body can usually be identified as one of the following groups: scalp, facial, body, eyebrow or eyelash, and pubic or axillary. Some facial and chest hair may be confused with pubic or axillary type hairs. The groups differ in length, diameter, uniformity, and shape but within a group it is usually difficult to indicate positively a specific source.—G M ROE, senior scientific officer, Metropolitan Police Forensic Science Laboratory, London

1 Roe GM, McArdle W, Pole K. The detection of cosmetic treatments on human scalp hair. Screening of forensic casework samples. In: *Proceedings of international symposium on forensic hair comparisons*. Quantico, USA: FBI Academy, 1985:63-8.

2 Gaudette BD, Keeping ES. An attempt at determining probabilities in human scalp hair comparison. *J Forensic Sci* 1974;19:599-606.

3 Gill P, Jeffreys AJ, Werrett DJ. Forensic application of DNA "fingerprints." *Nature* 1985;318:577-9.