

Writing a Job Description

A good job description performs a number of important functions:

- It describes the skills and competencies that are needed to perform the role;
- It can be used as the basis for the employment contract; and
- It is a valuable performance management tool.

Good recruitment can increase productivity and profits. To achieve these, you need to attract the right applicants. Believe it or not, it all starts with writing a good job description. A well-written job description will help you attract more qualified applicants and simplify your resume review process. The following are some tips to help you write your job description.

1. Be specific and concise.

Narrow your focus. The description shouldn't be a novel, but it also shouldn't be too brief. Balance your brevity with enough specifics that the job seekers can understand what's in store for them. It has been suggested that the optimal length of a job description is 400-800 words.

2. Be generic enough to compare, yet interesting enough to catch attention and stand out.

It's a Catch-22. You want to stand out to attract candidates. Yet, candidates need to compare your position to others in the industry. It is possible to strike that balance. Use compelling phrases that describe the perfect candidate with phrases such as "fearless critical thinker" or "passionate believer in..." Yet, when considering the description in its entirety, be universal enough that readers can compare it to similar positions for equity of salary and conditions.

3. Avoid internal lingo.

There is a fine line between using industry-specific jargon to find an experienced person and using terms that are confusing. Avoid buzz words and acronyms not widely known. Stick to standard phrases and terms people will recognize.

4. Make it conversational.

Whether your culture is laid-back or more serious, remember your audience. Job seekers are people too. Break the ice by talking to them in a more conversational tone. (i.e.: use the word "you" instead of "the ideal candidate".)

5. Use O*Net to help you write the job description.

The Dept. of Labor hosts O*Net, which provides employers and job seekers typical tasks, tools, and skills for over 900 occupations. Employers can use it to help write the duties, responsibilities, skills and tools needed. O*Net also offers a great variety of action words ready to copy and paste if needed. (www.onetonline.org)

6. Check Labor Market Information (LMI) and CalJOBS for trends and average salaries in your area.

The California EDD has an abundance of data to help you make decisions. Use their LMI and CalJOBS job board to research the competition, industry and forecasting. It includes industry data, prevailing wages, employment projections and much more. (www.labormarketinfo.edd.ca.gov)

7. Use consistent formatting.

Format your postings so they are consistent. Use the same colors, logo placement, font, and lay-out. This shows that you are professional and organized, and job seekers will be able to recognize your brand.

8. Remember, you are also writing an ad.

Hiring a new employee is a two-way proposition. Top talent has to select you before you can choose them. You are writing an ad for your company. You need to have major selling points clearly presented, compelling and interesting. Then end it with a strong call to action that is easy to understand.

9. Put yourself in the reader's place.

In the end, look at the whole description from the job seekers' point of view. Is it compelling and interesting? Does it describe your company well? Does it describe the position well? Is it clear, and are your expectations for the employee easy to understand? If the job seeker is unfamiliar with your company, will they discern your company culture and how this position fits into the company? Can they compare it to other jobs in the industry or to a related job title? If the answers to these questions are "yes", then you may have the job description that will do the trick.

10. Review and update it regularly.

Your company evolves — job descriptions should too.

At a minimum, include the following sections in your job description.

• Job Title

The first fundamental element of the job description is the job title. Consider it carefully. Some job titles may have many different interpretations of what the role actually is, especially if it is unique or specific to a certain sector. The working title for a job should be based upon the main function or role of the job. It is important to stay away from both vague and overly specific job titles. Instead, create a working title that appropriately describes both the level of responsibility and role of the job. A good job title:

- Accurately reflects the nature of the job and the duties being performed
- Does not exaggerate the importance of the role
- Reflects its relative position among other jobs in the company
- Is free of gender or age connotations

• Job Summary/About the Job

This is the introduction to the position. It should contain 2-4 sentences. Include some information on the position's relationship to others, reporting lines, and/or if it's part of a larger team. This is important, not only in relation to compliance issues, but also to provide insight into the hierarchical structure of the organization.

• Duties & Responsibilities

This section should include a list of the duties and areas of responsibility associated with the role. Consider separating areas of responsibility and including percentages of the work that will be performed. Outline the core responsibilities, starting with action words (refer to www.onetonline.org for samples). The list of duties and responsibilities will vary in length, but as a rule, should be as short as possible; otherwise the document becomes an operational manual rather than a job description. Try to keep the list to around 15 tasks, or less.

• Qualifications & Skills (required/minimum and preferred)

Include both the hard and soft skills you desire. List first the ones that are non-negotiable or "must haves" (certification, degree or second language) to dissuade under-qualified applicants. Don't get carried away, however, with the "preferred" or "nice to haves" so that you turn off what may be great candidates. Consider how flexible you want to be with these. If you want the right people and are willing to train them on some of the specifics, say so. Break the qualifications down further into "experience", "skills & abilities" and "education" if needed.

• Compensation & Benefits

Give some kind of salary range and general benefits. Many organizations are reluctant to do this in a job posting, but organizations that post salary information generally get applicants who are better qualified and genuinely interested in the position. It also will screen in/out the job seekers for the range you are willing to pay. Listing a salary range does not limit your ability to negotiate, but does help frame the job for the serious job seeker. Refer to local Labor Market Information to be sure you are competitive (www.labormarketinfo.edd.ca.gov).

• Company Description

Make this short and sweet, but try to describe your company culture. Motivated job seekers will research you and your company. Tell them what they can't find in that research. What is it like to work at your company? What's the day going to be like? Make it compelling and sell your company. Don't, however, paint a false picture just to attract candidates. That can create resentment and make for more turnover than you intended.

• Company Name, Website & Logo

This creates a professional, organized look to the job description.

• Call to Action

Be specific about what you want candidates to provide and where or how you want them to send it. If you prefer they apply with a code or to a specific person, be clear with those instructions. This is also true if you want specific information included in the candidate's application, such as a sample of previous work, references, salary history or a cover letter.

• Legal-eeze

This section covers some of the items that are required by law:

- Whether the job is exempt or nonexempt
- A qualifying statement that the list of job duties is not exhaustive and may be revised from time to time, based on business needs (other duties as assigned).
- Work hours and days
- Equal opportunity employer verbiage
- Date of writing/creation and version for management records