

JOB DESCRIPTIONS: A Format You Can Use

8-10 Essential Functions

Link knowledge
and skills to the
essential functions

Include a disclaimer

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Clear, accurate, and well-defined job descriptions have been a useful management tool for human resources for many years. However, there is no one accepted or "best" format. Some organizations develop elaborate and lengthy descriptions, while others employ broad, more generic class specifications. At Fox Lawson & Associates LLC, we work with organizations to custom-tailor job descriptions to the specific format that you are looking for, while ensuring that all considerations of legal compliance are in order.

Some of the main characteristics that all job descriptions should have, no matter their degree of specificity, are:

1. An Accurate Job or Classification Title. The title should describe the nature and level of work performed. It should be descriptive, gender free and simple. When you read it, you should know the character of the work (engineering, accounting, etc.) and the level of work, such as entry level, journey level, master level. Don't inflate the title, as it will cause problems later on.

2. A Summary. In this section, the job description should provide a brief (3 - 4 sentence) description that describes in further detail the nature and level of work. It should state why the job exists.

3. Supervisory Requirements. This should outline the job titles that the person reports to or, conversely, which report to it. This section is most commonly found in exempt jobs. It may not be found on a non-exempt job description because non-exempt jobs may operate in multiple departments where there are

different supervisory titles relationships.

4. The Fair Labor Standards Act. Your job descriptions should identify if the job is exempt or non-exempt.

5. Essential Functions. Sometimes called duties and responsibilities, this section should list the essential functions of the job. This is usually about 8 - 10 statements of what incumbents are responsible for performing. Another way to look at this is, if these duties were not performed, there would be no reason for the job to exist. Normally they are listed in order of importance, or some other logical order such as the sequence of performance. In either case, each function should be succinctly written or constitute at least 10% of an incumbent's time. Anything less than 10% is not considered an essential function according to the ADA, and therefore may not be required of an applicant to perform. They should clearly describe why the job is different from other jobs in the same family in terms of the complexity of the work performed or the character of the work.

6. Other Duties. In the essential functions section, it is advisable that you list the last function as "other duties as assigned" or some other disclaimer that states that the essential functions are examples of the types of duties and responsibilities that an employee will be required to perform. This statement prevents employees from demanding that everything be placed in the job description and allows some flexibility to management.

7. Minimum Qualifications. This section should contain the minimum level of education and

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experience required to perform the work at the entry level of the job. While many supervisors want to indicate a higher level of skills, these are desired qualifications and should not be used to influence the minimum level that is required. We prefer to list equivalencies in this section, such as "...or, an equivalent combination of education and experience sufficient to successfully perform the essential functions of the job." This allows the incumbents to meet the requirements in a number of different ways and reduces the opportunities for legal challenge.

8. Knowledge and Skills. In this section the job descriptions should describe the things that the employee needs to know (knowledge) and the things the employee needs to be able to do (skills). The best way to get this correct is to link every knowledge or skill to the essential functions that have been identified earlier. If a link cannot be made to an essential function, perhaps it should not be listed in this section.

9. Dates and Approvals. Your job descriptions need to have a section that outlines who approved the job description (you don't want just anybody in the organization approving job descriptions!). In addition, you should date the job descriptions so that you can determine if they are in need of an update in the future.

To prepare good job descriptions, it is important to collect up-to-date job content information. We recommend starting with having employees fill out Position Description Questionnaires (PDQs). PDQs will collect information about

current job content – essential duties, knowledge, skills, and abilities, minimum qualifications, working conditions, and other related job information. Supervisors should review these and add comments, but should not change employee input. Then, a series of informational interviews should take place to confirm and expand on the data in the PDQs. These should include at least one representative from each job class, and often several. This level of employee participation will help to secure buy-in.

The next task is to actually prepare the written job descriptions. It has been our experience that here is where organizations often stumble and take too long. Jobs are not static – they often do not stay the same for months and years on end. So, after going through all of the trouble of collecting this information and asking for employee input, it is important to get the job descriptions prepared in a reasonable amount of time. We have assisted organizations with the collecting of information, only to watch them take years to prepare the job descriptions. By then the job content information will, in many cases, be out of date. Good job descriptions should be in a format that is concise, easy to read, not too long or short. They are an essential HR document and they should facilitate job evaluation, recruitment, organizational design and training needs.

If you need assistance in analyzing jobs and preparing new or updated job descriptions, please contact us at 800-383-0976. Jim Fox is at extension 12 and Bruce Lawson is at extension 20.