

## How to prepare job descriptions that work

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### What is a job description?

A job description is a summary of what individuals do in a particular job and what attributes are required for a person to do the job well. Every employee in a normal situation must have a clear job description when they start a new job. This job description should be updated when the job changes. Job descriptions, unfortunately, come in different formats and sizes. The scope of what is covered in these job descriptions vary depending on who has prepared the job description. It would seem there is no agreed format for job descriptions basing on the different formats currently available on the market.

### How to prepare a job description?

The approaches to preparing job description vary from one organisation to another. Here I will share with you the best way to prepare job descriptions that work. This approach to job description writing is based on a scientific approach often used by Psychologists when they are preparing job descriptions used in test development. So far this is the best approach to develop job descriptions that will help organisations hire the best candidate for each job.

#### Step 1 – Develop a Job Description template

For you to develop a credible job description you need to develop a job description template for collecting information about each job. In developing a job description template you must ensure that the template is based on a sound theoretical and research foundation. As an example the best job descriptions are those that tape into the following framework;

- **Cognitive ability** - We know from research that cognitive ability or general mental ability contributes the most to individual job performance. Therefore when developing job descriptions, it is important to gauge the level and variety of cognitive ability skills required to perform a particular job. There are off the shelf templates you can use to gather information on cognitive abilities. I recommend that you customize such job description templates to suit your organisational circumstances. In the cognitive ability template, you need to ensure that you have questions covering the following areas; memory, numerical ability, critical thinking, verbal ability, attention to detail and oral communication.
- **Manual dexterity** – You would need to have a component of the job description template to cover issues to do with manual dexterity. This should cover finger dexterity and hand coordination requirements. You could in the same section cover all issues to do with physical fitness and eye coordination requirements. There are well-researched template guidelines to use

in all these areas.

- **Personality** – Every job requires some level of personality alignment. Therefore it makes sense to collect this information when preparing a job description. It is important to work under the framework of established personality traits like the big five and its sub-factors. As an example, you may want, under the Agreeableness dimension, to cover sub-factors such as flexibility, gentleness and patience. In all this, you are collecting information on how each subfactor contributes to job performance in the target role and how important that factor is for someone to succeed in that role.
- **Job duties** - Under here the job duties are collected from subject matter experts and put together in the form of statements. These job duties statements are rated for importance by the same subject matter experts or another group of subject matter experts.
- **Qualifications** – Under this dimension, you are targeting to find out what minimum qualifications are required for someone to be successful in a particular role.
- **Experience** – Under this dimension you want to get the minimum experience required in the target role for someone to be effective.

## Step 2 – Use Subject Matter Experts

Once the job description template has been designed and agreed upon, you need to decide on who will participate in completing the template or in providing information about the job. The major mistake most people make when developing job descriptions is that they tend to rely on job incumbents to provide this information. Job incumbents are interested parties and therefore conflicted. The information often provided by job incumbents is not reliable and therefore is misleading. They often inflate what they do. They often inflate the qualifications and experience required to make their job more important to the detriment of the organisation.

To address this flaw, it is advisable to use subject matter experts as your sources of data. Identify at least 5 subject matter experts per role and use them as a source of data. The people you should consider are people who have done the job before and are now in higher roles. It is important to note that such people must have been considered competent in those roles to enable them to give authoritative data about the role.

Each of the subject matter experts is given the job description template to complete. The template will have a rating scale to rate various statements under each of the dimensions being assessed. Once the experts have rated each statement under each of the dimensions you can then average the ratings under each dimension to get the relevant scores. Normally the statements are rated in terms of how important each of the statements is to the performance of the target job. Under each major dimension, the statements will be ranked from more important to the least important items. You may decide to remove all the items rated as not important in the performance of a role. This will leave you with a more focused and streamlined job description.

A job description developed through a process like this is likely to be reliable and more valid. Such a job description is more credible as input in the management of other human resources processes such as recruitment and selection.

On the market what we see are more generic job descriptions that do not address the needs of any particular organisation. As a way forward I would like to urge human resources professionals to adopt the approach above when developing job descriptions. The approach will help the organisation and enhance the credibility of the human resources profession.

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