



Job descriptions – identifying purpose, not tasks

by Chanon Collins

Have you ever heard an employee voice “That’s not my area” when questioned about the status of a project? Or have you witnessed employees ignoring an assignment because it “is not in their job description”? If these instances have occurred in your organization, perhaps you should examine the job descriptions of your employees. If you have job descriptions to examine, you are ahead of most organizations. Many companies do not create official job descriptions for their employees and those who have do not rely on these documents as driving forces for their team members.

Job descriptions, at a minimum, should serve as a guide for employees and it should be based on the manager’s expectations and the employee’s perceptions. A job description that is written without any input from the employee will not serve its true purpose. It is essential that all job descriptions address areas of communication, organizational structure, position goals and objectives, and assessments used for evaluation.

Ethan A. Winning, of Winning Associates, has 30 years of experience writing and critiquing job descriptions. Through his studies of numerous companies and their multitude of job descriptions, he has discovered several commonalities in poorly written descriptions – some employees do not know who their supervisor was, others didn’t know what their responsibilities were, some thought that they had more responsibilities than they actually did, and others thought that they had more authority than was actually given. In the cases where responsibilities were given, the employee did not exhibit the skills necessary to complete the tasks. Winning also found employees who did not even know their own job titles.

The task of creating job descriptions might seem tedious, but if written correctly, they will serve as useful tools in performance evaluations and job assessments. Effective job descriptions should include the job title and illustrate its position in the organizational structure. It is imperative the employees realize that their role is vital to the overall function and success of the company. This illustration will also present the lines of communication in the organization.

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In identifying lines of reporting, use department or division names, not specific managers. This will illustrate that the employee is part of that department and must work with division members to ensure success. Once lines of communication have been established, the purpose for the position must be made clear. It is in this area that most job descriptions fail. Michael Gerber, author of **The E-Myth Revisited**, prefers to develop position contracts for his team members. These position contracts contain essentially the same information as a job description, but they also illustrate the goals and objectives of the job, thus giving the employee a strong sense of commitment and benchmarks for assessment.

Identifying the purpose, goals, and objectives of a position give the employee a strong sense of value as a member of the organization. Objectives should illustrate what should be completed as opposed to how it should be completed. Once the goals and objectives have been established, a listing of specific duties and tasks will serve as a guide for the employee.

While there are many things available to include in a job description and a position contract, these documents would offer more to employees if the purpose, goals, objectives, and assessment tools are presented clearly. Try not to make this document an all-encompassing item to serve as an employee contract. Some things are vital, while other information is superfluous. Remember that "not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted." -Albert Einstein

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