

How to Review and Critique a Job Description

Merces Consulting Group, Inc.
Royal Oak, MI

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Job Description Review Guidelines

A job description needs to be accurate, up-to-date, and a useful management tool. It serves as an understanding between the organization, employees and their managers about what employees are to be accountable for. The job description establishes expectations – and should be worded in such a way that expectations are as clear as possible.

Job descriptions also serve as the foundation of the performance management process. Nothing should be on a job description unless we can evaluate performance on it, and anything that we can evaluate performance on should be in the job description. The best way to evaluate the quality of the job description is to actually use it to appraise performance.

- If two employees who have very different levels of performance come out the same in your evaluation, something is missing in the job description that would serve to separate them.
- If a poorly performing employee appears to be “fully functioning” after being evaluated on the job description, something is missing – either there are elements of the job that aren’t clear, or there is no standard against which you can measure performance. A quick way to see what’s missing is to say “why do I think this isn’t a good employee” and see what’s missing.

The purpose of this exercise is to determine if the job descriptions are ready for use as a performance management tool, and if not, to ensure they are fixed and made more useful before the formal performance appraisal process begins.

GENERAL STRUCTURE

All job descriptions should have:

Summary Description

The Summary Description is one or two sentences that describe the basic purpose of the job. This should not include statements of how the job is to be done, skill requirements or anything other than simply the responsibility of the job. Think of this as the answer to a stranger’s question “so what do you do for a living?”

Here is a critique of a “summary description” for an administrative position (numbers in brackets added as references):

This position involves ^[1] varied complex and confidential tasks ^[2] essential to the efficient operation ^[3] of the organization’s administrative office ^[4]. Good judgment, self-motivation, and responsible decision making are essential in this position ^[5]. Working with minimal supervision ^[6], the Administrative Assistant provides ^[7] administrative support ^[8] to the Corporate Project Manager and Marketing/Promotion department of the corporation ^[9].

[1] Typically start this summary with “Responsible for” or something like that... that is, make it a direct sentence. Here we are told what the job will involve, not what the job is.

[2] “Varied complex and confidential tasks” – this is a good phrase, as it indicates the overall complexity of the work (although at this point we don’t know what those tasks are, and we should, but we have to wait until item 8 below).

[3] Avoid obvious statements, or anything related to how the work is to be done. All work is expected to be done correctly, efficiently, in a timely manner, etc., so putting it here is unnecessary. “Essential to the efficient operation” is not a function of the job, it’s the reason someone decided to create the job.

[4] It is good to include the functional area, if the job is specific to a functional area in such a way that it makes a difference. Here, it says “of the organization’s administrative office” but later on we see that it is specific to a person and a department. Either redundant or inaccurate.

[5] This entire sentence relates to how the job should be performed and essential requirements of the person in it, and should not be included.

[6] “Working with minimal supervision” does give us an important characteristic of the job and should be included in some form, but can be done more efficiently.

[7] Repeating the title is unnecessary, it’s right above this section.

[8] This is the “further explanation” of what was first mentioned in item [2] above, but is separated from the qualifier found there. Better language for [2] and [8] would be “a variety of complex and confidential administrative tasks.”

[9] Defines who the services are provided for. Might be unnecessary if the role is defined better in the title.

Let’s try a re-write, keeping in mind the comments above:

“Responsible for independently performing a wide range of complex and confidential clerical and administrative tasks to support the Marketing/Promotion Department.”

This is clear, concise, and gives the reader a very quick answer to what the job is all about.

Duties and Responsibilities

This is the heart of the job description. It should be presented in an organized “outline” form, not a scattered list of tasks. The basic structure should look like this:

1. Statement of responsibility
 - a. Task/duty in support of responsibility
 - b. Task/duty in support of responsibility
2. Statement of responsibility
 - a. Task/duty in support of responsibility
 - b. Task/duty in support of responsibility

Most jobs will have between two and six responsibilities. Some more complex management positions may have more (but unlikely any would ever have ten), some very routine jobs may only have one. A “responsibility” is a single sentence description of something the employee in the job is charged with completing. For example:

- “maintains the operation of the company’s network server” is a responsibility
- “issues login passwords” is not a responsibility... it is a task

You can usually tell a responsibility from a task, because with a responsibility, it is natural to expand the statement by explaining what it means, usually with a series of lesser responsibilities or tasks that are part of the major responsibility. For example, the responsibility noted above might further be explained like this:

- Maintains the operation of the company’s network server.
 - Loads updated network software and ensures it is operating per standards
 - Performs periodic maintenance on network hardware and software according to pre-established procedures
 - Monitors hardware performance and recommends purchase of new hardware when required by need for additional capacity or to replace equipment no longer functioning
 - Provides recommendations to management on potential upgrades to server hardware and software.

Writing a series of sub-bullets for “issues login passwords” would simply be the steps required to issue a login password, which is not appropriate for a job description. The reality is that “issues login passwords” might be considered a bullet under “maintains the operation of the company’s network server.”

Some good tests of whether something should be included in this section include:

- Can you objectively evaluate performance on the statement?
- Is it something unique to this job, rather than something that is expected of everyone in the organization?
- Is the item really essential to performing the job?
- Is it something that should really be in another section, such as the section on knowledge and skills?

EXAMPLE: This is a critique of a list of duties and responsibilities from an actual job description for a Medical Records Technician, with commentary on each item. First note that there is no distinction between responsibilities and tasks, the items are in no order whatsoever, and that they include items that should be in different parts of the description. The critique may appear harsh, but is done to deliberately highlight why certain things should, or should not, be included in a job description.

1. Maintains confidentiality, security and standards of ethics with all medical records information. **[Comment: unclear as to whether this refers to ensuring that there are policies in place, or following them – if it is following them, the gist of the statement is “follows procedures,” which is obvious, because all jobs are supposed to follow procedures. This is not an essential statement.]**
2. Carries out responsibilities in accordance with Corporate policies and procedures, including HIPAA and state/federal regulations and laws. **[Comment: same as in item 1 above; all employees should carry out all responsibilities in accordance with policies and procedures and government regulations and laws. It is appropriate to mention what policies or regulations are being followed in some cases, so that it is understood what rulebook to follow.]**
3. Develop and maintain expertise of regulations for proper release of information. **[Comment: this is a statement of the knowledge required to perform the job, not the duties of the job. This should be in the qualifications section.]**
4. Evaluates information to determine compliance of the law. **[Comment: this is a valid task, not a responsibility, but is unclear as to what it means.]**
5. Date stamps all requests and highlights pertinent data to facilitate processing. **[Comment: this is a little specific, but less so for a clerical job, which is what this appears to be.]**
6. Validates requests and authorizations for release of medical information according to established procedures. **[Comment: this is a valid statement of a responsibility, indicates that there should be some sub-bullets (which it doesn't have), and informs the reader that this responsibility is performed following a set of guidelines.]**
7. Retrieves medical records from EHR and hard copy charts. **[Comment: this is a task statement, tied to a responsibility. Avoid abbreviations or inside lingo, even where you think they will be understood; if used repeatedly, on the first use, spell it out. Example: electronic health records (“EHR”).]**
8. Work in a conscientious manner while releasing medical records in an efficient, effective, and accurate manner. **[Comment: statement of how the employee is supposed to work, and content is redundant. All employees should work in a conscientious manner, and all work should be done efficiently, effectively and accurately.]**

9. Performs quality checks on all work to assure accuracy of the release, confidentiality, and proper invoicing. **[Comment: good thing to include, but prompts a question – “is the employee performing quality checks on their own work, or on the work of others? Makes a big difference, and is unclear here; essential that it be clarified.]**
10. May receive requests including assisting walk-ins and telephone inquiries, and retrieving inquiries. **[Comment: be careful with “may” – “may” could mean “it is possible that” or it could mean “this is one way it happens.” If it’s only possible that something would happen, it probably isn’t an essential part of the job. Here it’s relatively clear that it’s describing a way that inquiries might come in the door, although the last phrase is confusing.]**
11. Processes invoices and maintains working knowledge of existing state fee structure. **[Comment: this contains multiple items, one of which is a statement of duties and the other a knowledge standard. By definition, all employees are required to maintain the appropriate amount of knowledge for the tasks they perform, so putting this here is unnecessary. While it might be obvious to someone on the inside, the phrase “processes invoices” does not provide much information on the complexity or difficulty of the task.]**
12. Performs day-to-day administrative tasks such as maintaining information files and processing paperwork. **[Comment: simple basic statement of a duty.]**
13. Notifies HIM Director if unable to adhere to daily schedule. **[Comment: an employee handbook type statement, not relevant to a job description. All employees should be required to inform their supervisor if they are unable to keep up with work.]**
14. Ability to read and comprehend simple, healthcare/medical terminology. **[Comment: neither a duty or responsibility, should be a statement in the qualifications section.]**
15. Work professionally, effectively, and efficiently in a team environment with customers, management and co-workers. **[Comment: general statement about how the employee should work; could be a part of the “how the job is done” part of a job description that is used for performance appraisal, but does not belong in this section.]**
16. Maintains a neat, clean, and professional personal appearance and observes established dress codes. **[Comment: employee handbook statement, all employees must do this.]**
17. Maintains a clean and orderly work area, ensures that records and files are properly stored before leaving area. **[Comment: potentially deceptive statement. The immediate response is “employee handbook statement;” however, this could refer to a specific duty of an employee in this job that is responsible for ensuring the security of the medical records office. Should be clearly stated if this is a specific job requirement or just what is expected of everyone.]**

18. Maintains and operates office equipment. ***[Comment: all employees operate office equipment of some sort; very few actually “maintain” equipment. If appropriate, should describe what office equipment, and what “maintain” means. It’s likely that “maintain” here means “fills paper tray,” “changes toner,” rather than “conducts diagnostic procedures on faulty machinery and repairs according to manuals, including wiring, programming, etc.”]***
19. Answers incoming calls. ***[Comment: all employees answer incoming calls. This may be a receptionist function in this job, or indicates that an employee in this job is responsible for answering and routing calls to others in the department.]***
20. Perform other related duties as assigned or requested.
- Demonstrate behavior of cooperation and professionalism when assisting with other assigned duties.
 - Perform and complete special assignments in a timely, accurate and organized manner.
 - Demonstrate ability to adapt to change in workload and assignments.

[Comment: the requirement of “other related duties” or “anything else as assigned” should be understood for all jobs, but is frequently included to make a point. The bullets following the statement are employee handbook items.]

Here is all of the content from the task list above, and how it would look properly formatted:

- Validates requests and authorizations for release of medical information, following non-discretionary established procedures.
 - Receives inquiries for requests for release of medical information through mail, electronic communication or in-person contacts
 - Evaluates requests to determine compliance with legal and regulatory requirements; determines if release of information is appropriate
 - Date stamps all requests and highlights pertinent data to facilitate processing and retrieval of information
 - Retrieves medical records from electronic health record (EHR) system and hard copy charts/files
 - Provides medical information to inquirer in appropriate format.
 - Processes invoices for information retrieval, following defined Corporate policy and state fee schedule guidelines
 - Conducts quality reviews of the work of other employees involved in the release of medical information [POSSIBLE DUTY, NOT CLEAR IF AN ACCURATE STATEMENT]
 - Explains reasoning for denial of requests for information, providing inquirer with policy information or describing correct way to request release.
- Provides clerical and administrative support for the medical records office
 - Answers calls to the department; provides response or forwards to other staff as appropriate

- b. Maintains files, processes health record requests and related paperwork, makes copies, sends faxes and performs other basic clerical functions as needed.
- c. Ensures that the workspace is clean and free of debris or paperwork; ensures all files are returned to their secure locations.
- d. Provides additional as assistance and support as directed.

[note: this does not constitute a “revised job description;” it simply organizes the thoughts in the original list, supplemented with what might be considered “obvious” content for a job such as this.]

There were 20 items in the original list. Of those 20, seven were clearly statements of the general way in which employees should work (including the “all other duties as assigned”), fitting the “employee handbook” definition. Two, and part of a third, were qualification items. Of the remaining eleven, one was an actual responsibility, and the remaining ten were tasks, or parts of tasks.

Some statements (“attends meetings,” “processes paperwork”) should never appear in job descriptions unless they are specific and unique to a job or a function. All employees will likely attend meetings from time to time, and we don’t appraise performance on “attends meetings.” On the other hand, “attends state and national conferences in order to present Corporate methods or approaches” is a clear statement about the requirements of a job. Remember that the purpose of a job description is not to repeat the employee handbook, or to include everything a person does.

Knowledge and Skills Required

This section should include all knowledge and skill elements required in order for an employee to perform all of the responsibilities of the job, at a fully functioning level. It DOES NOT describe the entry level requirements, or what qualifications might appear in a want ad or job posting. For this reason, the word “preferred” never appears in a job description – something is either needed or it is not. It does not matter whether the knowledge/skill is acquired outside the job, or on the job. Whenever listing a skill, be clear as to the level of the skill, preferably how it would be applied.

Education – If there is an education requirement, state it clearly, e.g., “Bachelor’s Degree with a major in Accounting or Finance. An alternative would be “thorough understanding of the theory and practices of accounting, typically acquired through completion of a Bachelor’s degree program with a major or concentration in accounting or finance.” Do not list a degree requirement unless there is either 1) a specific major, concentration or area of study) or 2) the degree is “shorthand” for some more general body of knowledge, e.g., “basic level of reading, writing and mathematical skills typically acquired during completion of a high school program” or “advanced verbal and written communication skills, and a higher level of general knowledge typically acquired in a college degree program.”

Certifications – List certifications or licenses only if they are required for the job. If certification itself is not required, but a certification accurately describes a level of skill, you may use it as an example, e.g., level of knowledge of network operations consistent with acquiring Microsoft Windows Network Administration Certification.

Knowledge of Laws/Regulations/Policies – State the specific requirements and the depth of knowledge required. Each organization should have a “glossary” of what terms like “understanding” “in-depth knowledge” or “expertise” means, so that the terms can be applied consistently. To ensure clarity, these statements can always have the qualifier of “current” to indicate that employee have to maintain their knowledge. Example: “Possesses thorough knowledge of current Federal and State laws and regulations governing the employer-employee relationship, and the way in which these are applied to the Corporation”

Non-educational knowledge (“experience”) – Never simply indicate a certain number of years of experience. There are various reasons. The obvious one is that everyone learns at a different rate. The second, perhaps more important reason, is that what an employee learns during a set number of years is based on their job and the way they are used. What one employee may experience in one year may take another ten. It is better to state a specific body of knowledge, with a qualifier. Instead of saying “must have 10 years of supervisory experience” (which isn’t even a good want ad statement), it would be better to say “possesses high level of supervisory skill and expertise, including the management and development of multiple staff members performing jobs of varying responsibility and level, typically not acquired in less than five years of progressively greater levels of responsibility.”

Specific skills – State specific skill sets in a way in which it is easy to measure whether the employee possesses the skills, and if he or she does not, to be able to explain exactly what the employee needs to do in order to prove ability with the skill. Many skills are important in a medical environment in order to be fully functioning on a job, although employees may not need to be specifically trained. For example, it is reasonable for many jobs to have statements such as “must be familiar with and conversant in basic medical terminology used in communicating to patients.

Some skills are more general, but it is important to be specific – “computer literate” is not a statement of a skill. A statement such as “ability to use Microsoft Word sufficient to produce simple correspondence and basic reports and documents” is a good statement. List any specific software programs used, and the degree to which an employee must know how to use them. If there are specific programs used in a department, list them and the degree of expertise needed, e.g., “employee must have thorough knowledge of all the major functions of XYZ billing software, including the ability to change databases such as fee schedules.”

Nature of Work

This section of the job description includes a variety of items that will vary from job to job. These may include statements about the level of direction (e.g., “work is performed under only limited guidance) or the complexity of the work (e.g., “work involves extensive research to determine the nature of the situations encountered, and to determine an appropriate course of action”). A glossary of these terms should be developed for the Corporation over time.