



Job Descriptions: An Essential How-To Guide

Employers often face challenges in creating new job descriptions for positions that they do not currently employ, identifying essential job functions, and keeping job descriptions updated. For these reasons, members often request sample job descriptions from ERC and consult with us to develop or update their job descriptions.

Based on our experience and knowledge in helping organizations with job descriptions coupled with our research on job description development practices, we've developed an essential how-to guide to creating new job descriptions to equip you with tips and guidance on managing this important, but often arduous, HR responsibility.

What Sources to Use

When creating a job description for a new job, using secondary sources of job information can help you better understand a position and the typical duties a person would perform in that role. Use these cautiously, however, and validate the job description with the new position's manager before finalizing it to be sure that the job description accurately captures the true job duties. Good sources to use to develop new job descriptions include:

- AnswersNow / JDXchange Tool in my ERC portal
- O*Net / Job Description Writer
- Dictionary of Occupational Job Titles
- Compensation or salary survey job descriptions
- Sample job descriptions from other organizations
- Job postings

Who to Consult for Job Information

Job analysis should always be used to create a new job description. Interviews, questionnaires, and/or observation techniques can be used to gather information about job tasks and duties, determine the most essential functions of the job, evaluate the abilities needed to perform the work, and uncover the qualifications or background necessary to complete the job duties. Common techniques include (in order of most used):

- Interview/meeting with supervisor of job incumbent
- Interview with job incumbent or past incumbents (typically high or average performers)
- Observe job incumbents working on tasks
- Ask supervisor and/or job incumbents to complete a questionnaire (i.e. PAQ)
- Interview with subject matter expert(s)

What Should Be Included

The HR professional and hiring manager can work together to gather important information about the job, such as:

- Purpose of the job
- Basic functions and duties
- Responsibilities related to supervision (number of employees supervised)
- Level of discretion/authority
- People with whom the position interacts and level of interaction
- Amount and type of physical exertion
- Abilities (mathematical, verbal, etc.)
- Minimum educational or technical qualifications (diplomas, degrees, certifications, etc.)
- Minimum experience required to perform duties
- Exposure to certain work conditions

What Information to Include in a Job Description

At a minimum, job descriptions should include the job title, key duties and responsibilities, a job purpose summary, required job knowledge or skills, requisite physical and cognitive abilities, required educational level or certification(s), minimum qualifications/competencies, preferred qualifications/competencies, reporting relationship, indication of essential duties, "other duties as assigned," and creation/revision dates.

Information about work conditions/environment, FLSA exemption status, and location of work are also somewhat commonly included in job descriptions.

Job descriptions should not include instructions or recommendations about how to do the job, performance expectations or standards, occasional or temporary job duties that are non-essential, future job duties, and generalized statements. Job descriptions also should not contain a laundry list of job duties, but rather should reflect the position's priorities.

How to Identify Essential Functions

One of the most important things employers must do when developing job descriptions is to identify and delineate the essential functions of the job.

An essential function must be an important task that only the person in the job can do. In other words, the duty would be a hardship for another person to handle. An essential job function is not necessarily a duty that takes up the largest percentage of an employee's time, nor can it be automatically considered an essential function across similar jobs.

There are a number of strategies organizations use to determine essential functions, including asking the job incumbent's manager, observing employees doing tasks, conducting a thorough job analysis, and reviewing core duties and most critical job tasks.

How to Write Job Descriptions

Job descriptions should be written using clear and very specific language. Each duty or task should begin with an action verb in the present tense (i.e. supervise, create, analyze, administer, etc.) and imprecise words should be limited (i.e. assists, handles, etc.). In addition, no references to race, gender, disability, or other protected classes should be included in the document. Similarly, avoid jargon and spell out acronyms.

How Often to Update Job Descriptions

Ideally, job descriptions should be "living documents" which are evaluated annually because it's not uncommon for job descriptions to grow outdated or need minor adjustments each year. Nonetheless, the majority of employers re-look at job descriptions only when a position becomes available, when there is a change in the duties of a position, and when there is a significant change in the organization.

Be aware that if job descriptions are not updated on a regular basis, you risk running into trouble with regulatory requirements like complying with ADA, as the courts frequently revisit employers' job descriptions to determine if employees are capable of performing certain job duties and whether those duties are essential.

Job descriptions are generally regarded as legal documents, necessary for maintaining compliance with ADA, FLSA, FMLA and other employment laws in addition to aiding the recruiting and hiring process, helping managers evaluate performance and set performance criteria or goals, determining compensation or grade level, and helping to identify training needs. For these reasons and more, be sure that your job descriptions are created and written accurately and updated on a regular basis.

This document is meant to provide general guidelines and should be used as a reference. It may not take into account all relevant local, state or federal laws and is not a legal document. ERC will not assume any legal liability that may arise from the use of this document.