

Harnessing the power of the job description

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Managers have a wide range of tools available to help with their managerial duties. Managers can employ tools such as strategic planning, customer relationship management, employee engagement surveys, benchmarking and a balanced scorecard to maximize the productivity of their workforce (Marr, 2013). Although often used in the hiring process, job description is a managerial tool that is often underutilized.

Understandably, very few managers get excited about job descriptions. In its rudimentary form, a job description is a written document that outlines the duties, responsibilities, contributions, behaviors, outcomes and required qualifications for a specific job in an organization (Heathfield, 2016). The overall goal is to hire the right person for the right position. Many organizations simply use the job description during the hiring process and discard it until it is needed again. However, upon further examination, the strategic use of a job description can provide a competitive advantage for an organization.

A job description is the outcome of a detailed job analysis. The job analysis involves managers, job incumbents, subject matter experts and human resource professionals working collaboratively to capture the essence of a particular job (Mondy and Martocchio, 2014). In theory, the job analysis should closely match what a person in a particular job actually does. The resulting job description can aid in the development of employees throughout their employment with the organization.

In the recruiting and selection process, organizations routinely utilize job descriptions. Organizations post the job description to various media in an effort to entice potential candidates to apply to the position. Candidates' qualifications are then compared against job descriptions to measure for job and organizational fit. Typically, that is where the usefulness of job description ends. However, job descriptions can be used further in the interview process. By transforming the job description details into questions, the organization can better determine the candidate's fit with the position. The organization can see exactly which of the knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviors the candidate is lacking in relation to the position (Herrick, 2009). Additionally, the organization can evaluate the extent of the candidate knowledge specific to the position requirements. Using the job description as questions for the interview also reduces the likelihood of discrimination. The organization can reduce liability and help ensure compliance with equal employment opportunity (EEO) hiring standards by asking questions that focus on what the candidates need for the position, not on personal characteristics. By focusing on questions that come from the job descriptions, organizations can avoid asking questions that may violate EEO laws.

Utilizing a job description can provide a better means for checking a candidate's professional references. Many job reference checks are unproductive. Former employers are reluctant to provide performance-related information in fear of a possible lawsuit. To

combat a potential defamation lawsuit, former employers will only give titles and dates of employment. According to [Kondrasuk et al. \(2001\)](#), employers have an affirmative duty to make sure that all questions during the screen process, including reference checks, are job related. Using the job description as the source of reference check discussions reduces the likelihood of controversy. Rather than being a free-for-all discussion of the candidate's job performance, the reference check is focused specifically on attributes of the candidate in the future position. By focusing on the job requirements outlined in the job description, an employer will get a more accurate picture of how the applicant will perform on the job. Any performance information that cannot be verified as factual and relevant to the job description should be discarded.

Once hired, the job description becomes a document that can be utilized for performance management ([Scott, 2011](#)). Because the job description represents a detailed job analysis, the job activities performed by the employee should accurately depict what he or she will actually do on the job. The knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviors listed in the job description are converted into statements or tasks in the job evaluation system. Measuring employee performance is as simple as comparing how well the employee performs in the job statements or tasks that were taken from the job description. Utilizing the job description for performance management provides transparency for both supervisors and employees. Both entities know exactly what is expected in terms of performance.

A job description can also be valuable in training and development. Any performance deficiencies, as identified during the performance evaluation or the hiring process, can be addressed with training. Because the performance evaluation and hiring process is based on the job description, identifying training needs is fairly straightforward. It also provides trainers with specific knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviors that need to be addressed for each employee. Instead of providing broad training sessions to meet the needs of the masses, an organization can tailor training to meet the specific needs of each individual employee. Training can also be tailored to an employee hired with any deficiencies. Instead of eliminating candidates who do not meet all the requirements listed in the job description, specific training can be developed to help candidates with their shortcoming. By being proactive, an organization can expand their candidate pool.

From a human resource development perspective, job descriptions can play a vital role in succession planning. Organizations utilizing information systems, can carefully create an inventory and track employees' knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviors (KSA). In the event of a retirement, firing or employment separation, the organization has a list of qualified candidates to fill the position. If the organization has utilized a job description throughout the employment process, the organization will have an accurate account of the intellectual capital of the institution. Consequently, the organization will know if they can replace an employee by promoting from within or need to recruit externally. The succession plan is based upon concrete employee competencies.

Utilizing a job description can help with health and safety. If an organization has utilized a job description in recruiting, selection and training and development, the organization will have a detailed inventory of the KSAs of its employees. The inventory will allow the organization to make sure that employees are not performing jobs that they are not qualified to perform. Consequently, employees will avoid work situations that may cause injury or death. Additionally, the organization reduces its liability by not allowing untrained employees performing dangerous tasks. If an untrained employee performs a duty that is beyond his or her level of training, the organization has documented evidence that will help reduce its liability if an employee gets injured.

A job description can also help with labor relations. Often, labor agreements are negotiated in general terms for the masses. Management and labor try to improve the overall working conditionals, salaries and benefits of all employees. Because the job description outlines specific job requirements for each worker, the labor negotiations can address specific

worker issues. If a specific worker needs more training or salary adjustment based on their particular knowledge, skills and ability, the organization can do so without making changes to the entire organization. Instead of collective bargaining, the organization can engage in targeted bargaining. Organization can save time and money by not providing benefits that employees will not use. The employees will be happier by receiving specific benefits that meet their individual needs. The scope of labor negotiations shifts from very broad to very narrow, thus reducing time and money.

A job description can serve as means to be more efficient with compensation (Massad, 2005). Each job in an organization clearly has KSAs. Additionally, each individual employee has specific compensation needs based on their personal backgrounds. Compensation models can be developed to strategically match the needs of each employee with the human resource priorities of the organization. If an employee has specific KSAs that are particularly valuable to the organization, he or she can be compensated accordingly. Conversely, if an employee's skills can easily be replaced, he or she can be compensated accordingly. Organizations can justify salary increases, promotions, demotions, firing and transfers based on the proficiency they exhibit in relation to their job description. Compensation can be directly related to each employee's documented contributions, when compared to the job description, to the organization.

Drucker (1993) was not a supporter of the job description. He felt job description too narrowly defined a person's job that created a crippling effect on worker productivity. Workers would only do what is outlined in their job description and little else. Drucker preferred flexibility in workplace tasks. However, when flexibility is left unchecked, workers take on tasks they are not qualified for or properly trained to perform. There is potential for overworking employees or workplace injuries. Additionally, workers may become confused about what their job entails, causing frustration with their job. Although workers may become too literal with their duties, a job description helps eliminate job duty confusion. If workers become too entrenched with their job description details, the job description can simply be changed to meet the demands of the job.

Conclusions

A job description is often dismissed as a human resource necessity that an organization deploys when they need to hire an employee and puts away afterward. However, a job description can be used throughout the employment relationship to give the organization a competitive advantage.

Organizations gain a competitive advantage by being transparent in their employment practices. Because the job description provides guidance, everyone in the organization understands what is expected of them. Any deviation from the job description allows employers to correct employee actions through performance management, training and development or separation of employment. There are no surprises for all parties involved.

If utilized throughout the life of employment, a job description is a powerful tool that can aid managers. Managers have a road map that can help them with their duties of planning, leading, organizing, controlling and staffing. With a road map, the complexities of management become easier.

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