

## **The Importance of Job Descriptions**

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It is difficult to do a good job without the proper tools. So, most employers spend time and resources to make sure people have the tools necessary to do good work. Likewise, there are many important tools necessary to do a good job when evaluating employee performance. However, these tools are often out-of-date, hard to use or, worse yet, non-existent.

Performance evaluation is an objective process that measures how well an employee fulfills a position's requirements. Therefore, there must be an objective benchmark against which performance is measured. That benchmark is known as the Job Description – a summary of the knowledge, tasks, responsibilities and personal characteristics required of an individual in a specific position. In addition, under the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), job descriptions must also include physical demands and environmental exposures.

Creating effective job descriptions remains a challenging and often time consuming process. First, you need to collect information about the job. This process is called the Job Analysis. You should collect information from the incumbent and position supervisor, at a minimum. An "intake" form, with checklists, would also be very helpful at this stage. Once you have all the input, you may want to spend some time actually observing how the work is performed. This helps to verify the job's content, physical demands and work environment.

Next, organize the information you have gathered into two categories – tasks and responsibilities. Tasks are things physically accomplished by an employee – building things, repairing things, entering data, preparing reports, etc. Responsibilities are often associated with supervisory or management positions and may include assigning or checking work and ensuring that certain activities are carried out in a specified manner. Knowledge is education or training. Skills can be concrete things such as keyboarding skills or personal qualities like the ability to speak persuasively.

When we hear the words physical demands, we tend to think of activities requiring strength or significant exertion. However, in order to be ADA compliant, a job description must list all kinds of physical demands, including prolonged sitting, repetitive use of hands and fingers (typing), standing, stooping, bending, reaching, walking, etc. Environmental factors include such things as exposure to heat, cold, noise, etc. and apply to office positions and shop or industrial jobs.

The accepted writing style for job descriptions utilizes action-oriented short sentences that start with verbs or adverbs and contain a subject presumed to be "the worker." For example, a clerk's job description might include: "Accurately enters alpha-numeric information from vendor invoices into Accounts Payable database." While the word "accurately" is not entirely necessary, I recommend using descriptive adverbs where possible because *how* it's done often remains as important as *what* is done.

While developing job descriptions takes a lot of time and effort, it is worth it. Not only will they help you do a better job evaluating performance, they will also remain valuable during the hiring process, training and employee development.

If you would like a free Job Analysis intake form and/or a Job Description template, please contact me at the HR Help Line, 800-683-3440. The next article in this series will cover Performance Evaluation Forms – the good, the bad and the downright awful.