

## Do Your Managers Hate Writing Job Descriptions?

As an HR professional, you no doubt encounter foot-dragging, complaints, and many other bad reactions from managers who don't want to complete job descriptions for new positions—much less review and update their existing descriptions. Compensation firm Kenexa offered a webinar packed with helpful advice on the topic.

You know they're essential, right? It's most organizations' managers who'd just as soon skip writing job descriptions. Presenter Chuck Csizmar of the CMC Compensation Group began by reviewing the reasons job descriptions really matter:

They're crucial to the recruiting process.

They are a critical element in performance evaluations. Job titles can be very vague, but good job descriptions are specific. Says Csizmar, "Title inflation can be expensive, but a lack of accurate job descriptions encourages it."

They are a must-have piece of your rewards program, because they can help calibrate the differences among job classes.

They also help organizations complete their market pricing evaluation, expediting the process of comparing competitors' jobs with your own.

They define your organization's structure.

Here's what else is good about job descriptions: Recruiters depend on them, compensation strategists need them, employees expect them, and they form the basis for organizational development and succession planning. And one more thing: Management attorneys love them, says Csizmar.

They're especially important in determining the essential functions of a job, as must be done, for example, in determining whether an employee with a disability can perform them. And that's become even more important since Congress recently amended the Americans with Disabilities Act to expand the definition of disability. And employees want them, primarily because they see them as objective descriptions of what they should be doing, rather than reflecting biases or blind spots on the supervisor's part.

What approach should HR use with managers? Csizmar offered this important piece of advice for HR in training managers: The most important part of every job description, which should be at the beginning, is the purpose of the job. And, HR, don't be tempted to avoid all the complaints by writing the descriptions yourselves: You won't understand each job well enough to do a thorough, detailed document.

Managers want employees to write their own job descriptions? Bad idea. Employees tend to believe the rumor that better writers get better deals. And, many will inflate their own importance to the organization. Quipped Csizmar, "All hospital employees say their jobs are essential, because patients will die or be injured if their jobs are eliminated." But it is up to HR to provide managers with a template or format. "And don't shoot yourselves in the foot by making it too long or demand too much detail." Especially remember, he advises, to train managers to avoid confusing tasks with responsibilities.

In many jobs, simply describing the responsibilities is enough—employees can decide how best to meet them. Csizmar believes a good format should be no longer than two pages, with blanks in which managers can fill in information about the job's purpose and a bulleted list of responsibilities and the few tasks it may be important to include. He advises that there should

be a minimum of four responsibilities, and no more than eight (or they're likely to be tasks). Begin each one with a verb—"Plan," "Design," "Implement," "Coordinate," for example. As far as possible, avoid the phrase "Assist with," because it lacks clarity about who's responsible for which part of the process.

What else is in a job description? Managers should be given areas to list such candidate qualifications as the average amount of experience desired, what knowledge and skills are required, and how much education candidates should have. Csizmar cautions that managers are prone to exaggerate both the amount of experience and the educational levels needed for many jobs. Strive to limit experience required to the lowest possible, such as 3 years, for all but the most technical or senior-level positions. And automatically requiring a 4-year college degree is usually a mistake anywhere but academia.

How can you demonstrate its importance to the job? Do candidates need supervisory experience? Are working conditions at all unusual? If so, describe them in the document, says Csizmar. What laws do the candidate need to comply with, such as OSHA and Title VII of Civil Rights law? Further, HR should train managers to write and/or update each description using the assumption that there is currently no incumbent in the job. Otherwise, the description may mirror the jobholder rather than the job. Csizmar advises HR to keep the format short, provide simple instructions, and make good use of a job descriptions resource (BLR offers hundreds of sample job descriptions in its Job Descriptions Manager).

Two last bits of advice: Train managers to delay writing the purpose of the job until they've finished everything else. And update all job descriptions either annually or every 18 months.