

Make sure your job descriptions fit your company's culture

Use language that reflects your workplace and don't forget updates

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Part 2 of a 2-part series on how to develop good job descriptions.

Job descriptions can vary from short lists to in-depth manuals. But regardless of how they are organized, simply creating one can help clarify roles and improve your business practices.

"Very rarely do people put the time in to do them and it causes all kinds of trouble because there are no clear expectations set out," says Mark Wardell, president of Wardell Professional Development in Vancouver and Toronto.

Each description is unique to the company and role but there are some general ideas you can follow to get started.

Set the tone

Use a job description to set the tone of the work environment. If the culture is very proper, write in full paragraphs and formal language, says Cissy Pau, principal consultant of Clear HR Consulting Inc. in Vancouver. Similarly, a more informal office can use more casual language. "If you're a small business with two employees and it's a really casual, fun environment then having that really proper, stuffy language might not set the tone properly," she says.

Divide it up

The page length of job descriptions varies, depending on how you want to organize them. To keep descriptions short and sweet, break them into different documents. Usually, basic job outlines are about one to two pages in length says Pau. To "explain the ins and outs of the position" create a second more detailed document.

Wardell recommends one document that is broken up into two parts. The first half answers the 'what do you do' question. First, create a detailed checklist with three columns. The first column lists all the required tasks: for example, 'answer phone calls.' The second outlines time considerations — 'answer the phone within two or three rings.' Finally, the third gives a brief explanation of how to do the task. An example in this section may be: 'a script of how to answer the phone properly.' Notes Wardell: "You want to keep the list because that way people can absorb it," he says. A more detailed explanation of tasks, such as the software or how to fill out forms, would be in a separate document.

The 'performance objective,' as Wardell refers to the second half of the document, is an explanation of the goals of the job. Outline three to six mutually agreed upon, big-picture goals that you want to reach by the end of the year. Whether it's increasing the number of clients or deposits to accounts, this will help identify how successful the year has been, he says. "The rest is mechanics," Wardell says. "The performance objective humanizes the whole thing."

Keep it relevant

To make the job description effective use it and keep it relevant. "Job descriptions are a living document," says Pau. They should be continuously updated and modified as employees go through performance reviews. They should also be reviewed when training new members, she says.

Updating a job description once a year in a performance review is an important part of keeping the description relevant. You can review and modify the assigned tasks while also making sure that team members are on board and agree with the responsibilities, says Wardell.

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