



# Practitioner's Guide:

## Formulating effective job descriptions



Deutsche Gesellschaft für  
Technische Zusammenarbeit  
(GTZ) GmbH



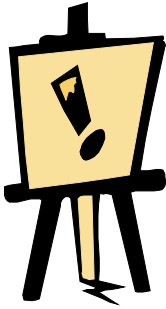
Bundesministerium für  
wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit  
und Entwicklung



Jabatan Perhutanan  
Semenanjung Malaysia

### Formulating effective job descriptions

#### Brief Description



Well-prepared job descriptions embody information that can be useful in all the classical functions of management: planning, organizing, staffing, leading and controlling. In short, it is a practical, relatively simple tool, that supports personnel management and employee communication everyday. The “position specification” or better known as the job description is squared one of the hiring process and leads to the hiring of the right candidates.

The need for effective human resource management is not specific to any organisation, some local regulations may call attention to the importance of current, complete and correct job descriptions. Accurate job descriptions can be very useful when an employee, applicant or government agency wishes to hire good personnel. In some cases job descriptions may even prove useful in the event that disputes arise between the employer and the employee in an organisation.

Although written job descriptions are helpful in keeping management practices consistent with local rules and regulations, they may not necessarily be required by the organisation or by the national laws and regulations. Probably the most substantial benefits of job descriptions are realized through better management decisions and employer-employee relations.

Figure 1: Good ideas for a job description.....



Figure 2: ...have to be well formulated



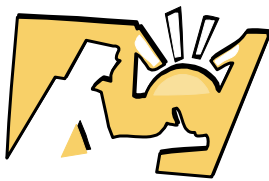
### Formulating effective job descriptions

#### Proposed Main Users

Government organisations, project managers,  
human resource managers, public sector officers.



#### Purpose of the Method



Job descriptions are required for recruitment so that recruiter and the applicant can understand their roles. It defines a person's role and accountability. Without a job description it is not possible for a person to properly commit to, or be held accountable for actions and results. Job descriptions improve an organization's ability to manage people and their roles. It also provides people with the opportunity to describe their general expectations of an employee. It gives weight to the employer's judgement as to what functions of a job are essential, especially if stated in a written description prepared for recruitment or selection.

- ▶ A job description is a broad statement of the types of a worker's responsibilities. In addition to helping organisations to find the employee they need, job descriptions are used for training, evaluation, promotion and accountability purposes.
- ▶ It is important to think of the job description as the "recipe" for creating a potential candidate. If the "recipe" is flawed, the end result will be flawed.
- ▶ For new jobs, the draft of the job description helps management to better understand the need for someone to fill a specific role.
- ▶ Human resources department staff often use the job description to set the salary scales, unless these are determined through the government. Typically, Human resources department uses the information in the job description to assess the complexity of the job, compare this job with others in the organization and in the job market, to determine what an appropriate salary and benefits package should be.
- ▶ Job descriptions are often posted on internal and on-line bulletin boards as a means of recruiting qualified candidates. Because job descriptions are usually longer than advertisements, they job description serve as very useful source material for formulating advertisements.

### Formulating effective job descriptions

#### Advantages



- ▶ Clarifies employer expectations; provides basis of measuring job performance and a clear description of roles and responsibilities.
- ▶ Provides a structure and discipline for an organisation to arrange all jobs and ensure necessary activities and responsibilities are covered.
- ▶ Provides continuity of role parameters irrespective of manager interpretation.
- ▶ Enables pay and grading systems to be structured fairly and logically.
- ▶ Prevents arbitrary interpretation of role content by employee and employer and manager.
- ▶ Essential reference tool in issues of employee/employer dispute or for discipline issues.
- ▶ Provides important reference points for training and development.
- ▶ Provides neutral and objective (as opposed to subjective or arbitrary) reference points for appraisals, performance reviews and counselling.
- ▶ Enables organisation to structure and manage roles in a uniform way, thus increasing efficiency and effectiveness of recruitment, training and development, organisational structure, work flow and activities, customer service, etc.

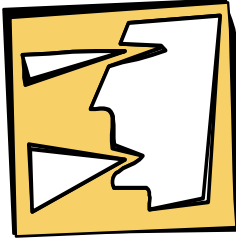
#### Limitations



- ▶ Many employers simply have not recognized that clear representations of what jobs entail are fundamental to aspects of careful personal management.
- ▶ A common objection to the use of written job descriptions stems from concern about losing flexibility to manage, especially when technology or other conditions are fast changing.
- ▶ Employers do not want their very written words to restrict their right to direct what workers do on the job or how they do it.
- ▶ The legendary, "that's not in my job description," however, need not be a problem to any employer making reasonable assignments to workers.
- ▶ Many employers do not use written job descriptions because the task of developing them is either too uncertain or the task is difficult to complete.

# Formulating effective job descriptions

### Principles & General Procedures



### Basics of formulating a job description

A job description has to be an integral part of the work of human resources group in an organisation. It is necessary to write job descriptions for every position in the organisation. There is a need to differentiate out between internal and external jobs.

**Internal Job Descriptions Versus External Job Descriptions:** There are internal job descriptions that are for insider use only and there are external job descriptions that will be read by prospective candidates. The former is very thorough and complete. The latter is an abridged version of the internal job description, typically with more of a marketing touch to it.

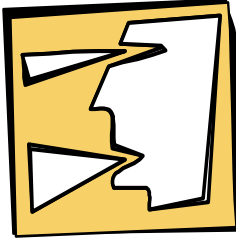
**High Level Objective of a Job Description:** Many different people use a job description, but the main objective is that it should provide a comprehensive picture of the purpose, requirements and context of the job. To do that, it needs to be written clearly in simple language, contain information but not opinions or judgements, and avoid using words with “company specific” meanings. A well-written comprehensive job description for a management position might typically be about three to five pages in length.

The following tips are designed to help write a “good” job description.

1. **Date Completed:** date when the job description was completed.
2. **Job Title / Position title:** Create and list a title for the job that bears some resemblance to the actual function of the job. It is not always enough to call people a consultant or an associate. The title and the position specification should express a unified vision for the role and its responsibilities.
3. **Reporting Relationship:** Name the position to whom this role will report and what positions, if any, this role will supervise. Are there secondary, or dotted-line reporting relationships involved? Are there dual-reporting relationships, perhaps administrative and functional? Give the prospective employee a sense of place in the organisation. It should be clear to the prospective employee what rung on the corporate ladder they might occupy. On the other hand, if the organisation has a flat structure, this should also be conveyed.
4. **Prepared By:** Name of individual(s) preparing the description.
5. **System of approval and approved by:** Name of individual who has final approval and budgetary authority. In addition, it would be important to highlight the general procedure for approval so that the process is transparent for both the employer and employee.

### Formulating effective job descriptions

#### Principles & General Procedures

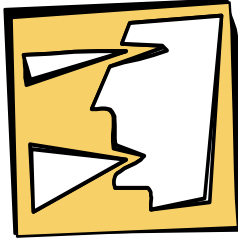


6. **Work Schedule:** Reference could be made to the need to actual working hours. In the event that regular overtime will be required and work during the weekends special mention of this should be made here.
7. **Job Objectives:** A brief description that summarizes the function of the position within the department.
8. **Key Responsibilities:** This is the heart of the job description and describes clearly and concisely the essential duties and responsibilities of the position. Key points to remember:
  - ▶ List the key areas of responsibility in descending order, with the responsibility requiring the most amount of time or of greatest importance coming first. A position will be classified based on the emphasis of the job's function, not the importance or perceived value of that particular function.
  - ▶ Describe duties and responsibilities as they presently exist or are expected to exist. If preparing a description for a new position, the department should feel relatively comfortable that the proposed duties and function of the position are accurately represented.
  - ▶ Make use of information contained in trainer needs assessments or in organisational review studies and reports. These describe the type of job profiles that will be required by the organisation.
9. **Non-Essential Functions:** This section lists parts of the job that are not essential
10. **Experience:** There is a need to define the experience that is necessary to do the job. Specifically, what should an employee know in order to fulfil the expectations and meet the basic requirements of the job. Consider each element of the position's responsibilities, and whether carrying out these responsibilities requires previous experience.

The precise skills and knowledge necessary to do a job well may not be apparent to all employees. By setting the criteria the organisation can ensure that everyone is speaking the same language and has the same understanding. This can prevent misunderstandings, and mistakes in hiring.

### Formulating effective job descriptions

#### Principles & General Procedures



**11 Competencies:** The competencies that are necessary to do the job successfully and work within the team and the organisation properly have to be clearly defined. Competencies are also referred to as 'soft skills' - the **abilities to communicate, adapt** easily to new situations, **solve problems**, and make strategic decisions are all competencies. This section focuses on the knowledge, skills, and abilities, including specific physical and mental abilities, where relevant, that are necessary to perform the tasks identified. To satisfy legal requirements, specific physical and/or mental requirements that are essential parts of the job (lifting, standing for extended periods of time, attention to detail, hearing, carrying, moving, pushing/pulling, climbing, etc.), should be described clearly and precisely and should include frequency.

**12. All descriptions should include the following statement:** *"Note: The organisation reserves the right to change or reassign job duties, or combine positions at any time."*

**13. Job Location Duty Station:** The location where the employee will typically report. This section should also include the following statement, "Travel within our district service area as well as other organisation areas in neighbouring districts will (or may) be required."

**14. Compensation Range:** Highlights how much the position pays. In Government organisations this is determined by the Government pay scales. In other organisations it is determined according to the available budget, the market, the benefits the organisation can offer, and the salaries of other employees to determine how much the position should be paid. While the compensation range for the position need not be publicised, it is a critical element of the position specification as it may serve to **disqualify potential candidates**, and may prevent a lot of wasted time spent on candidates who would never agree to the terms of the salary. It can also **weed out candidates** who make too little at their current job.

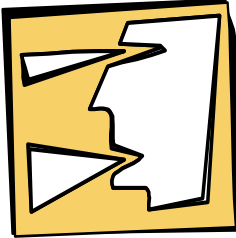
**15. Equipment:** List the equipment that the employee will use in the course of their job, e.g., PCs, printers, copiers, fax machine, etc.

**Final Check:** When the Job-Description has been completed, check:

- ▶ The layout
- ▶ Spelling
- ▶ That the wording makes sense and the job is well explained
- ▶ That there is no unnecessary jargon
- ▶ That the facts are correct and complete check against the checklist

### Formulating effective job descriptions

#### Principles & General Procedures



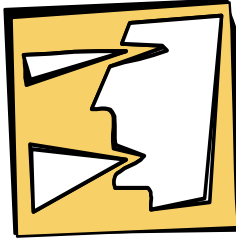
#### Some useful hints for writing sentences for job descriptions

- ▶ Use clear and concise language.
- ▶ Use words that have a single meaning.
- ▶ Use examples / explanations for words which have varying interpretations
- ▶ Use non-technical language whenever possible. A good job description explains the objectives, duties, and responsibilities of a job so that they are understandable even to a layperson.
- ▶ Use telegraphic sentence style (implied subject / verb / object / explanatory phrase). Avoid unnecessary words.
- ▶ Keep sentence structure as simple as possible; omit all words that don't contribute necessary information.
- ▶ Begin each sentence with an active verb, always use the present tense.
- ▶ Whenever possible, describe the desired outcome of the work, rather than the method for accomplishing that outcome. For example, instead of "writes down phone messages" - a task-oriented approach – one might say "accurately records phone messages".
- ▶ Avoid words, such as "handles," that don't tell specifically what the employee does. Others one may want to avoid: "checks," "prepares," "examines," "sends." If these words are the most accurate and specific ones available, it may be acceptable to use them. But if a more specific term would describe the task more clearly, use it.
- ▶ Use generic terms instead of proprietary names ("MS-Word" "Windows," etc.).
- ▶ Avoid using gender based language.
- ▶ Qualify whenever possible. Don't just say that a file clerk "files" materials; say that s/he "files alphabetically."



## Formulating effective job descriptions

### Principles & General Procedures



### Guidelines

The following guiding questionse can be used in order to undertake the preliminary job description. By answering the questions the writer is helped to ensure that all of the main points that need to be encompassed in a good job description are taken into consideration. The questionnaire should not be seen as being exhaustive, there will be other elements necessary and these will vary from between organisations.

### Guiding questions for Job Descriptions

**Instructions:** The following questionnaire may help organizations during the job description formulation process. The answers to the question will prove helpful in designing a job description. Please note that you may need more room to complete the questions than provided in this format, the format is to be used as a guideline.

1. Describe the job title? \_\_\_\_\_
2. In what department is the job located? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is the title of the supervisor or manager to whom the jobholder must report?  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Does the jobholder supervise other employees? If so, give their job titles and a brief description of their responsibilities.

Position Supervised	Responsibilities
_____	_____

5. What essential function duties does the jobholder perform regularly? List them in order of importance.

Duty
1. _____
2. _____

6. Does the jobholder perform other duties periodically? Infrequently? If so, please list, indicating frequency.

7. How often if the job holder given:

	Constantly	Frequently	Infrequently	Seldom
Supervision				
Instructions				
Discretionary Authority				
Authority over others				

8. What are the working conditions? List such items as noise, heat, outside work, and exposure to bad weather.

9. How much authority does the jobholder have in such matters as training or guiding other people?

10. How much education, experience, and skill are required for satisfactory job performance?

11. At what stage is the jobholder's work reviewed by the supervisor?

12. What machines or equipment is the jobholder responsible for operating?

13. If the jobholder makes a serious mistake or error in performing required duties, what would be the cost to management?

*(Adapted from: Free Job Descriptions; Alan Chapman, 2002 & Job Descriptions: Personal Assistance Section, Texas Association of Counties, 2000)*

### Formulating effective job descriptions

#### References and Sources Used



**Sarah E. Smith**, September 1999; Letter Perfect: The Ins and Outs of Writing Job Descriptions, Restaurants USA

**Saul Carliner**, 2002; The Commerce of Content, Manager's Toolkit: Communicating about Performance (Job Descriptions)

**Nicole C Moss**, May 2002; Monster Human Resources: Writing Job Descriptions, NetWork

**Melody Downs and June Littlefield**, September 2001; Job Descriptions, Polson Business Advocate, Lake County Job Service Workforce Center, Volume 3, Spring/Summer 2001

**The Many Uses of A Job Description:**  
[www.all-biz.com/articles/jd.htm](http://www.all-biz.com/articles/jd.htm)

**Free Management Library on Employee Job Descriptions:**  
[www.mapnp.org/library/staffing/specify/job\\_descjob\\_desc.htm](http://www.mapnp.org/library/staffing/specify/job_descjob_desc.htm)

**Writing Effective Job Descriptions:**  
[www.onlinewbc.gov/Docs/manage/descriptions.html](http://www.onlinewbc.gov/Docs/manage/descriptions.html)