



Job Worth Doing: Update Descriptions

The basic job description is the foundation of nearly every HR function.

By Kathryn Tyler
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Jill Bidwell, PHR, senior HR generalist at hydraulic manufacturer Sauer-Danfoss in Ames, Iowa, says her colleagues jokingly call her “the queen of job descriptions.”

“I do have a passion for them,” she admits. “I preach to all our managers and HR staff that the job description is the mother of all HR processes. Everything from recruitment and training to performance evaluations and compensation all stems from that document. Once they understand all of the various facets of the employment life cycle the job description touches, they take it a lot more seriously and put more thought into it. It’s not just a compliance exercise.



“Ideally, what is put in the job description can create a job posting and performance goals. It walks into a development plan for training you need. From a rewards perspective, it helps us benchmark other jobs,” Bidwell says. In the Ames facility, she supports 1,000 of the 6,500 employees Sauer-Danfoss employs globally.

Janet Flewelling, director of HR operations at Insperity, an HR service provider headquartered in Houston, agrees: “Job descriptions can have so much value if used regularly and appropriately. If you have an up-to-date job description, you can use it for recruiting, performance management and compensation.”

Despite the importance of job descriptions, very few HR professionals have a regular policy for updating them, says Michael R. Kannisto, Ph.D., SPHR, director of talent management and acquisition at JLG Industries Inc. in Hagerstown, Md., and chair of a workgroup developing a voluntary standard for job descriptions.

Updating descriptions is sometimes “the last thing on the list to tackle because there are so many other issues that require HR’s time and attention,” says Cathy Maddox, SPHR, HR coordinator at Lincoln Surgical Hospital in Lincoln, Neb. But revising job descriptions “is very important, especially when you are hiring people,” Maddox adds.

The Risks

Unfortunately, job descriptions often aren’t viewed as living documents. Once completed, they may be relegated to dusty three-ring binders or long-unopened text documents. Experts say this is a mistake.

For example, “If you don’t keep it up-to-date and you have [an employment] claim against you, that nonupdated job description can do as

much damage as a good one could benefit you. It can work to help in your defense or it can work to help the employee” filing the grievance, Flewelling says.

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Kannisto adds, "With the compliance environment and legal implications, the stakes are a lot higher for job descriptions to be crystal clear with essential responsibilities. If you have a measure of performance that doesn't appear on the job description and you have a case brought against you, depending on the agency [involved], there could be punishment," he explains.

Legal implications aside, "you aren't operating your business as efficiently as possible" if you don't keep job descriptions current, Kannisto says. "Job descriptions help with workforce planning. You can see how talent flows through the organization and holistically how it all fits together."

"Having a bad job description is worse than [having] none at all," asserts Tracy McCarthy, senior vice president of HR at SilkRoad, a talent management organization headquartered in Chicago.

The Timing

How often should job descriptions be reviewed and updated? Once a year at a minimum, experts say. But circumstances might call for more-frequent updates.

If nothing significant happens throughout the year, "once a year, to coincide with the performance review process, is a great time to update," Flewelling advises.

That's what happens at Sauer-Danfoss. "We have employee reviews on a calendar year. After we finish the reviews, we set goals and objectives for the next review period. During that time, we update job descriptions," Bidwell explains.

"If you are a growing or changing organization, it's likely that you'll have to do it more often," McCarthy says. Because SilkRoad is "always evolving," for example, it updated descriptions about three times during 2011. A great opportunity to update is when you are hiring for a position, Flewelling adds.

If there is a change to the job, do not wait until an annual review to make alterations. Updating job descriptions "should be an ongoing process anytime something significant changes," says Lindsay A. Nienhuser Barton, SPHR, human resources director for industrial explosives manufacturer Dyno Nobel Inc., in Cheyenne, Wyo.

Even if a job and an incumbent employee have not changed, or even if incremental changes have been made to the description annually, HR professionals may still want to consider a complete job description overhaul every so often. When Kannisto and his task force went through the process of creating HR job description standards, they explored job descriptions from the 1800s up to the present. He says it became clear which ones were written in which decade.

"The element of the culture and the words you use are obvious a decade later," Kannisto says. He compared it to watching a World War II movie made in the 1960s: Even though the movie is about the 1940s, the film quality, the colors, the hairstyles and other minor details date the film. If you read a job description for a longtime employee, it will sound dated if it has been fine-tuned only annually, he notes.

Everyone Has a Role

Creating and maintaining job descriptions should involve employees, managers and HR. Each person has a role, often with overlapping responsibilities.

Employees. "Obviously, the person performing the work has the best idea of the scope and size of the job," Kannisto says.

"Employees can vouch for what they actually do and should have input into their descriptions," McCarthy agrees. "However, the manager must also be a part of this process to ensure that the responsibilities and requirements are aligned with actual activities." **We use cookies to improve your browsing experience on our website, and we use our own, as well as third-party cookies, to display advertising that is relevant to your interests. By closing this message or continuing to browse this site, you agree to the use of cookies in accordance with our [Cookie Policy](#).**

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Managers. At Sauer-Danfoss, managers use a template to write or update job descriptions that are reviewed by HR, Bidwell says. The manager is in charge of keeping descriptions up-to-date when someone leaves and as part of the performance management process.

At Lincoln Surgical Hospital, “HR would never assume that they know more about the position than the person who is actually doing the job or managing the job. The manager is asked for his input. HR will then put the information into the standardized format and send that back to the manager for his approval or input on further changes,” Maddox says.

HR professionals. “HR’s responsibility is to coach and facilitate the process of updating,” Barton says.

It’s only natural that HR “owns” job descriptions, Kannisto says, because “a job description touches so many pieces of the organization—recruiting, succession planning, training, legal, compliance. HR is the only one who can be responsible for that.”

While HR professionals may not know the essential functions of every position, they are in a unique position to see how each job description fits into the larger organization and the organization’s legal obligations.

For example, HR can “look for consistencies across departments to compare similar jobs to set up consistent wording and responsibility levels,” Flewelling says. In addition, “HR is responsible for keeping [job descriptions] alive and using them during recruiting and performance processes.” She notes that HR is also responsible for ensuring that job descriptions comply with the Fair Labor Standards Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act.

At Sauer-Danfoss, “HR’s role is to review the job description and see if it makes sense in layman’s terms,” Bidwell says. “Because we’re a manufacturing company, we employ a lot of engineers who like to speak technically. We want to look at specific skill sets and understand the reasons why those exist.”

Potential Problems

Alexandra LeBlanc, lead sourcing specialist at Seven Step RPO, a recruitment outsourcing firm in Boston, places job description maintenance into a larger context. “Keep an open line of communication with employees so you’re aware of incremental changes as they occur. Keeping job descriptions current isn’t just about redefining a role. It’s also about understanding how and why job functions are changing, and anticipating any possible job description updates to reflect those changes.”

What if an employee’s job description and daily tasks do not match? Experts say employees should be encouraged to ask HR for a job description review if there appear to be inconsistencies between what the job description says and what they do. These situations need to be handled carefully, however, and with the manager’s input.

At Sauer-Danfoss, “when we get requests from employees to review a job description, we direct them back through their leader,” Bidwell says. “We ask the leader to come to HR to work through the issue. If someone feels they aren’t being recognized for extra work they are doing or the scope of their job has expanded, we can have a conversation with the leader to validate that and, if necessary, update the description. We can adjust compensation appropriately at that time.”

Bidwell adds that it is important to review the job description and not just match the description to the person currently doing the job.

Kannisto concurs, warning “You should not build a job description around an individual. If an employee brings an enhanced skill set to the job, that does not mean that those special skills need to be written into the job description or the compensation needs to be increased, unless you determine that this is a core element of the job.”

If, upon review, the job description turns out to be accurate, there is an opportunity to have a discussion about whether the employee is

spending time doing something that isn’t part of the job, Flewelling says. If the employee argues that his or her qualifications are much higher than what is in the job description, that’s time to have a discussion about how the employee can move up in the organization to take better advantage of his skills or education.”

Similarly, LeBlanc says, "HR should be aware of any inconsistencies with workload distribution and raise the issue accordingly. If there is one employee doing the work of many, or employees who are unable or unwilling to do what's asked of them, there needs to be serious discussion about each job description, function and how those fit in with the business goals."

Flewelling concludes, "If you regularly use a job description, rather than just have one on file, you're more likely to keep it up-to-date. If you pull out a job description every time you work on performance reviews, compensation planning, succession planning, training and development needs, you are a lot more likely to maintain it."

The author is a freelance writer and former HR generalist and trainer in Wixom, Mich.

Web Extras

- **SHRM How-To Guide:** How to Develop a Job Description
(www.shrm.org/TemplatesTools/HowtoGuides/Pages/DevelopaJobDescription.aspx)
- **SHRM HR Q&A:** How do I conduct a job analysis to ensure the job description actually matches the duties performed by the employee in the job? (www.shrm.org/templatestools/hrqa/pages/conductjobanalysis.aspx)
- **HR Standards:** Human Resource Management Standards (www.shrm.org/hrstandards/Pages/default.aspx)

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