



# The SCOOP

MAY 2020

## Job Descriptions That Reduce Organizational Risk

Job descriptions are at the foundation of many HR processes and decisions. They establish the minimum qualifications for entry into a job, document responsibilities and physical requirements, and provide information on reporting relationships. Job descriptions are used to create ads for open jobs, evaluate job levels, determine FLSA status and a competitive level of compensation, and identify career ladders.

Inaccurate or out-of-date job descriptions can increase organizational risks in a number of areas:

### Legal Risk

- Incorrectly categorizing a job as Exempt rather than Nonexempt
- Increased exposure to a claim of discrimination or a failure to provide reasonable accommodations

### Turnover Risk

- Increased turnover due to a misalignment between job responsibilities in the job description and actual responsibilities (resulting in compensation gaps)



### Reputational Risk

- Employees and candidates viewing the organization negatively due to grossly out-of-date job descriptions

Clear, accurate and up-to-date job descriptions effectively support HR processes and reduce organizational risk.

Best practice job descriptions typically include the sections identified below. Including this information can ensure your job descriptions are effective.

### ACCURATE JOB TITLE

Strong titles are descriptive, gender free and simple. The title describes the nature and level of work performed so that it depicts the function (administrative, lending, accounting, etc.) and the level (assistant, specialist, coordinator, analyst, etc.).

## REPORTING RELATIONSHIPS

Including the title of the supervisor of the job and the titles of any jobs that the job supervises ensures the reader understands the organizational hierarchy.

## JOB SUMMARY

The job summary explains, in clear and simple language, why the job exists. Ideally, the job summary is brief: two to four sentences in length.

## ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS

This section is arguably one of the most important sections of a job description. It provides a description of the essential functions that incumbents are responsible for performing.

It is the foundation for:

- Developing interview questions
- Determining required knowledge and skills
- Selecting the strongest candidate
- Establishing performance goals
- Creating individual development plans

Strong essential function statements are succinctly written and include enough detail so that someone not familiar with the job can understand what the job does. Effective essential function statements generally start with an action verb that describes what the incumbent does. The vast majority of jobs can be summarized into ten or fewer essential functions.

Language that doesn't describe the essential function and level of work should not be included. For instance, it is assumed that all tasks are done in a timely manner and with a high level of accuracy. Therefore, the need for accuracy and timely work does not need to be stated in the job description.

A best practice is to only include essential functions that account for at least 5% of the incumbent's time. Anything less than 5% can typically be covered under a disclaimer statement at the end such as "Other duties as assigned to meet the needs of the organization." This disclaimer statement addresses the issue of employees asking that every individual task be placed in the job description and allows flexibility for management. There is no need to include a percentage of time to this disclaimer statement.

### Action Verbs to Describe Essential Functions

*Compiles*  
*Monitors*  
*Tracks*  
*Directs*  
*Analyzes*  
*Researches*  
*Develops*  
*Determines*  
*Recommends*  
*Summarizes*  
*Coordinates*



## MINIMUM QUALIFICATIONS

This section contains the minimum level of education and experience required for entry into the job. It is important to list what education and experience are absolutely necessary to perform the essential duties of the job, rather than the qualifications of the current incumbent, or what would be nice to have.

A statement such as "Or an equivalent combination of education and experience sufficient to perform the essential functions of the job" allows employees to meet the minimum requirements in a number of different ways and reduces the potential for legal challenge.

## KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

This section documents the knowledge and skills necessary for entry into the job. Strong job descriptions ensure the knowledge and skills align with the essential functions.

Knowledge refers to the possession of concepts and information gained through experience, training and/or education. Skills refer to a proficiency which can be demonstrated. Defining the level of knowledge and skill necessary for entry into the job further strengthens the job description.

## PHYSICAL REQUIREMENTS

This section includes the physical requirements (standing, talking, hearing, seeing, reaching, keyboarding, etc.) and nature of work (sedentary, light, heavy) as described by the ADA. Only the physical requirements to perform essential functions should be included. For instance, a an Accountant may occasionally refill the paper in the central printer, however, refilling the paper is likely not an essential function of the job, and the ability to lift 25 pounds (to carry a box of paper to the printer) should not be included in the physical requirements. Having accurate physical requirements documented is essential when considering accommodations for a candidate or employee.

## DATE

Including a date on the job description records the date the job description was last revised. This helps for record keeping and legal compliance.

## SUMMARY

In looking at your job descriptions, you may find that you simply need to tweak a few things here and there in order to ensure HR processes are supported and risk mitigated.

If you determine that job descriptions need to be re-written, we suggest having your employees complete a position description questionnaire (PDQ) to collect information about current job content, reporting relationships, knowledge, skills and minimum qualifications. Supervisors should then review, edit and approve the PDQ before a formal job description is written, ideally by a HR professional with solid writing skills and who understands the elements of an effective job description.

[View example of a strong job description.](#)

If you need assistance in updating or preparing new job descriptions, please contact Beth Ostrem.

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