

5.9: Job Descriptions

Learning Outcomes

- Identify the elements of a job description
- Differentiate among job analysis, job descriptions and job specifications

A job description is a written statement of what a position entails: what is done, how it's done and under what conditions. Wright State University's Human Resources department notes that "when well-written, [a job description] produces a realistic picture of a job and answers the question, "What does the person in this role actually do?"^[1] In addition to describing the responsibilities of the position, a job description is the primary reference document for recruiting and evaluation. To that point, WSU notes it "sets the stage for optimum work performance by clarifying responsibilities, expected results, and evaluation of performance." As is true of a job analysis, a job description should be "incumbent neutral;" that is, a classification of the position, without reference to a specific person in that position.

Elements of a Job Description

Although layouts vary, job descriptions generally include the following elements:

- **Job Title.** Job title and other reference information such as a job code.
- **Reporting Relationships.** Identification of the department the job is a part of, the position the role reports to and any supervisory responsibilities (i.e., number of staff supervised).
- **Job Summary.** A brief (1–2 sentence) overview of the role, including its purpose, level and scope of responsibility.
- **Essential Functions.** A representative description of the essential tasks, duties and responsibilities of the position. Although in templates this section is often titled "Job Duties and Responsibilities," using the terminology "essential functions" reinforces the point that these are considered "must have" capabilities. That is, they are required for the successful performance of the job and cannot be modified. For fairness and legal defensibility, these should include all but only those specific skills or abilities that are necessary. Employers who do not have job descriptions with current, defensible essential functions may find themselves unable to defend against a claim of discrimination.
- **Job Specifications.** This section identifies the minimum acceptable qualifications for the job including education, experience, and specialized knowledge or skills, if applicable. If applicable, a job description may also list a few preferred qualifications, which may reflect a preference for additional education, experience, knowledge, skills or ability. For example, the job may specify a minimum of a bachelor's degree but list a preference for a master's degree or a Human Resource certification.

For a point of reference, refer to Workforce's sample job description for a HR Manager. For perspective, CareerBuilder states that "the key to writing effective job descriptions is to find the perfect balance between providing enough detail so candidates understand the role and your company while keeping your description concise," noting that job descriptions that range between 700 and 2,000 characters receive up to 30% more responses.^[2] Potential shortcut: SHRM offers members free sample [job description templates](#) organized by title and function.

Practice Question

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Job Analysis vs. Job Descriptions vs. Job Specifications

A job analysis is an internal document that serves as the basis for both job descriptions and job specifications. As discussed in the prior section, a job description summarizes key details of the job, including its purpose, essential functions and job specifications. Job specifications are a subset of the job description that detail the minimum acceptable qualifications for the job. For an illustration of this, refer to Table 1.

Table 1. Job Analysis produces a Job Description and Job Specifications

Job Description	Job Specifications
Job Title	Qualifications

Job Description	Job Specifications
Job Location	Experience
Job Summary/Duties/Responsibilities	Training
Reporting to	Skills
Working conditions/Hazards	Emotional Characteristics

A key distinction is that the details listed under job description are not personal; they are aspects of the job. That is, the job description is what is to be done. Job specifications reflect what's required to complete the job and are personal in the sense that each candidate or employee will have a different job specification profile or combination of education, experience and expertise. Note that a job description may also feed back into the job analysis as a source document when a job is being reviewed or updated.

? Practice question

<https://assessments.lumenlearning.co...essments/18148>

1. "[Writing an Effective Job Description](#)." Wright State University. Accessed September 12, 2019. ↵
2. "[How to Write a Job Description](#)." Indeed. Accessed September 12, 2019. ↵

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