

# WHY JOB DESCRIPTIONS DON'T WORK & WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

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## *THE SEVEN ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE JOB DESCRIPTION*

By Wayne R. Berry, CMC, © 2010 Aquarius International Corporation

Most job descriptions (position descriptions, if you prefer) in the United States are inadequate at best and close to being worthless. It is no wonder we get marginal performance, lack of personal accountability, and have difficulty finding “just the right person” for the job. If we, as executives and managers, don't have a clear vision of what is expected, how can we possibly communicate it to an employee or an applicant? If we cannot or do not communicate it properly to generate mutual understanding, how can we possibly expect superior performance?

It is the purpose of this paper to discuss the critical elements of an effective job description, the definition of these elements, how they are designed and integrated, and how to use the completed document to significantly reduce employee turnover and increase worker productivity. Properly developed and implemented, an employer can reasonably expect to obtain a performance improvement of 5% to 15% of payroll.

But let's start at the beginning.

Way back in his neophyte years as a manager, this writer was convinced that job descriptions were invented by HR departments to justify their own existence. Yup, really believed it! Was he ever wrong. Like you, perhaps, he thought “If the manager knows what is wanted (questionable assumption), and the employee agrees to it, what’s the problem? They just are expected to DO it.” Or perhaps he echoed the response of many a business owner, supervisor or manager: “Their job description is to do what I tell them to.”

So let’s look at these various elements, and as we go through the process, silently grade yourself on how well you are doing in your organization. Some of your people problems and HR issues may come to light.

**POSITION TITLE:** Indicate the title of the position. No problem here. Everyone seems to do this correctly (although some titles are questionable).

**ELEMENT #1: EFFECTIVE DATE:** Really, a no brainer. Yet, fully 40% of the JDs observed by this reviewer over the years have not identified this key element. Content changes over time and in many cases we question “which one of these is currently in effect?”

**ELEMENT #2: BASIC FUNCTION:** Observed in only 15-20% of the cases (larger firms do a better job here than the smaller organizations), this is one or two sentences which explains the overview of why the job exists and what is expected to happen (in very broad terms) as a result of someone functioning in this position. If no specific function can be identified, the job should probably not be on the payroll and any incumbent is almost always doomed to failure. At best, performance will be marginal.

**ELEMENT #3: REPORTING RELATIONSHIPS:** No problem here – or is there? It’s quite common, almost universal, to indicate to whom (by position) the incumbent reports. Equally common is overlooking the other two components of reporting relationships: 1) those subordinates report directly to this function (supervisory), and 2) the relationship between peers within the organization (functional, not supervisory relationships)? This will eliminate the problem of an employee having too many bosses (with conflicting requests).

**ELEMENT #4: AUTHORITY:** Missing from virtually all standard job descriptions, authority is defined as having the power to make decisions and to take action within prescribed limitations without the need for specific prior approval. (Examples may include hiring/firing authority, pricing authority, check signing authority, purchasing authority, etc.) Most authorities are limited authorities except for CEOs of privately held firms. Without establishing the authority parameters, the incumbent cannot be charged with accountability and lines form at the boss’s door “to get permission”, a major time waster of executive talent.

In the authority section of the job description, authorities are generally written as: “Has the authority to .....”. *Example: (The incumbent) has the authority to hire, fire, discipline, or recommend changes in compensation for those reporting directly and within established company policy.*

**ELEMENT #5: RESPONSIBILITY:** Here is where most job descriptions fall apart. The vast majority of job descriptions written in the United States (and even some of the templates sold on the internet) contain a section called “duties & responsibilities”. This would seem to indicate that whoever authors the document does not know the difference between a duty (element #6) and a responsibility. Hence, they are lumped together and, in most cases, improperly worded.

The responsibility section denotes the “what” of the job. Responsibilities are not necessarily what the individual actually does (those are duties), but more of what should actually be accomplished. What should be happening. Responsibilities are results oriented, not activity or task oriented. Responsibilities are generally written as “Is responsible for .....”. *(Example: (The incumbent) is responsible for ensuring that all members of the department are in compliance with established company policy.*

**ELEMENT #6: PRINCIPAL DUTIES:** Listed here are the specific tasks and duties required of the individual to accomplish the objectives of the position. As they are specific duties, they cannot be delegated. Duties are generally written starting with a present tense action verb such as prepares, establishes, produces, supervises, monitors, creates, etc. *Example: Conducts performance reviews on direct reporting personnel annually on their anniversary date or as otherwise specified by company policy; or, furnishes such activity reports to the President as may be required or requested.*

**ELEMENT #7: STANDARDS AND MEASUREMENTS OF PERFORMANCE:** This is the most difficult element to compose (although it shouldn’t be). It is also the most important. It covers EXPECTATIONS. How can any employee ever live up to expectations if we never bother to tell them what we expect?

The section starts out with the statement: *The incumbent in this position will be deemed to be meeting or exceeding performance standards when the following happens:* Then list them – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc. Don’t get carried away with minutia. Just list the critical success factors for the position. In most cases, there probably should be somewhere between five and ten factors.

Each factor together with its accompanying standard must be realistic, achievable, and measurable. "Improve Sales" or "Reduce Costs" are examples of poor performance factors.

Once the job descriptions have been prepared, both the incumbent and the immediate superior should sign off the document with the incumbent indicating *Reviewed, Examined, and Accepted* properly dated. Copies should be distributed as follows: the incumbent, the boss, all employees reporting to the incumbent (how can they support the objectives of the manager if they don't know the scope, objectives, and parameters of their boss), and company HR files. Well managed organizations generally require that the JDs be reviewed at least once annually.

## SOME FINAL WORDS

**Q:** In an organization, who should have a job description? **A:** Everyone from the CEO on down. Part time positions, temporary and/or seasonal (such as summer interns) may be exempt.

**Q:** Once I have put in all the work to develop job descriptions that meet your standards of "effective", how do I best use them? **A:** Now they can become a powerful tool, no longer a product of the HR department to justify their existence. They will fulfill a vital role in improved:

- ..... recruiting
- ..... selection
- ..... interviewing
- ..... orientation
- ..... training
- ..... performance reviews
- ..... compensation

**Q:** Can I find a usable template on the internet to accomplish the profile discussed here? **A:** It is doubtful. Over six years of searching have produced no identifiable sources. The reason for this is probably that to be successful to a mass audience, the product must, of necessity, be completely generic. What we have discussed here is the development of a highly customized tool for management to improve productivity through more focused communications.

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**About the Author:** *Berry is a graduate of the Business School of the University of Evansville and has done graduate work at Indiana University. A Certified Management Consultant (CMC), he is the founder and CEO of Aquarius International Corporation, a 26 year old management consulting firm based in Missouri. He has lectured internationally and served on advisory boards at Indiana University and the Midwest Region of the U. S. Small Business Administration. A former HR executive for a billion dollar publicly held company, he serves the privately-held business community through direct consulting and by facilitating several peer advisory boards through The Alternative Board, TAB. He can be reached at [wberry@aquariustab.com](mailto:wberry@aquariustab.com)*