

Manager, supervisor, team leader? How to choose the right job title

Supervisor, manager, assistant manager, lead special, team lead, director, associate director... When deciding on a job title for a position you have many, many, to choose from. However while many may seem interchangeable, they shouldn't be considered so flippantly, especially when choosing a job title for a manager or supervisor.



That's because job titles play an important role. Generally, job titles:

1. Give insight into the organizational power the position holds. Is a team lead the same as a Department Manager? Probably not.
2. The job title is how potential candidates find your listing. If you don't use terms that resonate with candidates, you might miss out on good people.
3. Legally, a job title can be impactful. After all, a court might not be sympathetic to your case if you claim that a Senior Specialist was fired for not fulfilling their management responsibilities.

With that in mind, when choosing job titles for supervisors and managers, you want to do so carefully and in a way that aligns with the position's authority and responsibilities. Unfortunately, the use of job titles across different organizations is far from uniform. However, there are trends that you can follow to ensure your job titles are as precise and effective as possible.

Considerations before choosing a job title

Know the position's responsibilities

There are a few things you'll want to think through carefully before you choose a title. First and foremost are the responsibilities of the position. Here are a few primary questions to ask yourself.

- How many direct reports will this job have? Do those direct reports also have direct reports? The more tiers of employees a position oversees, the closer to senior management it generally is.
- Can the position discipline, hire, and fire employees? This can determine the difference between a manager, and for example, a team leader.
- Does this position oversee the work of multiple employees?
- Does the position conduct performance reviews, approve raises, bonuses, etc..?
- Who does the position report to? If they report directly to the CEO, then it's more likely to be a VP or Director than a Manager,

Make sure the area of the work is clear

You don't want your position title to be too vague, and depending on the field you're in, this can be a challenge. Let's look at marketing and communications for a moment, as there are a wide variety of management job titles that are used. For this exercise, we'll just stick with the word Manager for the title.

- **Social Media Manager.** This title implies that the position primarily focuses on social media. Sometimes when a field is this narrow, it can imply that the position manages social media, but does not manage other employees. In a larger organization, the Social Media Manager may have direct reports that also do social media work.
- **Marketing Manager.** Marketing Manager is a broad title, as many topics can fall under marketing. Typically this still implies customer-facing work but could include email marketing, print, social, digital, and much more. You're more likely to attract candidates with a diverse experience set.
- **Digital Marketing Manager.** This could include email marketing, digital ads, social media, search engine optimization, and other digital fields.
- **Communications Manager.** Communications is a broad word, but one used often, especially in-house, where a Communications Manager will likely be expected to handle a wide variety of work. A Communications Manager might oversee both internal and external communication. The position could also include marketing, copywriting, and anything that falls under the umbrella of communication.
- **Public Relations Manager.** Public relations is a largely external-facing field, however, what that includes can vary greatly. In some cases, it may be media/crisis management, in other cases, it could involve philanthropy, community outreach, and more.
- **Internal Communications Manager.** Internal communication is often an entirely separate field from marketing and external communication. However, many positions have overlapping skills and sometimes overlapping responsibilities. Use a title like this only if the job is primarily focused on internal communication, otherwise, a more accurate general title is better.

This only reflects a small sampling of possible job titles ranging from hyper-specific to more broad. Each industry will have its own list, but it's important to try and title your position as accurately as possible to attract candidates with appropriate skills.

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Middle management job titles

Middle management may look different in different organizations. After all, middle management is, in a way,

defined by not being senior management. At a smaller organization, this structure may look a bit different. In cases like that, a middle manager may be a Shift Leader or other similar position.

Generally, however, middle management is defined by a few commonalities.

- Often doesn't have the final say in hiring/firing/discipline.
- Tends to focus on operations and execution instead of top-level strategy.
- Typically manages a team, but in some cases may only functionally oversee their work, and not be in charge of decisions like raises, promotions, etc...

Middle management job title examples

Manager. Manager roles vary quite a bit from organization to organization. In a larger hierarchical organization, a Manager might be under a Director, VP, and Chief Officer. In a smaller organization, a manager may report directly to the President and have full control over their department. Regardless, Manager often implies direct reports and some level of control over their work and department.

Assistant Manager. Assistant Manager inherently implies less power and responsibility than a traditional manager. The authority granted here largely depends on how the title of Manager ranks in your organization. If Manager is a high-ranking title, then an assistant manager may also have authority. However, in some organizations, an Assistant Manager may be one that oversees operations, executes on strategies, and supports employees without having direct authority over those employees.

Supervisor. Supervisor, by default, implies the management of direct reports. However, the amount of authority it has depends on the organization. In some, a Supervisor may be more of a front-line position, overseeing employees and the execution of work. In others, a Supervisor might be more involved in strategy. Either way, Supervisor implies more of a focus on the oversight of work and less on the senior level strategy.

Middle-to-low management job titles

In some organizations, management tiers may be broken out even further from executive/senior, to middle management, and even a tier of lower-level front-line management. Depending on your organization, the titles below could reflect middle management or these front-line management positions.

Lead. "Lead Analyst" and "Lead Specialist" are examples of this title. Lead implies they're the head of that work. However, it does not necessarily imply that they have authority over other employees. A Lead may be the point person on projects and oversee the execution of work others do. Other employees may even functionally report to them on projects, but they probably don't conduct performance reviews or handle disciplinary action for those employees.

Team Lead. This is similar to the Lead title, but with slightly different implications. This directly implies the position leads a team. Inherently, a Team Lead probably has more supervisory responsibilities, but not at the level a manager does. They likely oversee work, coordinate shifts, manage projects, etc... but don't actively hire or fire employees and must bring more serious issues to management for review.

Coordinator - While inherently, Coordinator seems like a good choice — after all, a middle manager is most likely spending much of their time coordinating, it can give a mixed signal. In some job postings, Coordinators do indeed oversee other staff and projects. However, many companies also use Coordinator as an entry-level or specialist job title. This doesn't mean you need to shy away from using it, but you should make it clear in the job description and/or job posting that the position has some management responsibilities and is not entry-level.

Senior - A Senior position implies more responsibility and could perhaps have some management responsibilities. However, it depends on the title it's paired with. For example, a Senior Project Coordinator

sounds like more of a manager than a Senior Project Specialist. Indeed, many Senior positions do not fall under management, so you must be clear about its responsibilities in the job description if you choose this term.

Upper manager job title examples

If the position is truly a management position, then it may seem obvious to choose the word “manager,” however, you may not want to just use that title alone. After all, you may have multiple levels of management, and calling everyone one of them Manager would quickly become confusing. In that case, you’ll need some alternate job titles to choose from. Let’s look at a few title options and when to use them.

Assistant Manager. While an assistant manager could be a middle management job, it also could be a position of authority in your organization. This is especially true if a Manager is a more senior-level position. In some organizations, Assistant Managers may run large sections of a department. However, more often than not, an Assistant Manager more likely falls under the middle manager group.

Manager. What qualifies as a Manager varies greatly from organization to organization. In some small to mid-sized companies, the Production Manager may report directly to the President/CEO. In others, there may be a VP and Director before it gets to the Manager. Still, a manager position typically has some level of authority on its own and is involved in some level of strategic planning. A manager may report to a Director or may be the head of a whole department.

Senior Manager. Similar to Manager, the authority of this position will vary. In some organizations, a Manager may be promoted to senior manager as a career advancement opportunity, without necessarily taking on more responsibilities. However, Senior inherently implies more authority and power than a traditional manager. It’s best to only use the term senior if you mean it.

Director. Director is, of course, always an upper management job title. In some companies, the Director could be next in line after the CEO/president. In others, it may be under a VP. Either way, a director is typically in charge of a whole department or a sub-section of a very large department. They also are likely to spend more of their time focusing on planning and strategy, and be less involved in day-to-day execution.

Vice President. A Vice President can often be similar to a Director, being the head of a department with managers under it. In other organizations, a Vice President of Operations may have multiple Directors of different departments or regions reporting to them. A Vice President typically either reports to the President or sometimes a Chief Officer and is often one of the highest-ranking positions in an organization.

Choosing a job title

There’s no one way to decide on a job title. Many organizations and industries have unique positions and titles and the way they overlap will vary. However, remember that candidates aren’t likely to be familiar with your organizational structure. When choosing a job title you want to craft one that is consistent with your organizational policies, but also is clear and easy for applicants to understand. This will increase the chances of finding the right applicant for a position.

Additional resource: [The normal 40-hour workweek might soon be a thing of the past.](#)