

Writing job descriptions: An 8-question checklist



Managers should never assume that their employees know what's expected of them. The best way to establish work expectations—and measure job effectiveness during performance reviews—is to put those performance standards in writing.

A well-written job description can become the cornerstone of communication with employees. But inaccurate or incomplete job descriptions can create costly legal risks. Here are eight questions managers should ask themselves when drafting a job description:

1. Does a job description exist for every position you manage?

If applicants complain they were rejected because of their race or gender, you can show a court they were rejected because they didn't meet all the written qualifications.

2. Is the title accurate?

Titles may seem unimportant, but they carry a lot of weight in the workplace and in court. Titles should always match the level of authority and responsibility.

Cross-check titles against others in the workplace. For example, "administrative assistants" should be doing most tasks others with that title do. Inappropriate titles could also factor into discrimination charges. For example, if your "director of distribution" is really a shipping clerk, could you explain to a court why he isn't being paid the same as other "directors"?

3. Does it cite the correct skills, experience and education needed?

List only skills that are necessary to perform the job. A laundry list of skills that may never be used might be considered discriminatory. Cite the experience needed. Prepare to prove that the "experience" is essential.

Include any education level or credentials needed. Make sure these are essential to job performance. *Example:* Requiring a bachelor's degree for a forklift operator may not be necessary.

Indicate any unusual working conditions, such as exposure to chemicals.

4. Does it cite essential and nonessential job duties?

The most important part of a job description is an item-by-item list of responsibilities and duties. For legal

reasons, identify which are the “essential” job functions and which are non-essential, less-frequent duties.

What’s the risk? Lawsuits filed under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have nearly doubled in the past decade. Disabled employees can only file ADA lawsuits if they can prove they can still perform the “essential functions” of the job. If those essential functions aren’t in writing, they’re left open to a court’s interpretation.

To identify essential functions, look at the frequency of each function and the significance if that function isn’t performed. Categories to include:

- Physical skills (e.g., standing, walking, lifting, bending)
- Learned skills (e.g., equipment proficiency, industry experience)
- Job duties (e.g., travel, hours, shifts)
- Behavioral skills (e.g., communication, leadership, time management)

5. Does it explain results expected?

Duties are just half of the equation. What do other employees, departments and customers count on this person to do? Include expectations relating to deadlines, customer service and company success. Linking duties to company goals helps employees see how the position fits into the “big picture.”

6. Does the job description identify the supervisor?

Many job descriptions include the title of the employee’s direct supervisor, the department name and other identifying details. Make sure it refers to a supervisor’s *title*, not name.

7. Is it realistic?

The job description must match the reality of the job, not the lofty standards management would like it to entail. Unrealistic job descriptions can trigger all sorts of legal issues.

8. Is the writing clear & specific?

Instead of saying the position “requires heavy lifting,” say it requires the ability to lift 25 pounds repeatedly overhead 10 times per hour. Write with action verbs in the present tense, such as supervise, inspect, produce, organize, motivate and analyze. Avoid gender-based terms, such as “salesman.”

Common mistakes found in job descriptions

✓ **Describing the employee instead of the job.** If you describe a position in terms of how its previous occupant performed it, you will find yourself looking for a clone of the ex-jobholder.

✓ **Using imprecise language.** Be direct and clear. Sentences should be short and simple. Language should emphasize the skills and purposes of the job. For example, instead of using a phrase like “good communication skills,” say the person needs, “the ability to communicate company policies to nonmanagerial groups in person and in writing.”

✓ **Failing to review and update.** Make it a point to review job descriptions periodically to make sure they accurately reflect employees’ responsibilities. Amend the document anytime the employees’ duties change.