



Understanding Nuances and Commonalities of Job Descriptions

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Abstract

This paper has explored how job descriptions are developed in today's organizations. As job descriptions are the foundations of jobs, they have to be prepared following certain guidelines. However, organizations follow different formats and put contents in those formats differently. This paper has searched for if there is a common ground in developing job descriptions. The paper is based on secondary sources of data. It compares and contrasts information from the available sources. The paper is an attempt to consolidate the pieces of knowledge that were already there. In doing so, it has also highlighted the gaps found in writing job descriptions which become remarkable avenues for further research. It concludes with the message that organizations can benefit if they follow the common practice of writing job descriptions discussed in the paper.

Key words: Job description, job analysis, performance expectations, performance appraisal

Introduction

'Right person in the right place' is heavily emphasized in today's world of management. We need certain tools and techniques to find out the right person. Finding out the right person with required educational qualification, experience and training is not enough. The incumbent has to be made clear regarding the duties and responsibilities s/he is expected to perform (Arthur, 2008). Again his/her performance has to be appraised in course of time and decisions need to be made about his/her performance. To do all these managerial activities, we need job descriptions.

There are various sorts of organizations. Some organizations are extremely hierarchical while others are flat. Some are private and some public. Some are specific to one particular locality and some are

multinational. Whatever the nature of organization, they all have employees who perform. To make sure that their performance was on track and effective, they are provided with job descriptions. In this connection, Martin (2010) also states that the job description is to the job what the foundation is to the house. However, different organizations develop their own formats of job descriptions. In this context, this paper explores how to write effective job descriptions.

Method

This paper is based on secondary sources of data. The author reviewed the books, dissertations, journal articles. Some samples of job descriptions from some world renowned organizations were also reviewed. In reviewing the documents both electronic and hard

copies were consulted. As Tylor (2011) mentions that review articles also provide the readers with practical insights, new thinking and new approaches to old problems, this paper has been prepared following that spirit.

Concept of job description

A job description is a written statement of the content of any particular job derived from job analysis (Cushway, 2003). Mader-Clark (2013, p. 3) defines it as “a clear and concise depiction of a job’s duties and requirements”. It is both a hiring blueprint and a performance management tool (Silverstein, 2007).

Here it is important not to get confused between job description and person specification/profile. Although the latter is also a product of job analysis, it basically refers to a statement of the skills, knowledge and other attributes needed for effective performance in the job (Rudman, 2003).

Importance of Job Description

A job description is used for various purposes. First, it makes the incumbent clear about the duties and responsibilities s/he is expected to perform (Arthur, 2008). Employees who know what is expected of them can focus their energy on specific goals (Sandler & Keefe, 2004). Second, it communicates where an employee’s position in the organization is and its

relation to other positions in the company (Rudman, 2003). Next, it serves as a performance contract between management and employee. Likewise, the well-written, comprehensive job description sets a standard for performance (Silverstein, 2007). That is to say, this written document forms a solid base for measuring success and pay. Similarly, it is also helpful in performing job evaluation and job redesign (Cushway, 2003). Finally, it can be used in various HR processes like recruitment and selection, orientation, performance assessment, succession planning, coaching, training and compensation (Hampton, 1947; Firth, 1989; Martin, 2010; Royer, 2010).

Components of Job Description

There are variations in content and format of job descriptions between organizations (Firth, 1989). Despite having the disparities, an attempt has been made here to search for common elements of a job description.

According to Haynes (1990, pp. 66-67), the major elements of a job description are job identification, basic function, duties and responsibilities, delegation of authorities, working relationships, working conditions, and qualifications. The table presented below makes us further clear regarding the sequence and description of these elements:

Table 1

Components of Job Description

Components	Component Description
Job identification	Department, location, salary grade or range, overtime status
Basic function	Job's basic purpose in brief and direct language
Duties and responsibilities	Principal duties and responsibilities in the order of their importance
Delegation of authorities	Financial and/or personnel authority if any
Working relationships	Description of internal and external relationships like staff members, other departments, customers, suppliers, government agencies, etc.
Working conditions	Work place, safety hazards, travel required, etc.
Qualifications	Required experience, training, and other qualifications

The components presented in Table 1 above are the common ones. These components appear in a sequential order in job descriptions. One example job description has been presented in Appendix B of this paper. However, these are not the only components of job descriptions. Other scholars have presented them in different terms. Some scholars have presented even greater number of components. Cushway (2003, pp. 6-9) talks about fifteen components of a good job description (see Appendix A).

Compared to the components given by Haynes (1990), the ones provided by Cushway (2003) are greater in number. Here it is important to note that all these components as provided by Cushway may not appear in all job descriptions. In this context, Brannick, Levine, and Morgeson (2007) categorize the different components of a job description into four major parts. These parts appear in almost all job descriptions. Their idea has been summarized in the following table:

Table 2

Major Parts of Job Description

Major Parts	Description of Parts
Identifiers	Job title as well as the physical and functional locations of the job
Summary	Description of the essence of the job; primary functions of the position
Duties and tasks	Details not found in the job summary; answers three questions – what, how, and why
Other information	Working conditions, required knowledge, skills, and abilities, or job evaluation information

Job Description Development Process

It is important how job descriptions are developed. Organizations follow a standard process of developing job descriptions. According to Haynes (1990, pp. 65-66), the process of writing a job description consists of the following five stages:

Information gathering

In the first stage, necessary information about a job is collected, usually through job analysis. It is an act of gathering data about a specific job and what a person needs to do that job (Rudman, 2003). Sometimes, job descriptions are not developed through job analysis. In that case, managers and HR professionals list all the duties and responsibilities associated with a specific job and develop the job description (Royer, 2010).

Drafting

After collecting information, a draft is written. It is

usually done by the person who collected the information. One important point is that the draft should follow the standard formatting desired by the organization (Haynes, 1990).

Reviewing and approving

Review and approval generally starts with the employee directly involved in the job. It then proceeds to the supervisor who is in charge of the job. Other managers and specialists may also contribute in reviewing the job descriptions.

Finalizing

Once the draft copy is approved, it is finalized by the authorized body of the organization. Now the job description is in the standard format and it can be provided to the concerned employee.

Updating

Jobs keep on changing in course of time. No job will

stay the same for very long. Therefore, job descriptions must be kept up to date and relevant (Rudman, 2003).

Discussion

It has become clear that there is variation in contents and formats of job descriptions between organizations. Management experts have stressed on the point that there should not be different formats of job description in the same organization (Haynes, 1990). Now it has become a challenge to those organizations which do not have their own standard format of job description.

Cushway (2003) regards 'principal accountabilities or responsibilities' as the core of job description. According to Royer (2010), this section should answer the questions: what, how, and why. For example, one duty or task of a receptionist might be, "to answer phones using the switchboard in a timely fashion to ensure customers receive a prompt and courteous greeting." The what, in this example is "to answer phones . . . in a timely fashion." The how refers to the equipment, in this case, the switchboard. The why refers to the goal of the task, in this case, the goal is for customers to "receive a prompt and courteous greeting." This piece of information is very important from performance appraisal point of view. Sandler and Keefe (2004) and Kirkpatrick (2006) also state that the performance appraisal is built upon the foundation of a well-crafted job description. If the 'duties and responsibilities' section is presented in measurable terms, performance review becomes more objective. Therefore, utmost care must be provided in writing this section.

Employees may see the job description as defining the limits of their jobs and therefore refuse to do anything not specifically listed in the duties and responsibilities section. To circumvent this potential problem, the last item of the duties section on many job descriptions reads: "All other appropriate and reasonable duties that may be assigned" (Haynes, 1990). Perhaps outstanding performers are those who go beyond the duties and responsibilities that

are given in the job description (DeNisi, 1996).

Job description and job specification are different things. Rudman (2003, p. 48) says, "Job descriptions and person profiles are different and should be kept separate." However, there are many scholars like Haynes (1990) who incorporate job specification in job description. In this connection, Cushway (2003) states:

While the knowledge, qualifications, skills and experience required to do the job are strictly part of a person specification, rather than a job description, it is useful to include them in one composite document which can then be used for a variety of purposes. (p. 9)

Some scholars like Haynes (1990) propose the idea of developing results areas and performance standards. However, they do not fully incorporate these things in the job description. The scholars suggest that such standards should supplement the job description in separate forms. On the other hand, there are other experts like Rudman (2003) who make the point that we can incorporate the results areas and performance standards in a single job description (see Appendix C).

Many interesting issues have emerged from the review. One issue is that who prepares job descriptions and how they are prepared in our organizational context. Another issue is the uses of job descriptions in our context.

Conclusion

A job description is a communication tool that makes the concerned employee clear about his/her duties and responsibilities. It is used in different HR processes like recruitment, selection, orientation, performance appraisal, job evaluation, job redesign, training, and compensation. Although it is not free from its limitations, it should be kept up to date, relevant and fresh. Experts have further stressed the point that employees are to be encouraged not to become rigid and be confined only to what has been there in job description. It is to be developed and

used effectively so that it becomes a boon in organizational success. This review paper has brought different ideas together, sought a common thread of developing a job description, and opened avenues to interested bodies for further studies on its different aspects.

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AppendixA

Components of Job Description Given by Cushway (2003, pp. 6-9)

Components	Component Description
Job identification	Job title, department or section, employee or job number
Reporting line	Title of the job to which the employee directly reports
Organization structure	Skeleton of the organization (details attached with JD)
Main purpose of the job	Main purpose distinguishes this job from other jobs
Principal accountabilities or responsibilities	Identification of key areas of responsibilities as well as the end results and description of how these end results are achieved; core part of JD
Performance measures or standards	Output expected from the job and the standards to which it is to be performed
Constraints	Limits of authority and decision making
Statistics	Details of any budget, equipment, or other resources the job holder is responsible for
Nature and scope	Context of the job in the organization; how the job relates to other jobs in the organization; where work comes from and where it goes to; nature of problems
Contacts	Nature and range of contacts of the job
Working conditions	Nature of the working environment
Knowledge, skills and experience	Knowledge, qualifications, skills and experience required to do the job
Competencies	Personal characteristics and qualities of individuals that enable them to perform the job effectively
Other information	Miscellaneous or additional information if any
Signature and date	Signatures of both employee and manager to indicate that it is an agreed document

Appendix B

Example Job Description from Haynes (1990, pp. 67-70)

Instructor: Management and Supervisory Skills

Department: Employee Relations

Date: July 1, 2014

Division: Management Development

Salary Grade: 10-12

Location: Head Office

I. Basic Functions

Instructors in management and supervisory skills design and present training seminars and workshops to increase the effectiveness of the company's managers and supervisors. They are expected to utilize effective instructional techniques in order to maximize the learning experience. Program designs vary in length from two hours to a full week or more depending upon the nature of material to be covered.

II. Duties and Responsibilities

1. Present training material in a classroom setting in lecture/discussion format supplemented with appropriate exercises and audio-visual equipment.
2. Design training programs to accomplish learning objectives.
3. Select and/or design appropriate training materials and coordinate their purchase or reproduction.
4. Arrange for, or advise host locations on, facilities required to accommodate class size and program design.
5. Coordinate program attendance, or advise host locations, to verify appropriate match between target audiences and participants.
6. Evaluate programs presented to ensure attainment of learning objectives. Modify program design as required.
7. Counsel participants' supervisor on appropriate ways to reinforce learning in the workplace.
8. Stay abreast of developments in the profession and needs within the organization and propose new programs as appropriate.
9. Prepare and submit annual budget proposals for assigned program areas.
10. Monitor expenses, by program, to stay within approved budget.
11. Advise field level training personnel on program design, instructional techniques, and evaluation techniques as required.
12. Carry out special projects and all other appropriate and reasonable duties that may be assigned from time to time.

III. Delegation of Authorities

1. *Personnel Authority:* This position has no delegated personnel authority.
2. *Financial Authority:* This position has approval authority for the purchase of goods and services up to \$5,000 per purchase against approved budget.

IV. Working Relationships1. *Departmental Staff*

Must negotiate with other staff members to share the services of administrative support and secretarial staff over whom the employee has no supervisory authority.

2. *Service Departments*

Must work effectively with purchasing, graphics, printing, and correspondence services in arranging for the procurement or production of training materials.

3. *Client Departments*

Must provide for the balance of participation in program areas from various client departments served.

4. *Suppliers*

Must manage the procurement and delivery of meeting facilities and support services from outside suppliers.

V. Working Conditions

This job is performed in both an office and classroom environment. Substantial travel is required with about 75 percent of the work being carried out away from headquarters.

VI. Qualifications

1. Must be able to work effectively with others over whom he or she has no organizational authority.
2. Must be familiar with, and supporting of, current approaches to optimizing the utilization of resources.
3. Must be familiar with the company's management philosophy and organizational structure.
4. Must be familiar with training program design and the utilization of audio-visual techniques.
5. Must be an effective public speaker.
6. Must be able to perform successfully under minimum supervision.
7. Must be sufficiently flexible and resourceful to cope with the inherent uncertainties of the profession.
8. Must have experienced sufficient organizational success to establish credibility with participants.

Appendix C

Example Job Description from Rudman (2003, pp. 50-51)

Position	Manager, Warehouse and Distribution	
Department	Production	
Date Prepared	June 2003	
Manager's Signature	
Job Holder's Signature	
Position Purpose	Provides leadership and guidance to warehouse and distribution team members to ensure that customers receive the products they order in good condition and on time.	
Reports to	Production Manager	
Responsible for	Warehouse assistants (4), Van Driver, Administrative Officer	
Functional Relationships	Sales and Marketing Manager, Accounts Team Leader, Sales Executives, HR Manager, Team Leader, Final Assembly, Health and Safety Advisor	
Authorities	<p>Financial Approves expenditure within agreed operating budget</p> <p>Contracts Recommends courier and other transport contracts for approval of Production Manager</p> <p>Staffing Makes recommendations for approval of Production Manager</p>	
Key Results Areas	Performance Standards	Reporting Information
Warehouse and distribution staff have knowledge, skills, leadership and direction they need for satisfactory performance	<p>Job descriptions, performance plans and reviews, and development plans are in place for all employees</p> <p>Employees are aware of workplace hazards and trained in safe working practices, handling hazardous materials, safe use of equipment and processes, and proper use of safety devices</p>	<p>Six-monthly activity report to production manager</p> <p>Performance plans and reviews are passed to Production Manager for information and review</p> <p>Six-monthly report to Production Manager, with supporting audit by Health and Safety Advisor</p>

<p>Customer satisfaction is enhanced by accurate and on-time delivery of orders</p>	<p>Standard for local customers is same-day (preferably) or next-day delivery</p> <p>For all other national deliveries, the standard is next-day delivery where overnight courier service is available, and a maximum of three days for all other orders</p>	<p>Immediate report of stock shortages to Production Manager following comparison of sales orders and inventory control information</p> <p>Immediate report of late deliveries to Sales and Marketing Manager and Production Manager</p>
<p>Warehouse housekeeping contributes to efficient operations and maintenance of pleasant and safe workplace; careful handling and storage ensure stock is clean and undamaged</p>	<p>Housekeeping and handling meet company requirements and standards</p> <p>No orders rejected by customers because of appearance or damage</p> <p>No more than 1% of warehouse stock is returned to factory for work because of dirt or damage</p>	<p>Monthly inspection by Production Manager and Health and Safety Adviser</p> <p>Immediate report of complaints or rejects to Sales and Marketing Manager and Production Manager</p> <p>Three-monthly report to Production Manager on returns</p>
<p>Warehouse and distribution operating plans and budgets are prepared in line with company requirements and objectives and implemented following approval</p>	<p>Draft plans and budgets are prepared in the required format and time frame</p> <p>Warehouse and distribution costs are kept within agreed budget levels</p> <p>Additional expenditure requires prior approval of Production Manager</p>	<p>Monthly report of budget/actual expenditure to Production Manager</p>