

Writing Great Job Descriptions

The job description is a critical document for every position. A good job description performs a number of important functions:

- It describes the skills and competencies that are required to perform the role
- It defines where the job fits within the overall company hierarchy
- It is used as the basis for the employment contract
- It is a valuable performance management and enhancement tool

Writing Job Descriptions

This guide aims to help you write job descriptions that are clear, concise and accurately defines the role. Most importantly, your new hire or potential new hire will know exactly what is expected of them prior to commencing in the role.

1. Basic Information

- I. Start with the job title
 - a. It should be a true reflection of what the position entails. Try not to exaggerate the importance of the role, and stay away from using words such as “Rockstar”, “Guru” and “superstar” – especially in external advertising and formal job descriptions. Once the candidate is employed, these titles can be used internally.
 - b. Make sure it is free of gender or age implications
 - c. Make sure it is self-explanatory for recruitment purposes as in most cases, the job title is the main keyword searched in online job searches.
- II. Define the status of the role – Full time, part-time, contract, fixed-term
- III. List the reporting manager title
- IV. List the job classification or level if applicable
- V. List the team/department of the where the job will fit into

2. The role – duties and responsibilities

- I. Include a short paragraph which covers the high-level overview of the position and its purpose. This is normally called the “position purpose” or “position objective”
- II. Following the role overview, list 8-10 KEY responsibilities – what will the position be responsible for on a day to day, week to week basis?
- III. List any key projects this position will be required to participate in – either leading or participating

3. The ideal candidate

Describe who would be the ideal candidate to fill this position. Break it down into sections.

- I. Skills & competencies – what should they bring to the position (see below difference between skills and competencies)
- II. Experience and accomplishments – how many years’ experience should they have, what sort of projects should they have experience in, how complex should their people management experience be (i.e., size of team, virtual, remote teams etc)
- III. Academic background – mandatory and advantageous qualifications
- IV. Any ‘bonus’ skill that is not an official requirement, but would greatly benefit the role

Let’s look at the difference between **skill** and **competency**.

Skill can be defined as:

- Proficiency, facility, or dexterity that is acquired or developed through training or experience
- The ability, coming from one’s knowledge, practice, aptitude etc, to do something well
- An ability and capacity acquired through deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to smoothly and adaptively carry out complex activities or job functions involving ideas (cognitive skills), things (technical skills) and/or people (interpersonal skills).

- A skill is the learned capacity to carry out pre-determined results
- A learned ability to bring about the result you want, with maximum certainty and efficiency.

These definitions are from various sources, however they all say the same thing.

So, a skill is something learned in order to be able to carry out one or more job functions.

Competency can be defined as:

Again, these definitions were extracted from a number of different sources:

- A cluster of related abilities, commitments, knowledge, and skills that enable a person (or an organisation) to act effectively in a job or situation.
- Measurable skills, abilities and personality traits that identify successful employees against defined roles within an organisation
- A measurable pattern of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviours, and other characteristics that an individual needs to perform work roles or occupational functions successfully.
- Competencies specify the “how” (as opposed to the what) of performing job tasks, or what the person needs to do the job successfully.

Competencies, therefore, may incorporate a skill, but are MORE than the skill, they include abilities and behaviours, as well as knowledge that is fundamental to the use of a skill.

Example 1

An example of this in an IT context is “Programming”. To effectively write a computer program one needs good analytical, logical, and interpretive ability as well as the skill to write the program in a specific language. **So, learning Java, C++, C#, etc. is a Skill.** But underlying the ability to use that skill effectively is **analytical, logical and interpretive ability – those are Competencies.**

Example 2

In an Executive Assistant context, to effectively support the Executive leader, the EA needs to have exceptional influencing, negotiating and organisational abilities, and the skills to execute this would be by having advanced knowledge of MS Office Suite, strong phone etiquette and high-level relationship building skills.

Types of Competencies

Competencies effectively fall in three groups:

- **Behavioural (or Life Skills) Competencies** - Life skills are problem solving behaviours used appropriately and responsibly in the management of personal affairs. They are a set of human skills acquired via teaching or direct experience that are used to handle problems and questions commonly encountered in daily human life. Examples are: Communication, Analytical Ability, Problem Solving, Initiative, etc.
- **Functional (or Technical) Competencies** - Functional Competencies relate to functions, processes, and roles within the organisation and include the knowledge of, and skill in the exercise of, practices required for successful accomplishment of a specific job or task. Examples are: Application Systems Development, Networking and Communication, Database Analysis and Design, Human Resource Business Partnering, Financial Management, Recruitment Expertise etc.
- **Professional Competencies** **Professional competencies** are competencies that allow for success in an organisational context. They are the accelerators of performance or – if lacking in sufficient strength and quality – are the reason people fail to excel in jobs. Examples are: Business Environment, Industry and Professional Standards, Negotiation, People Management, etc.

Other information

It is always pertinent to review your document, so including an “effective” date ensures it remains relevant and as up to date as possible.

It is recommended to include reference to your vision, mission and values, code of conduct and safety. I have included a ‘draft new version’ which you could adopt fully or in part as a refresh to your job descriptions.