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Job Description

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A *job description* is a written summary of what is done on a job, how the work is accomplished, and why the work is performed. The purpose of a job description is to convey the essential features of a job to a person not familiar with the job in question. Job descriptions are the most common output of a job analysis and are used for a variety of purposes, including recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, compensation, and job design.

Distinctions have been made between a job description and a position description. A *position description* summarizes what one person in an organization does, whereas a job description summarizes a number of related positions. A position description is typically used when an individual performs a relatively distinctive set of activities, and a job description is used when there is enough commonality across positions to justify treating multiple positions as a single job.

There is great variability in the structure and length of job descriptions. The job descriptions provided in the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* are each a single paragraph in length and primarily describe the key tasks performed in the job. Other job descriptions vary from one to three pages and contain considerably more information. There are three essential parts to a job description. First, there should be some information that uniquely identifies the job. At a minimum, this would include a job title but can also include identifying details such as the department, location of the job, job code, pay range, grade level, and reporting relationships. Second, there should be a job summary that conveys the essential features of the job and what a worker does. Included in the job summary would be the purpose of the job. Enough information should be provided in the job summary to enable it to be differentiated from other jobs.

Third, there should be a listing of essential duties or work activities of the job. This listing would cover the what, how, and why of the job. Describing what a worker does involves considering the physical and mental activities that are performed on the job. Physical activities include actions that involve observable physical effort. For example, workers might assemble, inspect, or remove parts in the manufacture of an automobile engine. Mental activities include actions that involve unobservable mental effort. For example, workers might judge, evaluate, plan, or compare the performance of a key supplier of raw materials to the organization. Describing how work is accomplished involves considering the methods or procedures used to perform key job duties. These can include tools, equipment, routines, checklists, or other work aids. Describing why a worker performs these specific activities reflects the overriding purpose or reasons the duties are performed. In other words, it is important to articulate the purpose of specific duties (given the overall purpose of the job) in the job description.

Finally, some job descriptions contain additional information depending on the particular application. This might include identification of key responsibilities (useful for job evaluation purposes), a listing of accountabilities (the major results for which the work is accountable), a description of the working conditions (e.g., temperature, noise), and the nature of social relationships at work. Last, some job descriptions identify the major knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) needed to perform the major work activities. The summarization KSAOs needed in a job have been referred to as a *job specification* and are often viewed as distinct enough to be treated separately from the job description because they identify what individual differences are needed to perform the major work activities of the job.

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See also [Job Analysis](#); [Job Analysis Methods](#)

Further Readings

Brannick, M. T., Levine, E. L., & Morgeson, F. P. (2007). *Job and work analysis: Methods, research, and applications for human resource management* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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