

Value of Job Descriptions

The shape and requirements of the job, as detailed in the description, drive the collection of job-relevant information about applicants. Descriptions save time for potential applicants as well as for employers. When shown or read the description and specification for an open job, many people self-select themselves out of the running for lack of interest or qualification. At best, the grossly unqualified applicant would have wasted some of the farmer's time. At worst, he or she could have been hired and wasted a \$20,000 machine. Of course, not all unqualified applicants will drop out of the running for a job needed to support a family.

Job descriptions are also useful in other aspects of farm labor management. They serve as important references when an employee, applicant, or government agency challenges a hiring or other employment decision. Descriptions are even sometimes requested by agencies investigating disputes that are not resolved internally. The listing of a job's duties and responsibilities has taken on extra significance with the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. The ADA prohibits discrimination against individuals who have physical or mental disabilities that may limit a "major life activity" but that, if reasonably accommodated, would not keep them from performing essential job functions. It gives weight to the employer's judgment as to what functions of a job are essential, especially if stated in a written description prepared for recruitment or selection. Naturally, employers who have not identified the essential functions of a job in question are at a disadvantage when attempting to defend against challenges of their employment decisions under the ADA. More information on the ADA is at AgHelpWanted.org.

The Difference a Job Description Can Make

Two friends were talking about experiences with their respective employers. Which farm would you rather work for? Which one do you think uses written job descriptions?

N: "A sign at the coffee shop said, 'Help wanted at 4Bar Ranch' and I was out of work at the time. I went over there to check it out. The place seemed okay and the person in the office was nice, so I put in an application."

N: "When I had an interview, we talked a lot about what I liked to do, where I went to high school, my hobbies, and my previous jobs. They kept telling me that I was the right kind of guy for the place, and that I would get along well with the other people there."

J: "I had just started looking for a full-time job maintaining and fixing tractor engines, and my brother showed me an ad in the paper recruiting for a mechanic. The ad had a lot of details about what the job was responsible for and what they wanted in a new hire. The job looked like a real good fit for me."

J: "During the interview they asked me several questions about engines and maintenance procedures and about my experience in relation to all the different tasks that were part of this job. Guess they wanted to be sure that I knew certain things and had the skills needed to do the work."

N: “It was very confusing to me when I started to work there because I wasn’t sure what I should be doing. I went to ask the lady in charge of the shop, but she didn’t seem to have much of an idea either. So I spent some time floating to see where I could pitch in and help.”

N: “When it came time for my annual review, my boss told me that my appearance was good, my attitude was okay, and that they had no problems with my work so far. She said that I was fitting in all right and would be getting a \$.20 an hour raise.”

N: “I am making more money than I did in my old job, but only by a little, and I’m working a lot harder. I am pretty sure that other people here who do similar things as me make more, but I don’t know how come. There’s this other guy, Jack, who I’m often told to work with on short-term tasks, and he makes a lot more.”

N: “I had an accident, dropped a chain saw on my foot. The doctor said I could work at different things as long as I didn’t stand for too long until my foot got better. I asked my boss if I could come back to work and do something else for awhile, but he said he couldn’t be sure that I’d be able to stay off my feet. Said he didn’t think it would work for me to come back until I was all healed.”

J: “My first day, a supervisor showed me around, introduced me to other people on the shift, and set me up at a station with a few tasks to start on. Later he came by with a list of things that I would be expected to take care of regularly. No real surprises, but it was nice to have it in that form. I knew who to go to with questions and how long it was supposed to take me to get the different things done.”

J: “When it came time for my review, my supervisor gave me a list of all my job tasks and objectives, and she asked me to think about how each of them was going, so that we could talk about it in a few days. At that meeting we discussed each area, a couple of things that I needed to do more carefully, a new way of reporting time spent on different tasks, and what I would have to learn to deal with some new equipment that was on order. At the end, she told me that with my performance rating I would get a middle-range raise of \$.20 an hour. She also told me what I would have to do to earn the maximum raise next time around.”

J: “My pay rate is for a mechanic level 2. At the third level, mechanics are responsible for more complex procedures, but they make \$1 an hour more than me. I’ll need other skills and more experience to get promoted to that level. I feel good about what I earn, because similar mechanic jobs that I see ads for don’t seem to pay quite as much.”

J: “After I had my foot injury, the doctor told me which of my normal tasks I could keep doing without danger and which I had to avoid for a few weeks. He spelled out some temporary restrictions and guidelines to follow. I talked to my boss about them, and he suggested altering my job temporarily. It was great that I could work while my foot was healing.”



While written descriptions may be of use in defending against charges of wrongful management action, their most important benefits are realized through better management decisions and employer-employee relations. The job description is a practical, relatively simple tool that supports communication every day

They are helpful, particularly in:

- **Recruitment.** Job announcements based on written descriptions that clearly outline functions and requirements give potential candidates a reasonable basis for deciding whether or not to apply, and they tend to attract a more suitable pool.
- **Selection.** In identifying the abilities and knowledge needed to perform a job, the job description helps supervisors and others who hire to focus on job-relevant criteria when choosing from the applicants.
- **Wage and salary administration.** Setting a pay rate in relation to other jobs within the company and similar jobs in other companies requires more of a basis for comparison than job title alone. The job description provides it.
- **Orientation.** Guided by a job description, supervisors can better anticipate what employees new to the company or the job need to know and help them minimize adjustment time. Employees can learn about their responsibilities both from a written description and by asking questions when reading the description.
- **Performance appraisal and employee development.** The statement of duties in a job description is the basis for evaluating employees with respect to actual performance dimensions rather than personal attributes or traits. It puts the discussion of an employee's capabilities, talents, strengths, deficiencies, and advancement aspirations into the context of the current job and other opportunities within the company. Job descriptions also may be used to inform employees of typical promotional sequences and requirements.
- **Workers' compensation claim management.** Before recommending that an injured employee return to work, a treating physician needs to know about the normal demands of the employee's job. In addition, if provided with a written job description, the physician who treats an employee under workers' compensation insurance may be able to detect links between injuries and job functions that could be redesigned.

A common objection to the use of written job descriptions stems from concern about losing flexibility to manage, especially when technology or other conditions are changing. Understandably, managers do not want their written words to restrict their right to direct what workers do on the job or how they do it. The



legendary, “that’s not in my job description,” however, does not have to be a problem to any employer making reasonable assignments to workers. In fact, the employee who does not have a written job description may be more likely to feel that a foreman’s directive is overstepping rightful bounds.

Wording within a description can advise employees that they are expected to adapt to new methods when introduced or to perform related tasks, even if not specified, that contribute to overall operations. Subheading the list of job functions as “*Examples of Duties*” (or of Major Functions) conveys a similar message.

An examination of the job, or a “job analysis,” is the logical precursor to writing a job description. Like other aspects of personnel management, a job analysis may be conducted through various methods that range in formality and complexity. Common to all the methods is the gathering of information about a job. Some managers may feel so close to all operations that they draw solely on their own knowledge (of an existing job) or vision (for a new position) when writing job descriptions. Most, however, rely on or supplement their initial understanding with information collected through systematic observation, interviews with employees, worker activity logs, or other forms of incumbent reports. Whether coming from the manager, job incumbent, immediate supervisor, coworker, an office staff member, a consultant, or others, collection of information to be summarized in the written description is essential.

Writing Job Descriptions

Many employers do not use written job descriptions because the task of developing them looms too large or uncertain. References that lower this barrier, however, are readily available. Though not a substitute for descriptions specific to positions in a given organization, generic references that describe similar jobs can serve as models and help in launching local job analyses with which to modify them.

Examples of agricultural job descriptions that are online at AgHelpWanted.org can be expanded and tailored to individual company circumstances. They are presented as starting points, working drafts for you to further develop and refine to fit your operation.

Following are tips for writing effective job descriptions:

- Make it simple, clean, and factual.
- Resist overstating or exaggerating job importance and requirements.
- Keep the duties/functions and qualifications in different sections.
- Begin each duty/function with an active verb.
- List functions in order of either significance or portion of work time spent.