

UPDATE

Job Descriptions Why Waste the Time?

I can just drive by the bus station and pick up the extra workers we need for this next week,” stated one farmer. “Of course those workers rarely stick around for more than a week, once they receive their first paycheck!” Investing time and energy into developing a strategy for hiring workers, including drafting a clear job description, can pay dividends over the long run.

No matter how the information about a job is obtained, putting it into a written job description lays the foundation for recruitment, selection, and management later on. What is a job description? It is simply a verbal sketch of a given job—its purpose, content, and attributes or characteristics of the people likely to perform it well. Some firms also use the job description to formally describe the terms of employment such as pay, benefits, and performance standards.

Value of Job Descriptions

The format and requirements of the job detailed in the description allow applicants and employers to exchange job-relevant information. Descriptions save time for potential applicants as well as for employers. When shown or read the description and specifications for an open job, many workers take themselves out of the pool due to 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 wrecked a \$160,000 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 sometimes even 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

AGWU-20210512.001
John P. Hewlett—University of Wyoming and
Jeffrey E. Tranel—Colorado State University.

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AgHelpWanted.org
May 2021.



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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.

Why Are Job Descriptions Important?

A job description's most important benefits are realized through better management decisions and employer-employee relations,

although written descriptions may also be of use in defending against charges of wrongful management action. The job description is a practical, relatively simple tool that supports communication every day.

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."

Anatomy of a Job Description

Typical elements of written job descriptions are as follows:

Job title: Descriptive of the job content.

Summary description: A one- or two-sentence overview of the position and its role in the organization.

Duties and responsibilities:

Essential functions: The core of the job, tasks, and responsibilities tied to the reason the job exists. Examples of duties that the incumbent must perform, with or without a reasonable accommodation for any disability.

Other functions: Duties and responsibilities that may be related to the essential functions but are not central to the position.

Qualifications required and preferred: The abilities, skills, knowledge, and other attributes (e.g., possession of a license, willingness to travel) that are needed to perform the functions of the job. Also referred to as the "job specification," these physical and mental qualifications are job related criteria for reasonable and lawful discrimination among applicants.

Skills and abilities:

Knowledge:

Experience:

Certification or training:

Other:

Relationships: Identification of the position or person to whom the incumbent reports, and of others to whom the incumbent is connected in work flow. Gives the position's location in the organization. Responsibility for supervising others is generally in the section on essential or other functions.

Special conditions of work: Any aspects of the work environment that may significantly affect the candidate and are not obvious from the job title or description of functions (e.g., unusual or varying schedule of work, high noise level, other hazards, equipment used, rapidly changing technology necessitating continuous learning, requirement to supply own tools).

Acknowledgment of understanding: Signatures of employee and supervisor or other management representative.

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. For example, 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. Including subheadings with a list of job functions as “Examples of Duties” (or of Major Functions) conveys a similar message.

Where to Begin?

The process of writing a job description requires having a clear understanding of the job’s duties and responsibilities. The job posting should also include a concise picture of the skills required for the position to attract qualified job candidates. An examination of the job, or a “job analysis,” is the logical first step 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 collecting information about a job. Some managers may feel so close to the operations that they draw solely on their own knowledge of an existing job or vision for a new position when writing a job description. 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 recent reports. Whether coming from the manager, current worker(s), immediate supervisor, coworker, an office staff member, a consultant, or others, collection of accurate information to be summarized in the written description is essential.

Writing a Job Description

Many employers do not use written job descriptions because the task of developing them appears too large or uncertain. References and examples that lower this barrier, however, are readily available. Generic references that describe similar jobs can serve as models and help in launching local job analyses, although they are clearly not a substitute for a description specific to a position in a given organization. Examples of agricultural job descriptions found 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.
- In identifying “essential functions,” consider these criteria:
 - Portion of time spent performing the function
 - Purpose for very existence of the job
 - Necessity for the incumbent of this job, rather than of any other, to perform the function
 - * Consequences of removing the function from this job
 - * Special expertise required to perform the function
- Develop the description in coordination with a current or recent incumbent.
- Review with the employee(s) after every revision.
 - Answer questions about it, and discuss the need for any changes.
 - Ask to indicate understanding by signing.
 - Provide a copy to employee.
 - Check each year or two for continued accuracy.



Example Job Description

A sample job description for the position of Herd Manager on a dairy farm can be found on the next page. No matter how the information about a job is obtained, putting it into a written job description lays the foundation for recruitment, selection, and management. Job descriptions save time for employers and for potential applicants. Further, written job descriptions serve as important references when an employee, applicant, or government agency challenges a hiring or other employment decision.

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Ag Help Wanted: Guidelines for Managing Agricultural Labor is an educational guidebook designed to assist every person who currently manages or expects to manage human resources on farms, ranches, nurseries, dairies, and other agricultural operations. The text includes chapters covering:

- Staffing the Farm Business | Choosing to Hire a Capable Workforce;
- Staffing the Farm Business | Value of Job Descriptions; and
- Staffing the Farm Business | Writing Job Descriptions.

RESOURCES:

AG HELP WANTED: Guidelines for Managing Agricultural Labor | Chapter 3: Staffing the Farm Business.

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Sample Job Description

Job Title: Dairy Herd Manager

Summary: Responsible for overall daily, weekly, and seasonal management of the dairy herd, including milking, herd health, and breeding. Supervises employees and plans feeding program in cooperation with farm owner.

Duties and Responsibilities (essential): Oversee and participate in all aspects of herd management, including milking, monitoring health of cows, breeding, and raising replacements. Plan and implement feeding program in consultation with farm owner. Supervise three or four other dairy employees who milk, feed, and care for cattle.

Minor Functions: Assist with field work and/or machinery maintenance as time permits, especially during peak periods of planting and harvesting.

Direct Supervisor: Farm owner

Qualifications

Knowledge, Skills and Abilities: Knowledge of cow physiology, life cycle, and factors affecting health and milk production. Understanding of and ability to work with modern milking equipment and automated feeding system. Ability to organize and maintain herd health and breeding records. Ability to communicate well with and to train milking staff.

Experience: At least three years experience managing a dairy herd.

Education and Training: Associate's degree from an agricultural or technical school with a major in animal production or a closely related agricultural field. Bachelor's degree preferred.

Safety Qualification: First aid certificate and ambulance safety certification preferred.

Conditions

Salary Range: \$450 to \$600 per week, depending on qualifications

Work Hours: 5:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., with two one-hour breaks per full day

Days Off Per Week: 1.5

Other Benefits: House in very good condition plus paid utilities. Two weeks paid vacation after one year.

Work Environment: Modern 200-cow freestall operation with 500 acres of field crops.



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