

## Tips for Effective Job Descriptions (Part 2 of 2)

[Last month](#), we explored some of the ways job descriptions can assist municipalities with managing their human resources responsibilities. While not required by law, well-written and maintained job descriptions can provide invaluable support of legal compliance and other important functions such as creating return-to-work programs for injured employees, recruitment and hiring, and performance evaluation. Out-of-date job descriptions, on the other hand, may contain inaccuracies that negate such support.

Below are a dozen tips for creating and maintaining job descriptions so they are as useful and effective as possible for your municipality. (*Note: In municipalities with one or more unions, changes to job duties usually occur as part of the collective bargaining process.*)

1. Use only non-discriminatory, gender-neutral language. Refer to the job itself, not personal characteristics of particular employees or applicants.
2. List the job duties in order of importance or by the percentage of time spent.
3. Avoid jargon; if you need to include acronyms, be sure to use the associated words the first time they appear.
4. To be concise and readable, use bullets with phrases or short sentences, not paragraphs or long narrative descriptions.
5. Solicit input from employees doing the job. Incumbents understand many aspects of the work best and will appreciate that their input is requested and valued.
6. Create a final version that communicates to the employee what successful performance entails. Be specific and describe how well, where, when or why a task should be done. It helps to use action words and descriptors. For example, instead of, “Maintains municipal vehicles” the job description might say, “Consistently follows recommended maintenance procedures for all municipal vehicles, including timely salt removal and regular oil changes to preserve vehicle longevity”;
7. Include “soft skill” requirements that contribute to success. Examples include customer service skills, the ability to communicate well with the public, working as an effective and supportive team member, communication and listening skills, the ability to accept and apply constructive feedback, flexibility and adapting well to change, problem-solving skills, self-motivation, and initiative.
8. Communicate safety expectations in job duties and requirements to encourage a safe and healthy work environment.

9. List as requirements only those qualifications that are truly necessary to avoid inadvertently disqualifying individuals who would do well in the role and to avoid discriminating against individuals in protected classes. Consider where there might be appropriate substitutions, such as experience for some of the education.
10. If a position is classified as “Exempt” under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), be sure the job description supports that determination. As an example, it is wise to document the types of independent judgment exercised and decisions made when a position is classified as “Exempt” based on the Administrative Exemption. (See the Guidance section regarding the FLSA in the VLCT job description template [on the VLCT website](#).)
11. For supervisory roles, include supervisory responsibilities and identify the positions the supervisor oversees. Again, paint a picture of successful supervisory performance. This can include listing the responsibility of ensuring that their staff members’ job descriptions are kept up-to-date. Additional examples include delegating responsibilities and tasks to staff members to ensure reaching departmental goals; communicating regularly with staff to provide and receive feedback and to assess and implement a plan toward each employee’s training needs and developmental goals; and conducting timely and substantive written performance evaluations of all direct reports to meet the June 1 and December 1 deadlines.
12. To ensure accuracy, review job descriptions regularly, i.e., at least annually and whenever changes occur. As noted above, it can be helpful if regular maintenance and accuracy of job descriptions is explicit as a supervisory responsibility. Another method is to require job description review and updating as the first step in the annual performance review process. In addition to ensuring at least an annual check for accuracy, this step helps link the performance appraisal directly to the responsibilities in the job description. Finally, *except where precluded by a union contract*, job descriptions may be considered “living documents” rather than “set in stone” and should therefore be updated as needed.

To further assist with municipal job description writing, VLCT’s Human Resources Assistance Program has created a generic job description template, containing additional guidance, that may be tailored to your municipality’s needs. The template is accessible [on the VLCT website](#). Your municipality may prefer alternative section headings or additional sections or sub-sections but, regardless of the chosen format, it is helpful to be consistent across departments.

More job description templates, for common municipal positions such as Road Crew Member and Road Foreman, will be added to the VLCT website. As soon as they become available, members will be notified.

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