

Ten Reasons for Job Descriptions

Many municipalities realize they should have job descriptions for all employee positions but do not think they have the time to create or maintain them. While care and attention are indeed called for, the process does not have to be onerous. Job descriptions form a foundation for many of the responsibilities municipalities have as employers and serve as an important tool to help employees understand performance and behavioral expectations. Thus, having well-written, accurate job descriptions ultimately saves a great deal of time and effort.

While not exhaustive, here is a list of ten areas in which job descriptions are quite helpful:

1. Job Advertisements. A job description is the best starting point to determine the qualifications needed to fill a job opening and create advertisements and postings that attract a pool of well-qualified candidates. Everyone involved saves time when excellent candidates are attracted to the role and those not meeting the listed qualifications self-select out of the search process.

2. Interview Questions. A job description serves as a valuable tool for crafting interview questions that are targeted to the position requirements. When questions are focused on the qualifications needed to perform the job, rather than on personal characteristics or circumstances of the candidate, they help the interviewer identify the best qualified candidate and avoid questions that are unlawful in the employment context.

3. New Employee Onboarding. A newly hired employee needs good information about job expectations and how to perform his or her role well. The process known as “onboarding” goes beyond the traditional new employee orientation to help the individual acclimate to their new role sooner. The employee’s job description helps a supervisor create an onboarding program by prioritizing the content and scheduling sequence of meetings, activities, and trainings to provide the type of support that will bolster the employee’s competence and confidence, incorporate the individual onto the municipal team, and foster a sense of engagement and commitment to the new role more quickly.

4. Shared Expectations of Employees and Supervisors. Employees and supervisors need a common understanding of tasks and deadlines associated with the position. Additionally, job descriptions should include details such as standards of conduct, required certifications or licenses, and other necessary aspects of the job. A clear job description helps both supervisors and employees measure and communicate about performance expectations on a continuous basis; this makes the formal annual (or more frequent) evaluation process much easier.

5. Performance Appraisals. As noted above, job descriptions should serve as the foundation of any performance review. When well written, they communicate to employees what successful performance looks like as well and when those standards aren’t being met. They can also assist with identifying training, certifications, or other employee development needs and opportunities.

Workers' Compensation Insurance. Job descriptions are relied upon by physicians or other health practitioners to determine whether an employee can safely return to work and whether work restrictions might be necessary. They may also assist with developing "modified duty" assignments to get employees back to work as quickly as possible. Accurately presenting issues in the job description – such as physical work requirements, required safety procedures, and challenging working conditions – is also helpful in the hiring process. (Specific information about compliance with workers' compensation laws is beyond the scope of this article. In a workers' compensation situation, it is best to work with your PACIF claim representative or legal counsel on return-to-work issues.)

6. Compliance with the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). Job descriptions provide information that is key to assessing and documenting whether positions are exempt from the FLSA and therefore not subject to minimum wage, overtime pay requirements, and other protections provided by the FLSA. (For further information about FLSA compliance, see <http://www.dol.gov/compliance/laws/comp-flsa.htm>.)

7. Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Compliance. Including essential functions required for a job in the job description is helpful during the hiring process as well as throughout an employee's tenure. Identifying possible reasonable accommodations a job applicant or employee returning to work may need relevant to compliance with the ADA is important. (For further information about ADA compliance regarding employment, see the Equal Employment Opportunity website, <http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/ada17.html>.)

8. Employee Wage Levels. Accurate job descriptions help municipalities compare salaries and hourly rates internally and in the market with those of similar municipalities or other employers. Such comparisons help municipalities provide appropriate pay levels to attract qualified workers and maintain internal equity. Job descriptions also assist with the job evaluation process used in many formal compensation plans.

9. Employee Relations and Communication. Employee input into the content of job descriptions contributes to staff members' feeling valued by the municipality. Additionally, the process of reviewing and updating job descriptions presents an opportunity for a supervisor and employee to engage in meaningful discussions around job expectations, safety procedures, and training needs, as well as individual career and departmental goals.

In summary, while job descriptions are not legally required, when well-written they can help a municipality minimize employment liability and lend strong support to many human resources processes.