

Tips for Effective Job Descriptions

While not required by law, well-written and maintained job descriptions can provide invaluable support for legal compliance and other important functions such as creating return-to-work programs for injured employees, recruitment and hiring, and performance management. Out-of-date job descriptions, on the other hand, may contain inaccuracies that negate such support.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, job duty changes should be maintained as a management right; however, some municipal contracts may require that such changes occur as part of the collective bargaining process. Be sure to check your collective bargaining agreement.)*

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 about expected behaviors 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 important "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, strong 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 could 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.
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 explicitly listed 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, unless precluded by a union contract, job descriptions may be considered “living documents,” rather than set in stone, and thus should be updated as often as needed.