

Job descriptions: worth doing or a tedious waste of time?

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Job descriptions—usually seen as just another task on the to-do list for HR professionals—are generally an underused resource. But you can rely on them for a variety of reasons, including recruiting, performance reviews, reasonable accommodations, and employee classification. The often overlooked process of writing job descriptions, if done correctly, can prove to be a significant asset for employers. By contrast, outdated job descriptions can open you up to significant liability. When was the last time you reviewed your company's job descriptions? Are your job descriptions an asset or a liability for your company? It's time to put more thought into your job descriptions.

Recruiting the right candidates

A job description sets the expectations for a position and should be viewed as a key element in the hiring process. Using outdated job descriptions in the hiring process increases the possibility that you'll receive applications from the wrong (read: underqualified) pool of applicants. On the other hand, updated and accurate job descriptions allow applicants to determine whether they are interested in the job and whether their skill set is a match with the position. Determining what the job will entail and the skill set necessary to perform the job can help you minimize poor hires and result in hiring the right candidate the first time around.

Conducting performance evaluations

Supervisors should review job descriptions when they conduct performance evaluations. An accurate job description will help your supervisors assess the various rating factors on the evaluation form. On the other hand, evaluating an employee against an outdated job description could result in a lower rating than warranted and harm morale. The job description should be used to provide a structure from which to review an employee's performance as it relates to the various tasks and responsibilities of the job.

Supervisors should also go over job descriptions with employees during reviews. Doing so will allow the supervisor to remind the employee of the requirements and expectations of her job. It will also provide the employee an opportunity to remind her supervisor of duties or aspects of her job that may not have been considered as part of the evaluation process.

Creating ADA accommodations

Job descriptions are also helpful from a liability perspective in determining compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Outdated job descriptions can be a detriment if you rely on them to deny an applicant a job based on his inability to perform a stated "essential function" of the position that isn't essential. HR professionals should review the job description's essential functions and determine whether they are in fact essential.

Updated job descriptions are also necessary for determining if a reasonable accommodation can be made for an employee or applicant with a disability. Liability will likely ensue if you decline to (1) hire an applicant who is unable to perform a task that isn't truly an essential function or (2) make a reasonable accommodation for a disabled applicant or employee.

Determining FLSA classifications

Employers also use job descriptions to categorize positions as "exempt" or "nonexempt" from overtime under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). Job duties must be accurately described to properly determine whether the employee is eligible for overtime or meets any of the FLSA exemptions. Failure to properly classify a position could result in liability for back overtime pay, liquidated damages, and possibly penalties and attorneys' fees.

The time is now

Were these reasons enough to get you started on an audit of your job descriptions? They should be. To get started,

identify someone who will manage the process internally and work with outside experts. Determine job requirements by engaging with and observing employees throughout the process. Base descriptions on current job requirements; don't tailor the description to what an incumbent is doing.

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