



Competency-Based Job Descriptions

Vexelle Manufacturing Inc. decided to build its second plant in a fairly small town in the Midwest. The new plant was going to have the best equipment, with all the latest technology. The first positions to be filled were for 15 maintenance workers. Sherri, the human resources manager for the new plant, was in charge of finding candidates to be interviewed by the maintenance and production managers. The response to an ad in the local paper was incredible: hundreds of candidates replied. After four days of interviewing, only three job offers had been made, and only one candidate accepted.

What happened?

Everyone had a different idea about what a “qualified” candidate looked like. The HR manager used an old job description to help her decide who to schedule for interviews. The maintenance manager felt that, with the new equipment, Programmable Logic Controls (PLC) experience was definitely a job requirement, and therefore eliminated all candidates without that particular skill. The production manager thought that training in PLC skills would be provided by the company, so he didn’t even ask about PLC knowledge. Instead, he focused on the candidates’ ability to work with others,

2 Hiring Great People

because he was planning to implement a team-based work environment. Since everyone was evaluating the candidates against different criteria, there was no agreement about who to hire. The end result was that Vexelle had devoted extensive time and resources to a selection process that yielded only one hire.

In this chapter, you will learn the first step in developing a structured selection system that can help identify “qualified” candidates. Specifically, we’ll provide answers to the following questions:

- How can a job description accurately define today’s “work”?
- What does a competency-based job description look like?
- How do you identify “critical competencies”?
- How can a success profile help you select better workers?

How Can a Job Description Accurately Define Today’s “Work”?

Everyone needs a job! Millions of job seekers scan the employment sections of the Sunday newspapers regularly, seeking that perfect job. Headhunters spend their careers trying to fill jobs. The 1990s is the decade of too many “jobs” and not enough candidates who can actually do the “work.” Yet with all this talk about “jobs,” we are seeing a surprising trend away from discussing jobs in the traditional sense.

Traditionally, companies defined a job by a specific set of tasks, duties, and responsibilities, listed in the form of a job description. The job description let employees know exactly what they were expected to do on the job. It also helped the company make hiring decisions. A candidate’s background and experiences were compared with the job description. Often, with this approach, “experience performing the tasks in similar settings” was a major criterion that managers would use. Although this approach has worked for many companies over the years, today it is becoming obsolete.

The world of work has gone through some dramatic changes. Many of us have experienced the trauma of some sort of a “sizing” (whether it’s downsizing, upsizing, or rightsizing). The objective is always the same—to find more productive ways to do the work! Increased productivity often requires a more flexible workforce—one that is multiskilled and able to perform more than one job. Yesterday’s singularly focused job descriptions just can’t capture the full array of skills, abilities, and motivations necessary for tomorrow’s workforce.

Why Should I Develop Job Descriptions?

Don’t misinterpret what we’ve said so far about job descriptions. We are not saying that you should do away with them. On the contrary, I strongly suggest that you do create job descriptions. However, the nature of today’s job descriptions should reflect the nature of today’s work. Let’s take a look at some reasons why we still need job descriptions.

Ever try sending a friend to the grocery store without a list of exactly what you want? Breakfast cereals may be breakfast cereals, but there clearly are different types. Ever try to fill a position and have the hiring manager reject your top candidate? You and the hiring manager need to be reading from the same list of job requirements. A good job description can serve as the basis for developing structured selection tools that will help you identify the best candidates.

Candidates want to know what is expected of them and how they will be evaluated. A good job description is the basis of any performance evaluation system.

The value of any job can be traced back to the job description. You will need information when presenting the case for how much a job candidate should be paid. Without the job description, your guess will be as good as anyone’s regarding how much to pay the new employee.

The job description also serves as a reality check! Too often we ask for individuals who do not exist in our job market or in the job’s salary range. So we waste a lot of time searching for job candidates who, even if they did exist, would never

4 Hiring Great People

take the position at the salary we are offering. Run your job description by other HR professionals or headhunters. This will ensure that if the job candidates do exist, you will not be wasting your time by offering them noncompetitive wages.

As you can see, the reasons why we need good job descriptions haven't really changed that much over the years. What has changed is what makes a job description "good" (i.e., accurate and useful).

What Should I Be Looking For?

A good job description accurately reflects the work that employees will be expected to perform. In the past, a good job description specifically outlined the duties, tasks, and responsibilities that the employee would perform in the position. This made sense. Job duties were fairly static, and jobs were distinct from one another.

Today, it's not unusual for companies to have 100 or more specific job titles, based on varying tasks and duties. The human resources department of such companies could spend months developing specific job descriptions for each of these titles. This doesn't make sense. In addition, the duties and tasks of today's jobs are more fluid and dynamic. Employees are expected to wear many hats—whatever it takes to help the company achieve its goals. This is another reason why job descriptions cannot be as narrowly defined as in the past. But how can we accurately define work without writing a description for every position that involves different duties and tasks?

First, we need to look at work in a broader sense than we have in the past. Traditionally, it was appropriate to ask, "What tasks, duties, and responsibilities are required to perform the job well?" Today, it's more appropriate to ask, "What *competencies* are required to succeed on the job?"

For instance, "leadership" is a competency that may require knowledge of various management techniques, effective verbal communication skills, the ability to inspire and empower others, and the motivation to be a change agent.



Knowledge The information that an employee must possess to effectively perform the required work. This should not include specific knowledge that will be learned on the job. For example, a Spanish translator may need to have knowledge of technical vocabulary.

Skills and Abilities A level of expertise reflected in performance in relevant areas. Examples of *technical* skills and abilities are welding, tool and die work, drafting, technical writing, and accounting. Examples of *nontechnical* skills and abilities are planning and organizing, oral communication, interpersonal, decision making, and leadership.

Motivations Characteristics that motivate an employee to perform well on the job. (This topic is covered in detail in Chapter 8.) For instance, a successful salesperson may need to find satisfaction in interacting with many different types of people, working on commission, and conducting presentations.

Other Requirements If it doesn't fit one of the other three categories, you can stick it here. Legal documents such as certificates or licenses are included in this category.

By including competencies and a broader range of responsibilities in the job description, a number of HR functions can benefit. To begin with, a competency-based job description will provide greater flexibility in assigning work to your employees, allow you to group multiple jobs that require similar competencies under a single job description, and lengthen the life cycle of your job descriptions.

What Does a Competency-Based Job Description Look Like?

There are several key elements that make up a good job description. These include:

- **Job Title:** The title normally found on the new employee's business card or the term used to refer to his or her position. In a traditional or stable environment, the job title would be specific (e.g., Second Shift Supervisor, Cab Trim

6 Hiring Great People

Department). In a flexible environment, the job title could be used for all supervisors, regardless of shift or department (e.g., Team Leader).

- **Relevance of the Position:** A statement about how the position supports the company business plan and its objectives. It would be much broader in a flexible environment than in a traditional environment.
- **Major Responsibilities:** A list of the primary work functions that the individual must do on a regular basis. In a traditional job description, this section would include a list of very specific tasks and duties to be performed regularly (e.g., review production goals with team members at the beginning of each shift). A more flexible job description would include broader responsibilities (e.g., facilitate team meetings).
- **Critical Criteria:** The standards that all job candidates must meet to be considered for the position. This is a key area for selection purposes. In traditional job descriptions, this section would include only specific requirements (e.g., work 2:30 to 11:30 p.m., level 3 operator status, able to lift 20 lb). A more flexible job description would include critical competencies required for the job (e.g., excellent teamwork skills, technical knowledge, ability to learn multiple jobs, demonstrated ability to successfully coach and develop others, flexibility to work various shifts).



Smart
Managing

Operating Procedures

The very detailed tasks and duties that make up the various parts of today's multi-faceted positions can be captured in a separate document called Operating Procedures. These documents will allow you to have a small number of shorter competency-based job descriptions while still capturing the critical tasks and duties of each job. Operating Procedures are useful for training and maintaining consistent work behavior. Unlike job descriptions, Operating Procedures are designed to be continuously updated to reflect changes in how specific parts of the job are performed.

- **Preferred Criteria:** The qualities that you would like all candidates to possess, but that are not essential for successfully doing the job. These may look similar for a traditional or a flexible job description (e.g., five years' experience in the automotive industry, computer literate).
- **Reports to:** The position to which this hire would report (e.g., Group Leader).

Make Sure Your Job Descriptions Are Accurate

From a practical perspective, job descriptions are meaningless if they do not fit the job. This is where many companies get into trouble. If descriptions are not accurate, they can be misleading. Remember that the Critical Criteria section of the job description is the primary standard used in the hiring process.

The best hiring systems use the competencies identified in the Critical Criteria section of the job description as the basis for developing interview questions (see Chapters 6 and 7), identifying appropriate selection tests (see Chapter 9), and making the final hiring decision (see Chapter 11). The bottom line is, if your descriptions are inaccurate, your selection criteria will be inaccurate; if your selection criteria are inaccurate, your selection decisions will be inaccurate.

The rest of this chapter will show you the steps to take to build a solid foundation for developing a comprehensive and accurate selection system.

How Do I Identify “Critical Competencies”?

To get an accurate picture of the criteria that are critical to effective job performance, you must conduct a *Competency Analysis*. The results of the competency analysis will serve as

CAUTION!

**Make Them
Job-Related**

The law requires that all criteria used for selection purposes be job-related. If someone in your company rejects a candidate based on an inaccurate job description, your company is a prime target for a lawsuit.



Competency Analysis

The process by which you determine the competencies (knowledge, skills, abilities, motivations, and other requirements) necessary to perform a job successfully.

Success Profile A description of the competencies that are required for success in a particular job.

the basis for developing a success profile for the job.

A single success profile is often applicable to multiple positions within the same level in an organization. For instance, all first-level leadership positions in a manufacturing plant (i.e., team leaders) will likely

require the same critical competencies for success. The tasks and duties may differ, but the same competencies are required.

Conducting a Competency Analysis

The key here is that you don't need to do a competency analysis for every job title in your company. In order to narrow your focus, you need to concentrate on job *levels* rather than job *titles*. Entry (e.g., hourly clerical and production positions), Intermediate (e.g., supervisors, team leaders), and Senior (e.g., mid- to upper-level managers) are examples of organizational levels. Within each level, specific jobs are then grouped into "job families." A job family is a group of positions, within the same organizational level, that have similar roles in achieving the organization's objectives. The focus of your competency analysis will be on a particular "job family."

Once you have identified your targeted job family, you can conduct the competency analysis. In order to conduct a thorough competency analysis, you will need to gather information from multiple sources—people who have a good understanding of the positions that you are analyzing. Such people are called *job content experts* or *JCEs*.

The first step in performing a competency analysis is to compile a detailed description of the tasks that make up the job. This is sometimes referred to as a "task analysis." Several data collection methods should be used, including:

Analyzing Competencies

A manufacturing company has 2,500 employees. Three levels of positions have been identified within the organization: Hourly, Supervisory, and Senior. Within the Hourly level positions, there are three job families: Clerical, Production Associate, and Maintenance Technician positions. The company is interested in developing a selection system to evaluate candidates for its Production Associate positions. It will conduct a competency analysis to determine the knowledge, skills, abilities, and motivations required for success as a Production Associate. Later, the firm plans to conduct competency analyses for the Clerical and Maintenance Technician positions.



Job Observation: Observe incumbents (i.e., people who are currently doing the job) performing their jobs. Watch what they are doing and ask them to describe what they are doing. Record their responses in detail.

Incumbent Interviews: Conduct interviews with people who are currently doing the job. Each incumbent should be asked the same questions, so you will need to develop the interview questions ahead of time. Your questions should focus on learning about their key responsibilities, the types of problems they need to solve, the interactions they have with others, the most difficult part of their job, and the skills and abilities they feel are necessary for success.

Critical Incidents Meetings: Facilitate meetings with job content experts (usually, the supervisors of the people in the target position). Ask them to provide specific examples of times when employees in that job demonstrated highly effective and highly ineffective behaviors. Here, you are focusing on traits that distinguish high performers from low performers. Record their examples in detail.

Competency Visioning Meetings: Facilitate meetings with people in the organization who are “visionaries”—people who really know the jobs, the organization, and, most important, the *future* of the jobs and the organization. Remember you are



Grouping Information

To illustrate how knowledge, skills, abilities, and motivations are grouped, consider the following task analysis for the Production Associate position.

Production associates were observed working together in small teams and rotating jobs.

Incumbent interviews revealed that team members need to communicate to make sure that everything is done correctly.

The critical incidents meeting produced this example of a high performer: “Last week, Jodi took the time to give a new teammate some tips for doing his job more efficiently. During her break, she talked to the new employee to see how things were going and offered words of encouragement. She has done this on multiple occasions with new employees.”

During the visioning session, employees were told about a continuous improvement initiative to begin within the next few months. Employees would volunteer to form multidisciplinary teams to address inefficiencies throughout the plant. Teams that met their goals would receive rewards.

The key knowledge, skills, abilities, and motivations gathered included “working together,” “communicating,” “offering encouragement,” and “volunteering to form multidisciplinary teams.” It was decided to group these competencies under the heading “Teamwork.”

not only hiring for today. You want the people you hire today to still be around tomorrow. The purpose of this meeting is to gather information about the tasks that will be important for future success on the job, as well as to determine the knowledge, skills, abilities, motivations, and other requirements needed to accomplish those tasks.

Once you collect the data using the various methods described above, you need to analyze what you’ve got. That means grouping similar knowledge, skills, abilities, and motivations under headings, or *competencies*.

After analyzing all the data, you will have a list of competencies. This is where you need to be reasonable. Managers tend to come up with a lot of competencies. Once the list gets

too long, there's bound to be overlap. For example, the skills and abilities needed to plan a project, schedule workers, and organize inventory are similar in that they can all be captured under a single heading like "Planning" or "Organizing." Your goal is to minimize overlap among competencies. When competencies are distinct from one another, it is easier to measure them with various selec-

tion tools. The easier they are to measure, the more accurate your results will be in terms of predicting job performance.

The competency analysis generates the success profile for the position. This success profile can serve as the foundation for improving (and integrating) a variety of HR functions, including selection, performance evaluations, training and development, and compensation.

How Can a Success Profile Help Me Select Better Workers?

You'll remember the opening scenario, in which Vexelle was opening a plant and everyone involved in the selection process had a different idea of what the critical competencies were for the maintenance technician position. Now let's see how things could have turned out differently if Vexelle had done a thorough competency analysis and developed a success profile for the maintenance position.

Four months prior to opening the second manufacturing plant, the human resources department at Vexelle decided to

Position Competencies

As a general rule of thumb, the following guidelines can help you determine an appropriate number of position competencies.

Entry-level hourly positions (clerical, manufacturing, service) usually require about 5 to 8 competencies.

Intermediate-level positions (supervisor, team leader, professional) usually require about 8 to 11 competencies.

Senior-level positions (mid- to upper-level managers, directors, advanced professionals) usually require about 10 to 14 competencies.



12 Hiring Great People

take a good look at the jobs in the new plant. One major difference between the two plants was the technology. The new plant was going to have the most up-to-date equipment available. The new equipment would make the work less physically demanding than it was in the original facility. On the other hand, because employees in the new plant were going to work in teams, the production manager anticipated that other skills would be more important than in the past, such as communication and problem-solving skills.

The members of the human resources department decided to conduct a competency analysis for the maintenance positions at the new facility. They observed maintenance workers, interviewed them, facilitated critical incidents meetings, held visionary sessions, and analyzed data from a survey that asked job content experts to rate the importance of various competencies for effective job performance. The resulting success profile was composed of seven competencies, including technical skills, safety orientation, problem solving, and teamwork.

The success profile was incorporated into the Critical Criteria section of the job description and used as the basis for hiring maintenance workers. That is, each competency in the success profile was evaluated during the hiring process, using interviews and job-related tests.

Each candidate went through a technical test (designed to assess PLC programming knowledge) and a problem-solving test. Those who passed the tests were interviewed by Sherri, the HR manager. Sherri's interviews focused on several of the key competency areas. Those candidates who most closely matched the success profile were then interviewed by the production manager and the maintenance supervisor. Each asked every candidate a set of questions that focused on the critical competencies. Of the fifteen candidates who were granted final interviews, nine received offers and eight accepted!

Now I can't guarantee that you'll get similar results, even if you do a thorough competency analysis. Hiring ratios (and the

success of those hired) depend on many factors, including your recruiting strategies (see Chapter 3), your selection tools (see Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9), and your job offer (see Chapter 12). However, structuring a selection system based on a thorough competency analysis will always help you achieve better results. “Better results” means hiring employees who are more likely to succeed on the job—and protecting your company against lawsuits!

What does it take to be a successful salesperson with your company? A great supervisor? A skilled maintenance technician? An outstanding customer service representative? Do you have a clear picture of the success profiles of the positions in your organization?

Think of the success profile as the gauge by which all candidates will be measured. Figure out the acceptable levels for each job competency, according to the requirements of the job and the selection tools used. When a thorough competency

Determine Your Priorities

The results of a competency analysis can be applied to a single function (i.e., selection system, performance evaluation, pay scales, training, etc.), or they can be used to integrate HR systems. Basically, ask yourself, “What do I plan to do with the success profiles?”

The next step is to group jobs that have similar functions. Groups of jobs with similar functions are sometimes referred to as *job families*.

Determine which job families are in need of selection system improvements. In which jobs are there problems with turnover, absenteeism, production, quality, or customer service? If you keep your eyes and ears open, you’re bound to know exactly where the problems are occurring.

Conduct a competency analysis for your target position.

Make sure your selection tools are capable of evaluating all of the critical competencies in the success profile.

Update your job descriptions by including competencies from the analysis in the Critical Criteria section.



analysis is conducted and valid selection tools are used (see Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9), competencies can be powerful predictors of performance on the job.

Manager's Checklist for Chapter 1

- ❑ Job descriptions are still important in the hiring process, but the question “What duties, tasks, and responsibilities are involved in this job?” has become “What *competencies* are required to succeed on the job?”
- ❑ You need a competency-based job description that will provide greater flexibility in assigning work, allow you to group jobs that require similar competencies under a single job description, and lengthen the life cycle of your job descriptions.
- ❑ A competency-based job description includes the job title, the relevance of the position, the major responsibilities (general), critical criteria, and preferred criteria.
- ❑ Identify critical competencies by conducting a competency analysis, a process by which you determine the knowledge, skills, abilities, motivations, and other requirements necessary to perform a job successfully.