

Guidelines for Writing a Competency Based Position Description

OVERVIEW

A position description serves several purposes:

- Provides essential information for assigning the appropriate pay grade, job function and/or title for the position,
- Assists in recruiting efforts for screening and interviewing,
- Identifies the essential functions of the position based on job specific competencies, and
- Provides candidate(s) an understanding of the primary duties and responsibilities they are expected to fulfill.

Competencies are the knowledge, skills, abilities, personal characteristics and other “worker-based” factors that help differentiate superior performance from average performance under specified circumstances. Competencies are identified to clearly define the essential functions of the position.

WHAT IS INCLUDED

Four key competencies are included in a position description:

- Technical – Technical skills and knowledge of technology. Measurable and tangible competencies, such as understanding and utilizing current technology, software and computer skills.
- Knowledge – What the candidate knows and how they think. Intangible qualities, such as project management skills, problem-solving abilities, decision-making skills and time management.
- Behavior – How the candidate reacts under specific conditions. The position may require high levels of customer satisfaction. This may raise questions about how often and effectively the candidate interacted with customers in previous positions.

- Interpersonal Skills – How the candidate interacts with others. This may include, but is not limited to clients and co-workers.

Information included in a position description:

- Representative duties and responsibilities,
- Reporting relationships within the organization,
- Education, licenses, certification, or other essential qualifications for the position,
- Special skills required to perform the job, and
- Work experience needed for effective performance.

STANDARD FORMAT

Northwestern University has adopted a standard format for position descriptions based on desired competencies. The sections included in the description are:

- **Position Information** which includes proposed job title, department name, the title of the position to which the described position reports, and titles of positions that this position will supervise if applicable.
- **Job Summary** consisting of one or two concise sentences summarizing the main purpose of the position.
- **Duties and Responsibilities** comprising a list of the primary tasks and responsibilities this position is expected to perform.
- **Minimum Qualifications** containing a list of experience, skills, education, and certification required of the employee performing the job.
- **Preferred Qualifications** containing a list of experience, skills, education, and certification preferred of the employee performing the job.

HOW TO PROCEED

It is generally easiest to start with itemizing the primary tasks that the position is expected to perform, answering the question of 'what do I want this position to do?' with concise, factual statements. These items then become the list for the **Duties and Responsibilities** section. When itemizing, each task should start with an action verb that is specific in nature. For example, a task described as 'assisting with marketing materials and brochures' is too vague to be of value. Rather, a statement such as 'editing copies submitted by faculty and staff for marketing pamphlets and newsletters, utilizing desktop publishing software to format copy, selecting and adding appropriate graphics when needed' tells a much clearer story of what assistance is expected of the position. It also identifies necessary skills and qualifications to be itemized later.

If the position has supervisory or lead worker responsibilities, the extent of the position's authority to hire, discipline, and recommend termination of the employment of subordinates, and to assign work, train and evaluate the performance of those subordinates must be included. Each duty or responsibility should also include the percent of time spent of that activity with the assigned percentages totaling 100%.

The final duty in this section should be "other duties as assigned". This ensures that the document is a more complete job description and is not interpreted in a more prescriptive way. It is not possible to finitely define each task, and some variations in

task assignment may be necessary from time to time. Including this statement precludes the need to modify the position description when these variations occur.

The letter 'E' should be used to identify the essential functions of the position. Factors to consider include whether one of the reasons that position exists are to perform that duty, the number of employees available to perform the function or among whom the performance of the function can be distributed, and the degree of expertise or skill required to perform the function.

Minimum Qualifications are derived from what is required to perform the duties and responsibilities. It is important to list any required degrees, certifications and licenses needed to perform the job. Competencies, such as Technical, Knowledge, Behavior, and Technical skills are used to identify the minimum qualifications (refer to page 1-2 of this document for a description of the competencies).

Preferred Qualifications are derived from what is preferred to perform the duties and responsibilities. They are not essential to the job, but are skills that can enhance a candidate's ability to perform the job. Competencies, such as Technical, Knowledge, Behavior, and Technical skills are used to identify the minimum qualifications (refer to page 1-2 of this document for a description of the competencies).

At this point the **Job Summary** can be written. This summary is not intended to be a reiteration of the duties, responsibilities, and qualifications for the position. It is, rather, a concise summary telling the reader why the position exists. In fact, the easy way to write it is often to simply answer the question 'why does this position exist?' To illustrate: "This position performs editorial, layout composition, and graphic design work on a wide range of brochures, newsletters, posters, and other marketing materials which are targeted to student and alumni audiences" summarizes the primary purpose of the position without going into specific duties and qualifications.

Finally, while it has often already been decided where this position fits in the organization, it is a good time to review if that decision is correct now that the position has been described. It is also a good time to look again at the positions reporting to this position to see if that relationship still makes sense.

At this point the **Position Information** can be completed. A proposed Job Title can be entered and will be reviewed for best fit by the Human Resources Consultant and, if needed, by the Compensation Division of Human Resources. Existing generic titles should be used whenever possible to assure consistency of job grading, other comparisons throughout the University and for external wage survey purposes. If a generic title is used, a school or department may use a more specific title internally if desired.

SAMPLE JOB DESCRIPTIONS

Two sample job descriptions follow illustrating how the sections of the description should be completed.