

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 the position incumbent an understanding of the primary accountabilities, 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

There are three types of competencies that can be included in a position description. They describe the skills, knowledge and behavior necessary to perform the job.

- Skills – Abilities needed to execute job duties, such as software and computer proficiency, interpersonal skills, accounting skills, or specific laboratory techniques.
- Knowledge – Areas of specialty or expertise; for example, nursing, finance, employment law, or history.
- Behavior – Characteristics an employee must display in the job; for instance, initiative, collegiality, resourcefulness, or professionalism.

Knowledge, Skills, and Behavior needed to succeed in a job can fit into two basic categories of competencies: “general/organizational” or “specific/individual.” A good position description includes both kinds.

- General/Organizational – These competencies need to be demonstrated by everyone in a particular organization. Examples at Northwestern include:
 - *Quality/Compliance*: Achieving a standard of excellence with our work processes and outcomes, honoring University policies and all regulatory requirements
 - *Customer focus*: Striving for high customer satisfaction, going out of our way to be helpful and pleasant, making it as easy as possible on the customer rather than our department or the University
 - *Communication*: Balancing listening and talking, speaking and writing clearly and accurately, influencing others, keeping others informed
 - *Collegiality*: Being helpful, respectful, approachable and team oriented, building strong working relationships and a positive work environment
 - *Initiative*: Taking ownership of our work, doing what is needed without being asked, following through
 - *Efficiency*: Planning ahead, managing time well, being on time, being cost conscious, thinking of better ways to do things
 - *Coachability*: Being receptive to feedback, willing to learn, embracing continuous improvement
 - *People management (for those with direct reports)*: Setting clear expectations, reviewing progress, providing feedback and guidance, holding people accountable

- Specific/Individual – These competencies need to be demonstrated by people doing particular jobs. Examples include *computer applications* and *deadline-sensitive* (for a non-exempt position) or *strategic planning* and *results orientation* (for an exempt position). You should identify and define these kinds of position-specific competencies for each position you supervise.

A position description also contains the following specific items:

- Representative duties and responsibilities, as well as accountabilities
- 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. The sections included in the description are:

- **Position Information** which includes the official University job title, as well as the departmental 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.
- **Scope** providing information about the position's financial, supervisory, and faculty and student responsibilities.
- **Job Summary** consisting of one or two concise sentences summarizing the main purpose of the position.
- **Principal Accountabilities** comprising a list of the primary tasks and responsibilities this position is expected to perform, as well as the end results that are to be achieved.
- **Minimum Qualifications** containing a list of experience, education, and certification required of the employee performing the job.
- **Minimum Competencies** consisting of a list of those skills, knowledge, and behaviors that are required for the performing the job.
- **Preferred Qualifications** containing a list of experience, education, and certification preferred of the employee performing the job.
- **Preferred Competencies** consisting of a list of those skills, knowledge, and behaviors 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 **Description of Principal Accountabilities** 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' tells a much clearer story of what assistance is expected of the position. It also identifies necessary skills and qualifications to be itemized later. In

addition, it is important to identify the end results that will be achieved through the completion of the tasks. For example, a description such as 'editing copies submitted by faculty and staff for marketing pamphlets and newsletters . . . in order to assure accuracy and appropriateness of materials' provides information as to the duty performed as well as the end results achieved.

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. To make this determination, consider whether each job duty must stay with this position, or if the duty could be transferred to another position, should the need arise. Functions that are integral to the position or require a unique skill will likely be considered essential.

Consider the position's **Scope** after the principal accountabilities have been written. These questions help to describe the degree of responsibility the position has in three important realms: supervision, finance and budget, and student and faculty interaction. If the position has responsibilities in any of these areas, it is important to revisit the Principal Accountabilities section to ensure that specific details about the scope areas are provided.

Minimum Qualifications are derived from what is required to perform the duties and responsibilities. It is important to list any required degrees, certifications, licenses, and years of work experience needed to perform the job.

Minimum Competencies, such as Knowledge, Skills, and Behavior are determined by identifying those skills that must be present for success in the position (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 can enhance a candidate's ability to perform the job.

Preferred Competencies, such as Knowledge, Skills, and Behavior are those abilities that will also enhance the performance of the job (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.