

Transforming the Workplace: Job Descriptions as Strategic Tool

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If I were to ask you what simple tool has the potential to be your organization's secret competitive weapon, would job descriptions have leapt immediately to mind? For most people, they probably would not even have made the "Top 100" list of possibilities. Yet used strategically, job descriptions can have an extraordinary impact on the way employees view their jobs and consequently literally can transform the workplace.

Let's look at how we define "the job" in the workplace. Typically organizations define a job in terms of its specific duties and responsibilities, characteristics, and special requirements, which are reflected in a written document called a job description. The focus is on the activities in which employees are expected to engage and the tasks they are to complete. Subsequently employees are evaluated on their success in completing these tasks, and their pay may be tied to their performance (i.e., some employees are paid because they complete tasks; others are paid based on how well they complete them).

My contention is that we have made a mistake by writing and using job descriptions too narrowly. Most job descriptions focus on the wrong thing - i.e., on tasks and responsibilities rather than on the effect of performance on the organization. Because these documents focus employee attention by defining the job and its "boundaries" and because we have used them as operational tools, job descriptions have not lived up to their potential as a strategic tool. What if we write job descriptions in terms that are organization/outcome-centered instead of those that are employee/task-focused? By changing the framework within which we describe how people are expected to work and relate to their jobs,

we can transform their performance and exponentially increase the organization's likelihood of success.

What is wrong with the traditional employee/task-centered approach to job descriptions? Focusing on the tasks employees are expected to perform places the emphasis on completing those tasks. Because there is no context for the performance, there is a disconnect between what an employee does day after day and what the organization does. In most organizations the focus is on individual performance; there is little or no reference to, or connection with, the effect of the performance on the organization's success. In fact, employees generally are paid to complete tasks whether or not their performance has a positive influence on the organization.

We can change this picture if instead of defining jobs in terms of their tasks and responsibilities, we define them in terms of how they contribute to the organization's success. This perspective focuses on the influence each employee has on the organization. NOW there is a context: employees can see where and how they fit into the organizational picture, so they feel connected. They also feel more motivated than they do when operating in a vacuum. In this scenario, employees are paid to help the organization achieve success rather than to complete tasks. Because the job description should serve as the basis for performance evaluation, employees now are evaluated in terms of how successful they are in helping the organization achieve its goals rather than in terms of whether or how well they accomplished discrete tasks. In short, employees become stakeholders whose interests are aligned with those of the organization.

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The differences in motivation and performance caused by the shift from an employee/task-centered job description to an organization/outcome-centered one literally can be transformative. For example, assume that one of the tasks of a warehouse manager is to keep the facility neat. Consider the difference between a manager who views one of his/her primary tasks as keeping the warehouse neat vs. one who sees the outcome of a neat warehouse as improving the company's level of customer service because the products can be located, packed, and shipped more quickly, or of helping the company manage its costs by reducing the likelihood of accidents. Under an outcome-centered approach to job descriptions, the motivation to perform is entirely different.

Re-defining our view of "the job" has implications for how we measure employees' contributions and success, evaluate and reward performance, and think about training outcomes. For example, under the task-based definition of the job, we might ask how the skills employees learn in a training session will improve their ability to perform their tasks. From the outcome-centered definition, however, our question will be how their new skills improve their ability to influence the organization's success in a positive way. Pay is another example of the differences in the two approaches. If we pay only for task completion, that's all we will get. However, if we pay for improving the company's position, employees will focus on their contributions to that outcome.

How do you know which perspective your employees have? First, read their job descriptions and see whether the documents focus on tasks or outcomes. Second, ask employees about specific aspects of their jobs and see what they say. The answers your employees give to the following two questions will be very telling:

1. What is the outcome of doing [an assigned task] well?
2. What is the outcome of not doing [an assigned task] well?

Imagine if when you asked the following questions you received responses like these:

- Why maintain a neat warehouse? So the company can control its inventory more effectively (cost effectiveness), locate and ship products faster/more easily (customer service).
- Why conduct fundraising events? So we can increase the number of athletes served through our programs.
- Why manage costs? So we can provide more competitive pricing to our customers.
- Why conduct performance reviews of employees? To help them become fully successful in providing exceptional customer service.
- Why does producing a document with zero errors matter (to a copy editor)? It helps maintain the company's reputation for exceptional quality.

Job descriptions that focus on employees' contributions to organizational success become an important and powerful strategic tool because they direct employee behaviors and decisions to outcomes rather than to tasks. They set the expectations and put employees on notice that performing tasks is not enough: to be successful, those tasks must result in a positive impact on the organization. In fact, a job that has no impact on the organization is one that we don't need.

Now that the "secret" about job descriptions is out, the choice is yours. Will they simply be a necessary operational requirement or a strategic tool? Six months from now, what will the job descriptions in **your** organization say? ➔

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