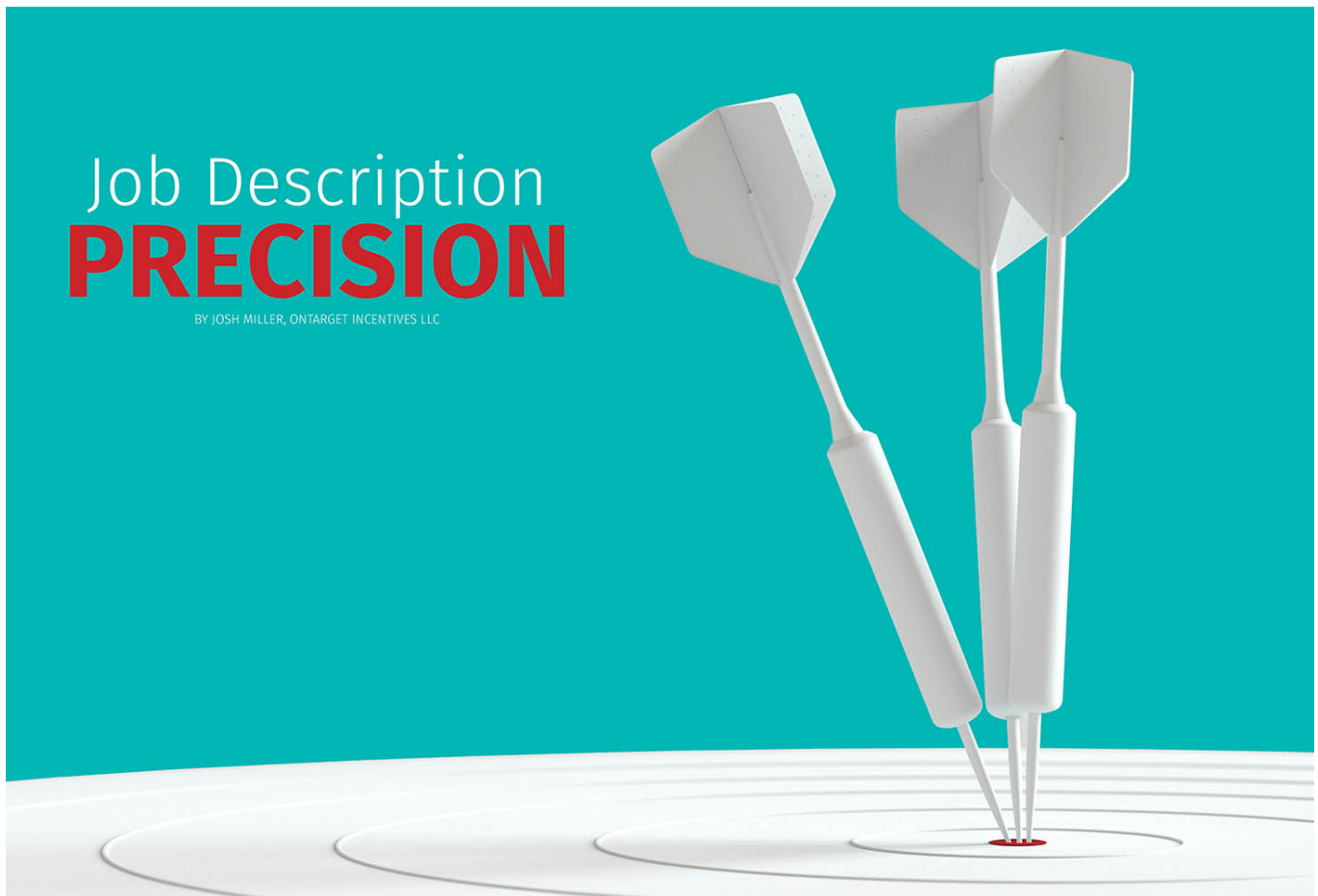


WORKSPAN

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Job Description Precision

BY JOSH MILLER



THE QUESTION COMES IN MANY FORMS, AND WE EITHER ASK IT OR ANSWER IT ALL THE TIME:

- What do you do for a living?
- What do you do for work?
- Or the simplest version: What do you do?

The answers tend to vary. For some of us, our title is enough to adequately explain what we do to a stranger. We're not all that lucky, though, and some of us have to be creative to explain what we do in a 30-second sound bite.

Job descriptions are an unpleasant, yet necessary evil in most organizations. I've never met anyone who enjoys job descriptions in any way. They aren't enjoyable to read. They are less enjoyable to write. Yet so many critical activities in organizations rely on good job descriptions.

The Role Job Descriptions Play

We'll come back to what we mean by a "good" job description later. For now, let's discuss what makes job descriptions important in the first place.

- **Recruiting.** Job descriptions are frequently used in job postings, and rightfully so. Outsiders need to get an understanding of a job in order to know if they should apply for it.
- **Job leveling.** In large organizations, jobs are often grouped into various levels. Generally, these levels correspond to many factors that help group jobs not by function, but by rarity and authority, among other things.
- **Performance reviews.** For a performance review, it can be hard to judge whether a person has done a good job if you haven't adequately described what the job is. The job description is the starting point for this, along with goals that can be updated as needed.
- **Professional development.** As an organization plans how performance in different roles may evolve as employees grow — hopefully into other potential roles — clearly defined jobs are needed. Descriptions of each role that adequately explain key differences are necessary for both leadership and individual employees for making professional development decisions.
- **Compensation benchmarking.** Leading organizations benchmark their jobs regularly, but job titles aren't enough to do it since companies can be inconsistent in how they use job titles. (Have you ever benchmarked the term "Account Executive?") Job descriptions help better define jobs in order to compare to similar jobs in other organizations for accurate benchmarking.
- **Incentive compensation design.** Incentive compensation by its very nature requires understanding what a job does, since the incentive compensation must be built to motivate the appropriate behaviors desired within that job.

Missing the Mark

Poor quality job descriptions cause a cascade of problems in the above areas. But to decipher what makes a job description “good,” let’s start by discussing the characteristics of a “bad” job description.

1. A bad job description is overly specific. Being too detailed in a job description can create many problems:

- The job description can be too time-intensive to maintain, as the more detailed it is, the more likely it is to need continuous adjustments. Not keeping up with the adjustments makes the job descriptions out-of-date, and once they are out-of-date, people stop trusting them.
- The more specific you are, the more you risk describing every individual person as being in their own job, and therefore having more job descriptions than you really need. Including details such as the accounts a person may manage or the specific number of people that report to them risks too narrowly defining the job.
- An overly specific job description risks being too long, and therefore causing the reader to lose interest. This can affect job postings among other things. The reader doesn’t need to know how many calls per day or emails per day the job may require, or the average length of meetings.

2. A bad job description is written with the wrong audience in mind. A job description needs to assume the reader is not already familiar with the position. As such, it needs to include enough detail for the person to understand what the job entails, without using industry jargon or lingo that may not be understandable to outside job candidates or internal users of the job description.

3. A bad job description can be too ornate. A job description needs to be accurate. It should not focus only on the exciting parts of a job, nor should it exaggerate a job’s role in the exciting activities. If there are less exciting parts of the job, the job description needs to be upfront in describing them (but not in too much detail).

4. A bad job description can be too short. Being concise is, of course, a good thing. But the job description still needs to capture the relevant functions of the job. Let’s discuss that in greater detail, as functions represent the core concept that needs to be explained accurately for all of these elements to come together.

Fashionable Functions

Focus on the job’s function to avoid the above problems. This is a key principle to recruiting the right people, properly leveling a job, accurately benchmarking it and creating optimized, relevant incentive compensation, if appropriate. None of these things happen without getting the functions right. Function doesn’t necessarily refer to what tasks the job entails. A job may include setting up meetings, traveling to customers and participating in conference calls. These

all describe tasks associated with a job, but they don't describe the functions. Functions refer to the actual things a job is responsible for completing. This may mean a job is overseeing a variety of processes that are all in the spirit of accomplishing a higher-level responsibility. If so, that's a function.

Example One: Account Manager

Account Manager is one of the most common, generic titles out there. A common use of this title is to describe a job that is the key point of contact for a customer. In that capacity, the following may be key functions of such a job:

- Negotiating and securing annual renewals from assigned customers.
- Cross-selling additional products to assigned customers.
- Acting as the key facilitator in ensuring that any problems the customer experiences get solved adequately.

Notice these bullet points do not go into unnecessary details, nor do they waste time on sub-tasks that are part of the key functions of the job.

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Example Two: Account Servicing Associate

Imagine that the Account Servicing Associate position is a more junior role that works alongside the above-described Account Manager as part of the account management process. Functions of that role may include:

- Acting as the first-line customer service contact for assigned customers.
- Executing basic tasks as needed as part of servicing assigned customers.
- Creating quote packages for additional products the customer may be considering purchasing.
- Assisting in analysis as needed for use in the negotiation of customer renewals.

Notice these functions remain fairly high level, without getting into too much detail. Now compare those functions to the following:

- Participates in the account management process.
- Is a key member of the renewal negotiation process.
- Helps cross-sell to customers.
- Participates in high-level strategic conference calls with executives.

See the problem in the second set of bullet points? They neglect to describe what the job's role is in all these things that are described. Functions don't merely describe what a job participates in, they also describe the responsibilities associated with the job. Describing things a job may participate in can lead to employee dissatisfaction as they may feel misled as to what the job's responsibilities may or may not be.

Functions, as described above, should be written to describe key differentiators between different jobs. Multiple jobs may participate in the same processes, but functions need to help tease out what is different about the roles the jobs play in those processes. These functions are the key element to help in grouping/leveling jobs, accurately benchmarking (because benchmarking against a similar functional job is more important than benchmarking against a similar title), and functions become a primary input into a robust incentive compensation design process.

Missing out on accurately describing the functions within jobs, and inaccurately capturing them in job descriptions, can lead to so many key recruiting, employee satisfaction and compensation problems. Therefore, it's best to enforce good standards in the functional job descriptions at the outset.

When it comes down to it, "*What do you do?*" isn't such a bad question. When that question is applied functionally across the organization, it unlocks an organization's ability to have better compensation processes, professional development, performance reviews, incentive design and improved employee satisfaction and engagement.

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