

☐ Some Suggestions

Whether you are writing a narrative-style job description or completing a questionnaire, there are a variety of things you should keep in mind.

First and foremost, remember that you are trying “**to communicate job understanding**” and it is quite possible that the reader will not have any familiarity with your job. Therefore, everything you write should be aimed at increasing the reader’s understanding. Try to put yourself into the reader’s position – review whatever you have written from the perspective of someone new to the area.

Regardless of the form of the documentation, the following kinds of information should be communicated (i.e., explained, described) somewhere in the documentation:

- ☐ What the job does. What methods are used to achieve the major objectives of the job. The kind of assistance that is available and its source.
- ☐ Where does the job fit into the flow of work. What are the main thrusts of the job? Where does the work come from? Where does it go? Why is the job there?
- ☐ Information about the context in which the job operates: e.g., information about the nature and complexity of the organization, division, department function, products or services, processes, and “clientele” which the job serves. In other words, any facts that will aid the reader in understanding the environment in which the job functions.
- ☐ The major challenges facing the incumbent. (**Note:** These could be the challenges inherent in dealing with people, or of a practical, technical, or managerial nature.) It is useful to provide examples of the most complex kinds of thinking which the incumbent must engage in – what kinds of problems typically present themselves in the job and how does the incumbent go about solving them?
- ☐ The nature and source of the controls which limit or extend the incumbent's ability to make final decisions and the nature of the decisions which can be made by the position.
- ☐ Participation on committees or task forces and the purpose of those bodies.
- ☐ Significant internal and external relationships and their nature and purpose.
- ☐ Anything not already covered but which is important for a clear understanding of the job.
- ☐ Include examples to help the reader understand specific points.

Following are some pitfalls to guard against:

- ☐ Vague generalities rather than precise, clear and concise language. If a sentence does not add to a reader’s knowledge of the job, then either leave it out, change it, or add an example.

- ☐ Too narrow. The reader is as interested in “why” something is done as he/she is in “what” is done. In other words, while there should be some focus on what the incumbent does, it should also be clear what the end results are that are required of the job.
- ☐ Inclusion of personal judgments or conclusions. Avoid adding opinions about the job’s requirements. Do not say, “The incumbent needs a good knowledge of people” or “of accounting”, or “of engineering”. Give the facts, if any, or describe the kinds of situations which will allow the reader to draw his/her own conclusions about the job’s requirements. One way of recognizing the facts which you should include is to ask yourself, “Why does the incumbent need a good knowledge of people (or whatever)?” and write down your answer.
- ☐ Too passive. Use the active tense. It will make your description clearer and will likely make it shorter as well.
- ☐ Organizational relations, upwards or subordinate, are confusing or incomplete, or contradict the organizational chart, or do not differentiate between line and functional relationships.
- ☐ Significant lateral organizational relations are omitted. Relationships “sideways” are often important to understand if the reader is to have the “complete” picture.
- ☐ Inadequate description of the nature and complexity of the service or function.
- ☐ No use of typical examples to add meaning.
- ☐ The role the position plays in the overall administrative process is not well described. For example, a position accountable for purchasing materials and equipment should describe the position’s role in the total purchasing process from feasibility, development of specifications, identification and selection of sources of supply, price determination or negotiation, budget allocation, and expediting delivery and installation. In addition, such a role may differ depending upon the nature of the material, equipment, or cost level. This does not mean that it is necessary to quote the standard practice involved; usually a sentence or two will provide what is needed.
- ☐ Too long and detailed with several irrelevancies.
- ☐ Too short and superficial: does not capture the job.
- ☐ Incorrect emphasis on different aspects of the job.

The overriding consideration in determining the quality of job documentation is whether or not it communicates understanding to the reader. When you have finished writing it, re-read it from the perspective of someone unfamiliar with your job and fix any part of it which does not communicate understanding. Finally, remember that simple language is best; do not try to overwhelm the reader with jargon or fancy language -- it will not aid in the communication process.