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Make Job Descriptions Do More Than Describe a Job

by Steve Bruce

Reviewing our records recently, we found a provocative article on job descriptions by Shelburne, Vermont, consultant Scott Delman, author of "How to Mean Business, Water Cooler Wisdom" and other books. Good things bear repeating ... and sharing. So let's share some of his thoughts with you now.

Job descriptions are all too frequently written like IRS instructions. They are a list tasks, requirements, boundaries, and guidelines. Yes, they are "accurate," but they offer little perspective as to what it means to do a good job and how to be valuable to the company. For example, look at the following description:

Truck Driver, Level 1: Load and unload merchandise, materials, and supplies as requested. Must have safe driving record and CDL license, and be able to lift up to 80 pounds. Supervised by warehouse manager. Overtime required.

There is nothing technically wrong with this job description. It accurately reflects the duties of the truck driver. Unfortunately, it does not suggest the complete scope of the position. It doesn't address (or acknowledge) the value of the truck driver's role—only the tasks.

What's the difference? The dictionary defines a **task** as "a piece of work done as part of one's duties." It defines a **role** as "the actions and activities required or expected of a person or group." In other words, *a role has to do with overall expectations within an organization.*

Understanding this difference can help make your organization more successful and profitable. How? Just check out another version of the job description we just examined:

Truck driver-Level 1: This is a service position, meaning you are always serving an internal or external customer. You have and are expected to use the authority to make decisions to provide successful transactions and satisfy customers. Being accurate and on time is a must. Each transaction must be handled in a way that positively spreads our organization's reputation. We keep our word 100% of the time, and we work every day until our obligations are complete, frequently resulting in unscheduled overtime. Working safely (by using good judgment and following all company and OSHA regulations) is required. Load and unload merchandise, materials, and supplies as requested. Must have safe driving record, CDL license, and be able to lift up to 80 pounds. Supervised by warehouse manager.

Plainly, there is a distinction between the two versions. The employee who works within the second job description has a clearly defined role, parameters within which to function, and an understanding of the organization's standards. Obviously, the truck driver who demonstrates good communication, customer service, teamwork, professionalism, and client-retention skills will outperform the driver who only delivers freight.

This example of task vs. role extends to all positions in all organizations. All members share common responsibilities (roles) in advancing customer service, effective communication, teamwork, professionalism, etc. Their tasks vary widely, but they all represent their company's standards to outside clients, vendors and co-workers.



From the Program Development Division
United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism
Rabbi Paul Drazen

Rapaport House • 820 Second Avenue • New York, NY 10017 • 646-519-9310