Experience

10 Tips for Writing Effective Job Descriptions

10 Tips for Writing Effective Job Descriptions

Did you know that most job seekers think current job postings don't have enough information about specific responsibilities of the position?

Did you know that when faced with two different descriptions of the same job, candidates will apply for the job that more clearly explains how the position can benefit them as an employee, rather than how they will be of help to the company?

These findings and more were revealed in a recent survey of more than 5,000 experienced candidates, recent graduates and college students who are users of Experience, the leading provider of university career networks.

For more detail on the survey results, see Appendix.

TIP 1:   Work Closely with the Hiring Manager

TIP 2:   Identify Critical Qualities Wanted in a Candidate

TIP 3:   Know Your Target Audience and Be Specific

TIP 4:   First Sell the Opportunity

TIP 5:   Then Sell the Company

TIP 6:   Translate Internal Jargon

TIP 7:   Be Clean, Clear, and Error-Free

TIP 8:   If You Change the Posting Location, Change the Description

TIP 9:   Control Your Messaging

TIP 10:   Use Available Resources

TIP 1: Work Closely with the Hiring Manager

The department manager is your best resource for exactly what the job entails. Spend an hour to hammer out the details with him or her. "I always ask what the must-haves are for the individual that the manager wants to hire," explains **Jeffrey Gross**, an independent recruiting contractor with Competitive Edge Business Systems in Cleveland.

Kim Hays, an HR recruiter for a major security company based in Canton, Ohio, agrees, adding, "I encourage the hiring manager to focus on what he or she really wants in the candidate. It's the manager who knows what the department needs to run successfully and what the department's future goals are." Hays also asks the hiring manager to consider this question: What are the qualities you want and need to fill this position?

One Boston-area recruiting manager at a financial firm says that she looks to the hiring manager for trends and to understand how positions change. "When I understand that," she says, "I understand how the value that a candidate adds to a position will need to change."

Upfront planning with the hiring manager will help you tremendously because you'll understand the details and nuances of the position to be able to write a compelling and targeted job description.

TIP 2: Identify Critical Qualities Wanted in a Candidate

Before you can successfully write a job description, it's essential to know the specific qualities that a candidate should possess. **Karen Cusimano**, a recruiter in the HR department of a large manufacturing company based in Canton, Ohio, uses a template for writing descriptions. Hiring managers complete the form, which has five sections:

- A general description of the job and department

- Actual tasks of the job and the knowledge required for completing those tasks

- Education requirements

- Problem solving, which ranges from simple everyday problems to one-of-a-kind situations requiring unique solutions

- Accountability, which determines the job's pay structure

From this template, Cusimano writes the job description. She notes that a separate page is available for any physical requirements.

Gross also has a structured format that he follows and has developed what he calls an "acid test." In working with the hiring manager, Gross compiles a list of 10 critical areas of expertise. For the position of Manager of Employee Relations, for example, three of his 10 items are:

- This individual has developed and implemented successful union-avoidance strategies

- This individual has experience with workforce reduction and job elimination

- This individual has familiarity with acquisitions, divestitures, and plant closings

Gross uses these items when writing the job description and, in turn, when interviewing applicants. "I score each candidate on these items using a 1 to 5 scale," he explains. "If the candidate barely meets the qualification, he or she scores the minimum of a 2.5. If the candidate has 10 years of experience in a particular area, he or she scores a 5. If I score five candidates, at the end of the day, I interview the person who scored a 45 over the person who scored a 40."

TIP 3: Know Your Target Audience and Be Specific

Every person is motivated by something-money, title, potential, to name a few. Your job description, therefore, should be tailored to what drives your intended audience.

A few trends that Gross has noticed are that, by and large, people working in IT don't have a tremendous amount of company loyalty; instead, they're motivated by the project, the support available for projects, and future training. On the other hand, folks working in HR are generally concerned with the impact they can make at a company, the size of their "turf," and their title. Gross writes his job descriptions with these biases in mind.

Cusimano finds that being very specific about job requirements, especially education level, is crucial. For example, if a Bachelor's degree is required, she clearly states it. "I try to eliminate people who don't have the necessary subset of skills," she explains. "By

giving job seekers as much information as possible, they'll rule themselves out before I even have to."

In the recent Experience survey of students, recent graduates, and experienced professionals, the majority of respondents (32%) identified job responsibilities as the area in which they would like employers to provide more information in job postings. Other areas include required skills (25%), what the company does (13%), and benefits (10%).

TIP 4: First Sell the Opportunity

More than just listing responsibilities and requirements, the description needs to explain the job's potential. Job seekers want to know how a job will benefit them and are looking for rewarding opportunities with room for growth and learning.

Jed Willard, recruiting director of LanguageCorps in Boston, recommends highlighting the "why," not the "what," when writing a description.

"Focus on what the experience is like, why someone would want to work for the company, and why someone would want to be a part of the team," he advises. "Focus less on what the day-to-day tasks will be. That's the kind of information that will come up during the interview."

In fact, the Experience survey data shows that respondents are more likely to apply for a job when the description explained how it was beneficial to the applicant. Of a job description doing just that, one survey respondent said, "The description offers an explanation of what's in it for me."

Another respondent said, "The company is both helping me develop and advance, while giving me the opportunity to learn."

TIP 5: Then Sell the Company

Many recruiters agree that an important part of job descriptions is well-written, positive, and proactive information about what the company has to offer and its culture. Essentially, the paragraph should sell the company as a workplace, which should attract top candidates.

Gross compares this concept to colleges that recruit high school athletes, "college recruiters do whatever they can to attract the best high school athletes." he says. "And it's the same with companies attracting job candidates." He recommends including

information about the company's future goals and how it expects to get there.

"This is who we are, this is how good we are, this is what our culture is, and this is where we rank in our industry," Gross suggests. This marketing piece is essential because top candidates, like top high school athletes who have their choice of college, have their pick of companies.

"If another company is doing a better job of attracting the candidate," Gross says, "then my company loses. A lot of talented individuals are out there, and it's a competitive market for those individuals, even in today's job market. So if I'm going to compete for the most talented individuals, I have to be able to attract them to the company."

Of course, don't go overboard. In a posting, three to four sentences about the company are ample. A link to your Web site's "About Us" section will direct job seekers looking for additional information.

And while most recruiters agree that they use the same paragraph about the company on all job descriptions, Gross recommends keeping it fresh.

"I work with a person in corporate communications," he explains. "If I hear of something new and exciting going on in the company, he and I work together to spiff up the paragraph a bit."

TIP 6: Translate Internal Jargon

All of your company's employees know that a Senior Widget Commander means "the person who oversees the selling of widgets"-but the outside world doesn't know that. In writing your job description, it's vital that the language is in real-world terms.

In fact, **Becky Rinaldi**, a corporate recruiter in the retail headquarters of OfficeMax in Cleveland, has faced this exact issue. At OfficeMax, a "category manager" translates to the more commonly known retail buyer.

"It's essential that I put 'retail buyer' somewhere in the description so that job seekers understand that the job entails buying," she explains. "If they see 'category manager,' they won't necessarily understand what it means."

Cusimano learned the same lesson. "Our internal title was 'master catalog technician,' which is actually a marketing position, requiring the person to have a marketing degree and be very

knowledgeable about designing Web pages and catalogs," she says.

In terms of applicants, however, Cusimano wound up with high school diploma and Associate's degree candidates with manufacturing backgrounds and little to no marketing experience. She believes it was because of the word "technician" in the title.

When Cusimano changed the title to "senior marketing catalog analyst" and re-posted the listing, it helped immensely and brought in the types of qualified candidates that she was seeking.

"One of my biggest challenges is taking the internal jargon and recreating it in a way that someone outside of the company is going to understand what I'm looking for," she says. "It's not just changing the terminology, either. It's recognizing that the jargon is even there."

TIP 7: Be Clean, Clear, and Error-Free

In most cases, a job description is a job seeker's first impression of your company. Consider hiring a proofreader, or asking a co-worker to help out, to avoid spelling and grammatical errors. If you include hyperlinks, check and double-check to make sure the links work. Write in the same tense and person throughout the posting.

One description that Gross rewrote for a client began with, "The position is responsible for … " He had to remind his client that it's the individual in the position who has responsibilities; the position isn't responsible for anything.

Finally, all experts agree that bullet points are almost 100% more effective than a paragraph format. "When I list things with bullets, I've found that job seekers notice what I'm asking for, and I receive more applicants who actually meet my requirements," Cusimano notes. "If I have a listing in paragraph form, I think job seekers merely skim it and catch only certain points. They'll submit their résumés even if they don't meet any of my requirements."

Rinaldi concurs, adding that her format for job postings begins with two to three sentences that give a basic summary of the job's purpose. She then lists with bullets between five and ten essential functions and typical responsibilities of the job.

"I think bullets are much more effective than paragraphs," Rinaldi says. "Job seekers are looking online at hundreds of jobs, and bullet points give them the information quickly. They know what the job requires and entails."

And if the shoe doesn't fit, the job seeker knows right away and can move on.

TIP 8: If You Change the Posting Location, Change the Description

Not every job board attracts the same candidates, and your job description needs to reflect the type of site to which you're posting.

For instance, LanguageCorps is a company that recruits people to teach abroad, certifies and supports them, and guarantees them jobs. Willard has five different versions of the same job description, all of which he regularly edits and changes.

The shortest version (19 words) is ideal for posters and billboards at career fairs. "It very quickly describes the opportunity," he explains. A 71-word version is perfect for emails and college campus Web sites, because "it's a nice, short, tidy paragraph."

The two longest versions, coming in at 172 and 292 words, go more in-depth with the opportunity, breaking out a company description, job profile, and specific requirements.

TIP 9: Control Your Messaging

Make sure your job description is where you want it to be-and not where you don't. In LanguageCorps' case, Willard explains that the company's job descriptions "take on a life of their own" and sometimes wind up on sites that are wrong for their context.

"For instance," he says, "we'll locate one of our very own corporate descriptions, explaining what LanguageCorps does as an organization, on a college's recruiting site, where a job should be more opportunity-focused. Someone saw the ad elsewhere, thought it was a great opportunity, and cut and pasted it onto a job board."

But Willard doesn't believe that message was appropriate for that particular medium. He warns companies to be very conscious of context and medium.

TIP 10: Use Available Resources

No man is an island, so don't be afraid to seek help. The Society for Human Resource Management offers a thorough web site

(www.shrm.com) with a plethora of suggestions and sample descriptions.

Also, for a fee, many job boards offer description-writing services. Try it once, and learn from their technique. Rinaldi suggests running the job description by someone in the marketing department, who might be able to spruce it up and make the listing more exciting.

Finally, do a little testing on the job posting and track your response rate. "If I find that I'm not getting a lot of hits on a job posting," Cusimano explains, "then I'll sit down with the hiring manager again and tweak the description."

And where have we heard that before? That the hiring manager is a valuable resource? See Tip #1. And good luck!

Appendix

Experience's Job Posting Survey was fielded from 8/30/04 to 9/13/04 and was sent to both opt-in students and alumni who currently use Experience's services. Over 5,000 responses were collected.

45% of respondents cited jobs skills/requirements as the first thing they look for in a job posting, while 23% looked for job responsibilities first.

When two job descriptions with identical responsibilities were presented, 80% of respondents preferred the job ad that provided more detail about qualifications.

The top 2 areas that jobseekers would like to see more information on in a job posting were job responsibilities (32%) and skills required (25%).

Despite the need for more information on skills and responsibilities, the top 3 criteria valued as most important in a job search were salary (20%), career advancement opportunities (16%), and location (11%), while job responsibilities ranked fifth (9%).

When two job descriptions with identical responsibilities were presented, 63% of respondents found the job posting that included goals or results of the position more helpful.

In a similar test, 85% were more likely to apply to a job ad that highlighted benefits for candidates (versus describing how candidates could help the company).

Share These Tips With Others

If you found these tips helpful, share them with others! Send friends and colleagues to www.experience.com/tips to download a FREE copy today.

Feedback

If you have any comments that you would like to share with us, please email your ideas, suggestions or your own tips to experience@experience.com. We would love to hear from you!

Acknowledgements

Experience would like to thank Andi Lucas for composing this white paper. In addition, we would like to thank Competitive Edge Business Systems, Fidelity Management & Research Co, LanguageCorp and OfficeMax for their contributions.

Sign Up For Our Newsletter

Experience publishes a quarterly e-newsletter that provides relevant news, tips and trends for recruiters. If you would like to sign up for our newsletter go to:

www.experience.com/experience/empNewsletter

About Experience Inc.

Founded in 1996, Experience is the leading provider of e-recruiting software and services that connect universities and employers with college-educated candidates. Experience's web-based platform spans more than 3,800 universities, 3 million registered candidates, 100,000 employers, and 800,000 job and internship opportunities. For more information, visit www.experience.com.