

What Every Supervisor Should Know About Position Descriptions

What is a Position Description?

A position description (PD) is a structured document assigning work to a given position as it is expected to be performed after customary orientation and training. It will tell the reader what the worker is responsible for doing, how it is done, and how it relates to other positions within and outside the work unit. The PD should accurately and completely describe the permanent duties and responsibilities that are assigned and performed. Position descriptions are not intended to cover every kind of work assignment a position may have. Rather, they cover those work assignments which are predominant, permanent and recurring.

Who Writes the Position Description?

The PD can be written by the supervisor, employee, manager or HR representative. Since the first-line supervisor is almost always responsible for directly assigning and reviewing the work, the PD is most often written or reviewed by him/her. Employees can and often do have important ideas and information which can be used for updating the PD. However, it is not an official assignment without the supervisor's approval.

Why are Position Descriptions Important?

Position descriptions are necessary documents which affect employees' positions in a multitude of areas, including: assignment of duties, classification of the position, identification of training and development needs, recruitment and exam development, organization and planning of the work unit, and the establishment of performance evaluation goals and standards.

Position descriptions are particularly important when a classification and compensation study is being conducted of the occupational area. It is crucial that supervisors ensure the PDs of their staff are accurate and comprehensive descriptions of the assigned duties. During a study, PDs are a vital source document used in the classification analysis of the assigned duties; comparisons to the external private and public sector labor market; internal comparisons to similar positions; the comparison of the position to the new title and description; and reallocation to the appropriate new title and level.

What Does the Employee's Signature on a Position Description Mean?

The statement preceding the line for the employee's signature says, "I have read and understand that the statements and time estimates above and on attachments are a description of the functions assigned my position."

The employee's signature does not mean the employee agrees with or likes the PD and its assigned duties. Signing the PD means the employee **understands** the work assignments. It is not necessary that the employee agrees with the assignments. If the employee refuses to sign, the supervisor should attach a note to the PD stating that the duties have been explained to the employee and the employee refuses to sign. A copy of the PD and note should be provided to the Office of Human Resources. Employees can be held accountable for work assignments on a PD they refuse to sign as long as the assignments are reasonable and within the employee's control.

Does an Employee have to Perform Any Duties Not Identified on the Employee's Position Description?

A PD cannot and does not list every task an employee must perform as part of his or her job. Tasks that are understood as necessary to accomplish the goals listed on a PD are required to be performed. In addition, tasks that are reasonably related but not on the PD can also be assigned. Finally, an employee may periodically receive work assignments of a temporary nature that are not on or related to tasks on the employee's PD. This is also acceptable as long as other legal requirements are met.

What Every Supervisor Should Know About Position Descriptions

Does the Use of "Buzz Words" Increase the Likelihood of a Position Being Reclassified or Reallocated to a Higher Level?

"Buzz words" do not increase the likelihood of a reclassification or reallocation being approved.

What is key is the **assignment and performance** of work consistent with the classification and level being requested. If the title and description contains key words and concepts, then a position which performed those duties is more likely to be reclassified or reallocated to that level. However, just writing the "buzz words" in a PD is insufficient. During the review process, the Office of Human Resources will be verifying that the work listed on the PD is being performed.

Position Description Guidelines

University of Wisconsin-Madison Office of Human Resources

A PD form is really nothing more than a clear, concise and complete outline of the position. To be clear, the information must be in a language the average reader can understand. To be concise, unnecessary wording and unnecessary details should be omitted. To be complete, all information that will help the reader understand the position must be included.

Purpose of Position Description

The PD is the key document used in determining the appropriate classification and level of a position. It is descriptive of the major goals of the position, but it is not construed to limit or modify the power of the supervisor to assign work to employees. It should be used as an information source for the development and implementation of an effective recruitment and selection plan if a position becomes vacant. An accurate PD helps the employee know what is expected by clearly defining the work to be performed in relation to the overall goals of the work unit. The PD can be the basis for identifying training needs and criteria for evaluating performance.

Completing the Position Description

Most of the items on the PD are self-explanatory. Should you have any questions, please contact your division Human Resources Representative.

Whenever a PD accompanies a personnel transaction, a current organization chart of the work unit should be included. The organization chart should show the employees' names, superordinate-subordinate relationships, classifications and current work schedules.

Definitions

- **Goals:** the expected results of each employee's work; the expected accomplishments, product or output that results from the work activities of the employee. Each PD should contain between two and six goals.
- **Worker Activities:** the specific tasks the employee performs to accomplish the goal. Worker Activity statements describe what a worker actually does. Generally there will be an average of five worker activities per goal, but there may be as few as two or as many as necessary.
- **% Time:** the proportion of the employee's total work time in the course of a year spent on a goal or worker activity.
- **Close Supervision:** the work is performed according to detailed instructions and supervision is available on short notice.
- **Limited Supervision:** the incumbent proceeds on his/her own initiative while complying with policies, practices and procedures prescribed by the supervisor. The supervisor generally answers questions only on the more important phases of the work.
- **General Supervision:** the work is performed independently. The incumbent seldom refers matters to the supervisor except for clarification of policy.