



How to Write an Effective Position Description

by Laura Gassner Otting

The departure of a key employee causes a great deal of consternation in most nonprofits. The first worry-driven thought that runs through many managers' minds is "How can I find someone who combines the skills and experiences of this person, as well as the knowledge of and connections to our constituents?" Yet, instead of just filling the shoes of the former worker, the replacement of an employee, or the creation and filling of a new position, can provide an opportunity for strategic reflection and redirection and therefore deserves serious thought.

Components of a Well-Written Position Description

Position descriptions are read by candidates and colleagues alike and may serve many purposes. A good job description will excite candidates to apply, especially some that might not have after reading only a few paragraphs of boilerplate information. According to Joyce Lapenn, a Vice President with DRG in New York City and the former Executive Director of Graham Windham, a major family and children's services agency, "Crafting an attractive position description to generate genuine interest comes after a very thoughtful assessment of the needs of the organization and how the open position relates to these needs. The employer should put some real effort into this document and exclude, for example, such usual 'pat' phrases such as 'good interpersonal skills.' How and to whom this position relates is more fundamental and ultimately more meaningful for potential candidates."

A good position description will also bring together a nonprofit around the central themes and challenges facing the new hire, many of which will be used in both the interview and weighing of candidates as well as their performance evaluation in the months and years to come. In other words, a good position description will sell the organization, serve as a mini-strategic planning session, and provide performance evaluation clear to the hire and the supervisor. Becky Klein, partner with The Phillips Oppenheim Group whose position descriptions are often six or seven pages long, states that "position descriptions really become marketing tools for both the position and the client itself and include a detailed (and hopefully enticing) description of the organization, an overview of the basic function, lists of key responsibilities, experience required and personal characteristics, and, most importantly, a section listing the priorities for the successful candidate in the first year."

The Executive Summary: Every position description should start with an executive summary. Not all of your colleagues (those people who provide helpful ideas for candidates or outreach techniques) will want to read the entire position description. Further, some outreach vehicles will only let you post a paragraph or two, and having this summary done ahead of time will make you more efficient later.

The executive summary begins with a clear statement of purpose, i.e., "Founded in 1978, YouthBuild USA is a comprehensive youth and community development program committed to giving at-risk youth life and job skills that lead to economic independence, while helping them rebuild their communities. We are currently seeking a Vice President of XYZ who will...." It finishes by describing that the rest of the document lays out some information about the current state of affairs at YouthBuild, as well as the particular challenges facing the VP of XYZ.

Background: A nice way to ease into the duties, responsibilities, challenges and potential problems facing the next hire is to describe the inspirational story of the founding of the organization and the context in which this hire will have to work. Providing a framework in which the candidate can



Imagine day-to-day activities and long term projects helps candidates rule themselves in or out of a search before wasting your time. More importantly, the background elicits intelligent questions and conversations from your candidates, helping you to determine which candidates are stronger than others.

The background section of a job description for Share Our Strength, for example, starts with the story of Billy Shore corralling a few local chefs in the basement of a Capitol Hill row house, and follows by describing the \$70 million Share Our Strength has invested in more than 1,000 local, state, national and international hunger and poverty organizations over the past 18 years. This information, like most of the other material needed for this section, has probably already been written in one of the following documents, and should be kept handy for exercises like this: publicity materials, web content, brochures, annual reports, grants, financial statements, department budgets, mission statement, a predecessor's position description, board presentations, articles, biographies, or anything public from a recent strategic planning session. Finally, this section, once written, can be cut and pasted into other position descriptions as much of it centers around general historical facts of an organization and not the specifics of any one particular job.

Position-Specific Challenges: Each role in an organization fulfills some basic need that keeps that organization running smoothly as well as, hopefully, raises it to a new level. These are the challenges set forth in a particular job. Challenges allow the realities of an organization's past to meet the hopes for its future. A well-written challenge statement can be measured during the interview process against the candidate's past track record, and then later against his or her performance on the job. When challenges are met, they allow hiring managers and supervisors to measure fundamental differences in an organization such as whether difficulties have been abated or new opportunities opened.

Qualifications: From the challenges facing this job, a clearer picture will appear regarding the specific professional and personal qualifications needed for success. Professional qualifications include a candidate's career track record, education and training; further, these qualifications can be tailored to the size and scope of the position at hand. Personal qualifications might include a candidate's background, experience, character, personality, exposure or outlook. Continues Phillips Oppenheim Group Partner Klein, "Spelling out qualifications not only gives a prospective candidate an understanding of the needs, but helps to ensure that the client organization is clear about what is going to be required of the individual hired and how to measure that individual's performance. The more specific a position description is, the more targeted the response from appropriate candidates should be."

Conclusion: Finally, be sure to include any compensation, application deadlines and contact information relevant to the position. A trick used by nonprofit executive recruiters when the compensation is open or when they want to survey the field is to avoid listing the compensation and, instead, ask for a salary history from applicants. From there, a nonprofit can determine what they need to pay for the level of talent they wish to hire without upsetting or offending potential applicants.

Gathering Information

As you write any position description, it is helpful to garner information not just from written materials circulating around the office and throughout your constituents, but by asking questions of key staff and stakeholders. Some of these questions are difficult; some of them are not. Each will



inform the challenges section of the position description, and in turn, the interviewing and evaluation process both presently and in months and years to come.

At the beginning of any new search for a middle- to senior-level position, start by meeting with those who will surround the new hire. These stakeholders will be able to answer many of the questions that define and individualize an organization. Meeting with them early will also increase the likelihood that they will become invested in the process and the success of your newest staff member.

Those to be interviewed include but may not be limited to the Executive Director, members of the senior management team, direct reports to this position, outside stakeholders such as consultants, clients and funders and board members as relevant. In discussing the details of the position with each of these stakeholders, make sure to ask questions about specific candidates they might know, online discussion forums or newsgroups they might read, or web pages they visit or have heard about. These will form the core of a nonprofit's outreach and will help a nonprofit increase its knowledge base about outreach methods for the future.

By putting forth a strong effort at the beginning of a search to quantify and assess an organization's needs, nonprofit managers can assure a more strategic search, a broader candidate pool and a smarter hire.

5 PEARLS OF WISDOM:

Before you sit down to write a position description, take time to do your research, asking key staff, funders, community members or other stakeholders these important questions:

1. What is the context within which this person must work? What are the particular challenges facing the organization at this time? Which will the new person be faced with tackling? What is the timeline to meet these challenges? What tools will they have at their disposal?
2. What fundamental differences do you see in this organization 12 months, 18 months and 24 months after this person is on board? What outcomes, subjective and objective, will be used to determine success?
3. Describe the education and training background ideal for this position. From what kinds of organizations might this person come? What types of roles might they have held in the past?
4. What activities, programs, staff need to be sustained? Which need to be enhanced, initiated, diversified, recalibrated, reassessed or eliminated?
5. Are there resources or advertising vehicles that should be considered, such as online discussion forums, newsgroups, publications or websites that are organized to assist nonprofit organizations reach out to potential candidates? In addition, are there any candidates or other sources of candidates that ought to be tapped?