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Job descriptions must do more than list duties

HAVE YOU EVER EXPERIENCED buyer's remorse?

In the showroom, the product seems wonderful. You love it; you try it out; the salesman sings its praises. You sign a check, and the glittering item is yours. And then a day, a week, or a month later, it hits: that awful sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach.

You've made a horrible, costly mistake.

As executive search consultants, we've heard a lot of horror stories involving buyer's remorse from both sides of the equation. The company extends an offer, the candidate accepts, but once the honeymoon period ends, the candidate proves to be a poor fit for the position itself or the firm as a whole.

While there are no guarantees in hiring, a powerful position specification can minimize the risk of buyer's remorse. Not only does a well-crafted job description show candidates in writing exactly what to expect, but it also forces you, the decision maker, to define the ideal candidate by pinpointing the position's scope, impact, and criteria for success.

In my opinion, it's no exaggeration to consider position specifications as a pivotal piece of your human resources strategy.

Join me then as we examine some major components of a powerful position specification.

POSITION TITLE: Creating a com-

PELLING position specification starts on the first page. Use the highest-quality paper with your company's logo centered in color on the top. Distribute the position specification via email as an attachment or by hard copy; faxing or photocopying this document undermines its quality and impact.

The position title occupies top billing on the first page. Lean towards weightier titles when appropriate, such as vice president instead of director, director instead of manager, etc. Better or higher titles cost you nothing but could be the definitive difference to potential candidates.

COMPANY BACKGROUND: This section is your organization's communications tool, much like your company Web site. In it, illustrate your history, size, culture, client base, product line, facility types, food safety programs, community involvement and strategic alliances, as well as your long-term growth and business plans.

Top-tier candidates recognize that corporate history, culture, and future objectives constitute an invisible hand guiding the organization. As a result, they want an insider's glimpse into your firm.

Go beyond a job description that stops with a dry exposition of the position's tasks and requirements. Instead, give candidates a sense of the past, present and future of your company, and whet their appetite to learn more.

POSITION SUMMARY: The position summary concludes the first part of the position specification. It functions as a snapshot of the job, giving a general sense of the position's purpose, goals and reporting structure.

The position summary section is the aerial counterpart to the detailed duties that follow later. Like an overview from 30,000 feet, the position summary captures the principal responsibilities and requirements of a complex position in a fast-moving industry. Consider limiting the criteria in the posi-

tion summary from four to eight bullet points.

DUTIES, RESPONSIBILITIES: If the position title, company background, and position summary sections serve to attract the attention of desirable candidates, then this section — professional duties and responsibilities — must cement their interest.

The professional duties and responsibilities addressed include several key issues:

- What tasks are pivotal to the position?
- Do all decision makers agree on what the individual must accomplish in order to succeed and in what timeframe?
- Are the duties and responsibilities realistic, or should the position be rethought, redesigned, or split into more than one job?
- To whom does the position holder report, and who directly reports to him or her?

Use simple language, short sentences and bulleted points. Your position description must be easy to read and understand. It should reflect a sense of priorities and urgency, rather than a laundry list of unsorted tasks. This is your chance to define what the ideal candidate must do in order to succeed, so make the duties and responsibilities as performance-based and measurable as possible.

PERSONAL QUALIFICATIONS: The next part, personal qualifications, covers the ideal background, experience, attributes, skills and credentials needed for the position.

Caution: A job description is generally considered a legal document. Any reference to race, color, religion, age, gender, national origin, marital status or physical or mental disabilities is strictly illegal.

To preclude charges of discrimination, list only the personal qualifications that are absolute musts, such as years of experience, bilingual skills, education and honesty/integrity.

COMPENSATION, BENEFITS: Use this portion of the position specification to sell the job in particular and your company in general.

How does your compensation package (including salary and performance bonuses) compare to the marketplace? Do you have a bonus program? Are your bonuses based on personal achievement, company performance or a combination thereof? Ultimately your final offer amount will depend on the candidate selected; therefore, give yourself flexibility, either by listing a salary range, or by stating that you offer an attractive and/or competitive base salary.

In terms of benefits, do you cover all or part of health and life insurance premiums? Do you contribute toward employee retirement plans? Do you offer on-the-job training, mentoring or tuition reimbursement? Does your company foster work/life balance through flexible schedules, vacation days and company holidays, or telecommuting?

The compensation and benefits section makes you, the hiring authority, confront the actual cost of attracting the very best people in our industry. The final component of a powerful position specification is action. No matter how eye-catching, interest-provoking and detailed your job description, it matters little if you fail to communicate it to potential candidates.

Start by employing the position specification as a selection tool.

Since the position specification provides a blueprint of the ideal candidate, it should help guide you through the networking, interviewing and recruiting process. You can draw on it as you consider whom to look for, what questions to ask and finally, which candidates to select. The position specification is also a sales tool to candidates.

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