

Some tips for writing a good job description

Introduction

1. To the extent possible and where available, the Conditions of Service Section, OHRM encourages the use of Generic Job Profiles (GJPs) instead of individual job descriptions. GJPs are classified standard job descriptions approved by the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management that conform to established classification grade level standards. They encompass a set of related jobs for which major characteristics of the job are similar in duties and responsibilities, education, work experience, technical skills and essential core competencies. Presently, there are nearly 300 GJPs for the Professional and above categories and the General Service category that have been developed. They cover some 80 per cent of the functions found within the Organization. The procedures for the association of posts to GJPs are to be reflected in an administrative instruction that is being prepared for promulgation.

2. Where an appropriate GJP is not available, departments/offices shall continue to submit a job description using the P.148 form. To ensure that the level of the post is properly established, it is important that the duties and responsibilities of the post are suitably presented. The following provides some tips for writing a good job description.

Presentation of duties and responsibilities

3. **Tip No. 1.** A well-written job description facilitates not only the classification review, but most importantly the staffing process by presenting the functions of the post in a manner that are readily understood by potential applicants and ultimately, by the selected candidate. Many a times, however, the duties and responsibilities of a post are written haphazardly. When this happens, the review can get delayed as the classification officers try to obtain additional information and/or clarification in order to establish the exact nature of the duties and responsibilities of the post.

4. An effective duty statement answers the questions what, why (if not self-evident) and how. In certain cases, additional information provided by the questions who, where and when would be essential in clarifying the exact nature of the functions of the post. The following is an example of a duty statement responding to the questions what, why and how:

What: Processes incoming correspondence.

Why: In order to determine the order of priority, distribute correspondence within the division and draw the attention to important points.

How: by sorting correspondence
by analyzing the content
by highlighting the important points
by distributing mail to addressees
by locating and attaching references
by drafting acknowledgments letters and replies to non-technical inquiries
by filing in accordance with pre-established system

5. The above duty statement would be written in the following way:

Processes incoming correspondence in order to determine the order of priority, distribute correspondence within the division and draw the attention of addressees to important points by:

- sorting correspondence
- analyzing the content
- highlighting the important points
- distributing mail to addressees
- locating and attaching references
- drafting acknowledgments letters and replies to non-technical inquiries
- filing in accordance with pre-established system

6. In a nutshell, a properly written duty statement is presented in the following format:

What %
 **why**

- **How**
- **How**
- **How**; and,
- **How**

7. The above represents the traditional format. The same duties could be presented using a results-oriented format^{1/}, as follows:

Job purpose: **Contributes to the effectiveness of the work of the division** by undertaking information-management support activities.

Job results:

- **Processes information** by reading incoming mail, obtaining background materials, highlighting important points, retrieving and attaching related documents, routing mail to concerned parties; drafting standard correspondence; filing documents.

8. Either format uses specific language to describe the duties and responsibilities of the post.

9. The example on page 4 presents the duties of a Press Officer using the traditional format.

Wordings used in job description

10. **Tip No. 2.** Always use clear and precise words in the job description and to the extent possible, avoid the use of jargons. Acronyms have to be spelt out at the outset.

11. **Tip No. 3.** Refrain from using imprecise words such as assist, prepare, etc., unless accompanied by a qualifying statement. For example, the duty statement "assists in organizing meetings and conferences" may have different significance to

different people. However, by adding a qualifying phrase as in “assists in organizing meetings and conferences **by drafting working papers**”, the readers would know the form of assistance provided by the post and would have a better understanding of the nature of the post’s contribution.

12. **Tip No. 4.** There is no such thing as magic words that when used to describe duties would greatly influence the classification level of a post. The classification review entails not only looking at a particular job description, but also at the whole organizational setting of a post. The organizational setting includes the reporting relationships, the size of the organization, the diversity, scope and stability of the organization’s work programmes, and other factors. Some may be tempted to copy passages from benchmark standards to try to influence the classification result. However, the post when viewed in the context of its organizational setting may result in a classification level that is different from the expectation of the requesting office and/or the incumbent. What is most important therefore is to present the duties and responsibilities in a simple, clear and concise language in either of the formats presented above.

Coherence

13. **Tip No. 5.** The statements under the various sections of the job description must be coherent. For example, the statements under the purpose and frequency of contacts, or those under decisions and recommendations of the post, should be in harmony with the duty statements and other parts of the job description, such as the summary of assigned duties, as well as the goals and objectives of the post.

Background information

14. **Tip No. 6.** Where available and deemed essential, provide background information on the organizational setting including information on the mandate and/or programme of work of the organizational unit in which the post is located. In the UN Secretariat, such information is normally found in budget documents. In all cases, submit an organizational chart with the job description.

^{1/} The sample on the results-oriented format was based on Plachy, Roger J. & Plachy, Sandra, J., 1993, *Results-oriented Job Descriptions*, AMACOM, New York.

PRESS OFFICER

DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

1. **Provides coverage of official events and writes printed or electronic releases for dissemination to various groups such as accredited press correspondents, United Nations Information Centres, by:** 55%
 - determining the news value and topicality of official UN events;
 - determining important points made by speakers or stated in relevant documents;
 - conducting research of relevant information prior to the event;
 - deciding sequence in which information is presented;
 - exercising awareness of political sensitivities of member states to ensure that balanced political comments are included;
 - judging the depth and complexity of information required by the target audience;
 - writing concisely and rapidly while ensuring that press releases and dispatches are in acceptable journalistic form and conform to approved UN style.

2. **Covers intergovernmental meetings held at Headquarters in order to prepare summaries of proceedings and press releases, by:** 20%
 - recommending to the supervisor the manner in which each meeting should be handled;
 - deciding when a procedural debate must be covered fully and when it may be summarized;
 - exercising political awareness in determining the most important comments made by delegates for inclusion in the summary;
 - condensing the text of resolutions and reports and eliminating bureaucratic wording for the benefit of the readers;
 - writing rapidly to complete meeting summaries within one hour of the adjournment.

3. **Writes background releases to inform participants and correspondents of prior events leading to, and status of, meetings, by:** 10%
 - researching documentation before a session;
 - deciding on newsworthiness of action taken by intergovernmental bodies;
 - drafting accurate and concise information.

4. **Edits meeting summaries (on rotation) in order to ensure accuracy and conformity to the Organization's standards, by:** 10%
 - reviewing work of colleagues;
 - modifying text submitted by other divisions of the organization to ensure conformity in style.