

FACTSHEET

What is a Job Description?

Communicating responsibilities, duties and tasks to employees

Why this is important

Under the Employment Relations Act (2000) ERA, every employer must provide the employee with an outline of the duties to be performed. A job description therefore enables the employer to fulfil this legal obligation.

It is important to clearly communicate to potential and current employees the tasks, duties and responsibilities their job encompasses and the standard to which the work must be completed. The advantages of providing a job description include:

- More appropriate applicants for a job
- Knowing what is expected of them is likely to help employees perform well
- Employees are easier to manage, resulting in less stress
- Employees tend to be more contented, because they are able to choose a job that suits them.

This factsheet will cover:

- What is a job description?
- Uses of a job description
- How to write a job description
- How the job description links to performance management
- Job description examples

What is a job description?

The job description is a summary of the key responsibilities identified in the job analysis. Its aim is to communicate to applicants and existing staff members, as clearly as possible, the expectations of the employer in the job. The job description is not going to be exact, but should cover all main points and any differences to other similar jobs.

Uses of a job description

Job descriptions are a means of communicating the requirements of the role to job applicants and existing staff. Ideally, a job description should be given to applicants prior to an interview, or during the interview at the latest. This is important because it gives applicants the opportunity to decide for themselves if they are really suited to the job being offered. This self-selection helps ensure a more successful employment outcome. The job description is also used in the ongoing management of employees.

A job description can also be useful for:

- Developing competency-based interview questions
- Orientating the new employee to the job
- Identifying performance objectives and training requirements
- Terminations.

How to write a job description

There are many different ways to write a job description, provided the outcome allows quality communication between employer and employee. For this reason there are no “stock standard” job descriptions, because every role is different depending on the level of responsibilities. The good news is that they don't have to be perfect to have value as a communication tool in employment relationships.

The basis for drawing up a job description is a job analysis (see Factsheet Job Analysis Analysing Individual Roles) where the job is broken down into tasks, duties and responsibilities that the potential employee will need to be able to perform to carry out the role effectively. A job description is a factual statement that covers the following:

- Job title
- Purpose of the job
- Reporting lines
- Tasks, duties and responsibility areas
- Performance standards.

Including performance standards in a job description is a good idea, but the starting point of performance management is to write the job description itself.

Some people prefer to separate the job description from performance issues and have separate performance management documentation. The advantage of communicating performance standards in the job description is that it helps to further clarify expectations to the applicant. However, to help give the employee ownership of the performance objectives, they should be discussed and negotiated once the employee is on board.

A suggested example job description template is outlined below. The first part is self-explanatory and the section on responsibility areas is explained further below.

Job Description template example

HR01

Job title	e.g. Head Shepherd
Strategic business focus	This should be a short statement reflecting farm goals. The required accountabilities will in part reflect this focus. For example: “Our goals for the farm over the next three years includes fairness, trust. To produce 400kg meat/ha which represents a 20% lift in current performance levels. To increase stock numbers to 10,000su. and to ensure all staff complete their ATV tractor and agri-chemicals training.”
Purpose of position	A three-to-four sentence summary of the role. For example: “To manage the feeding and reproductive performance of all stock, carry out farm maintenance and to take full responsibility for the farm during the farm owner’s absence.”
Reporting lines	Who does the person report to and who reports to them? For example: “This position reports to the farm owner. The position has one junior shepherd as a direct report.”
Hours of work	It is good practice to break this down on a seasonal basis. For example: Lambing/Calving - July to September: 60 hours/week Shearing - November to 1 February: 55 hours/week Summer: 45 hours/week Scanning/Winter: 35 hours/week
Special requirements	Any unique requirements of the position should be detailed here. Example: boarding another employee, providing a motorbike or attending a specialist course.

Responsibility areas, tasks and duties: (see below)

Accountabilities	'Responsible' or 'Assist'	Performance Measure
Accountabilities are the duties and responsibilities of the person in the job	Are they responsible for ensuring the work is carried out, or do they assist in carrying out the required work?	How does the person know they have been successful?

Completing responsibility areas, tasks and duties:

- List seven to ten duties or responsibilities as identified in the job analysis that will be key to success in the role. Each duty or responsibility may be expanded to improve understanding of the role. For example it is dangerous to assume that everyone in the industry knows what is meant by "doing a farm walk". For one person it may mean just having a look to see what's going on, while for another it will mean assessing pasture cover and completing a feed budget, so it is necessary to clarify what is meant in the accountability area.
- Develop performance measures that indicate the outcome or standard required for each accountability in the job description, where required. Where performance measures are included in the job description, it is not necessary to have a measure against every accountability. Select the most important drivers of the business.

More or less detail?

The level of detail to include in a job description is often debated. Job descriptions need to be comprehensive to have value in communicating expectations to an employee.

For a junior position a higher level of detail can be provided, as they will not have as many responsibilities so tasks or duties can be listed which are quite detailed.

Duty: Assist with managing sheep for shearing

Accountabilities	'Responsible' or 'Assist'	Performance Measure
• Pens in good condition	A	Pens are checked and all repairs made a least 3 days before shearing
• Muster mobs	R	All sheep are brought in, arrive to the shed on time and with their health and welfare considered at all times
• Carry out dagging	A	No shearer complaints
• Ensure sufficient entry time	R	No shearer complaints
• Pen up	A	No shearer complaints
• Count out	A	Accurate count
• Return sheep to paddock	R	All sheep are returned to their paddock within the expected timeframe

For a more senior person less breakdown of each responsibility is required, although key points should still be expanded where appropriate such as in the example below.

Responsibility area: Manager

Accountabilities	'Responsible' or 'Assist'	Performance measure
• Supervise and support other permanent and casual staff	R	Staff satisfaction survey results 4.0+
• Be on call to assist during lambing on rostered days off	R	Always available when needed
• In conjunction with Head Shepherd draw up a roster to ensure lambing work is fairly split	A	The roster is completed at least 3 days in advance with workload spread evenly amongst all staff

How a job description links to performance management

Job descriptions fit into the start of the performance management process because they are the first step in describing expectations to employees, whether or not they have performance measures in them. Because of this job descriptions should be reviewed annually with all staff.

Bear in mind that the job description deals with responsibilities, duties and tasks. There may be other measures stemming from the person specification (see Person Specification) regarding attitudes and behaviours, which need to be incorporated in the performance management system.

What are the benefits to me?

Communicating the content of the job and the desired outcomes to an employee:

- Clarifies the employer's expectations of the job to employees
- Leads to better relationships between employers and employees
- Is the first step in managing employee performance.

What do I do next?

- Think about completing a job description with current staff. Indicators that this is needed are:
 - staff not doing what you expect of them
 - jobs not completed to a satisfactory standard
 - staff are confused as to who is responsible for certain tasks
- Remember, having a job description is a legal requirement as well as best practice
- Complete a job description for all positions as vacancies occur and the position is re-advertised
- Review existing job descriptions on an annual basis to ensure they reflect expectations or changes in responsibility.

Useful references

There are a number of rural professionals who specialise in the area of recruitment and selection of farm staff. They will be able to assist in this process or carry out the process on your behalf.

For more information and other useful resources visit B+LNZ's Employment Hub
<https://beeflambnz.com/knowledge-hub/employment-hub>

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