

# STAFFING **ADVISORS**

HOW-TO GUIDE

## 6 Steps to Writing Job Descriptions That Attract Great Candidates



# Effective Job Ads Start With Direct and Honest Language

Typical job description language is often abstract and imprecise. It leaves the candidate without a good understanding of the role and performance expectations, if their knowledge, skills, and abilities will help them succeed, and whether the organization's culture aligns with their values and working style. And many organizations mistakenly use job descriptions as their ad content.

Direct, honest language allows your future employees to understand you better. This step-by-step guide will help you clarify your ad message with a position overview that directly appeals to every candidate's desire to find meaningful work. With this approach, you'll receive more qualified resumes from your job postings (recognizing that job advertising typically reaches only about [20 percent of the available candidates in the market](#)).

Well-written position overviews do more than help you recruit effectively. They also communicate your deepest cultural values, attracting the right people for the right reasons. They lead to long-term employee retention, engagement, and satisfaction. Writing a position overview provides an opportunity to consider the real business impact of the hire and the key factors that drive performance, laying the foundation for successful performance management.

## 6 Steps to Crafting Effective Job Advertising

### Step 1: Tell a Story

The modern era bombards us with information. And yet, great stories continue to rise above the fray. The most persuasive narratives move people to act. A great job ad tells a story.

First, understand your audience. Who do you want to attract, and what is the context in which your story will appear? If you are posting a job ad, read ten advertisements for jobs like yours. Can you articulate what distinguishes one job from another? The answer is probably no, and that's understandable. Most job ads are comprised of the same bland phrases and stilted, off-putting language used in job descriptions. Even the list of responsibilities can look the same from job to job. Job descriptions serve a valid legal purpose, but job advertising is an opportunity to capture attention with a more personal, compelling, and persuasive message.

Your job ad should tell a story that places the reader at the center of the action. Your ideal candidate should be able to vividly imagine themselves doing the job.

Which phrase do you find more appealing?

- "The successful candidate will demonstrate the proven ability to move mountains."
- "Working here, you will move mountains."

The first bullet uses typical job description language, which signals your distrust of their capabilities. The second bullet demonstrates your belief in their abilities. What does that simple change communicate about your culture?

Likewise, the first bullet distances your reader from the action; the second immerses them in it. Which ad is more likely to be attractive to someone eager to make an impact?

## Step 2: Demonstrate Why the Work is Important

Candidates judge your opportunity partly on the strength and clarity of your message and partly on how important the job is to you. If you have not thought much about the job ad, candidates will assume you have not thought much about the job.

Your job ad not only communicates your performance expectations, it also telegraphs your culture and the value of the work. Your tone and language choices convey a lot of information, intentionally or not. Are you serious and committed? Playful and creative? Determined and precise? Or are you dull and unimaginative?

You build trust with candidates with language that's tangible and unambiguous. Using language that's imprecise or debatable loses trust. Most job ads contain too many undefined attributes without enough concrete examples. This violates the first rule of persuasion—demonstrate, don't explain.

- Don't explain that you need a CEO with strategic vision, global perspective, and adaptability. Demonstrate why: "Half of our sales growth last year was in international markets. In this role, you will formulate our expansion strategy in light of recent changes in international trade policy."
- Don't explain that you need a nuclear arms negotiator with strategic vision, global perspective, and adaptability. Demonstrate why: "Recent geopolitical developments create the potential for increased weapons proliferation. In this role, you will negotiate treaties to contain that threat."

It's perfectly fine to include attributes in job descriptions. But as seen in the examples above, they only become meaningful when you demonstrate why you need them. Once candidates understand your context, they can see themselves in the attributes.

You are not just hiring people; you are hiring their capabilities. Capabilities directly drive business outcomes and tend to be concrete and measurable. By contrast, personal attributes without context are vague and can be misleading.

Your interviews will be more productive when you think in terms of capabilities, giving everyone involved in the hiring decision the right information to determine whether a candidate is ready to handle specific business situations.

Instead of debating whether a candidate has strategic vision, discuss whether they can formulate your international expansion strategy or negotiate your nuclear arms treaty. ([Here is a good way to evaluate capabilities.](#))



## Step 3: Be Specific About Your Expectations

People want to know what results you expect them to achieve. [Top performers are drawn to a challenge.](#) They have a powerful need for their work to be important. Will their work affect ten people or ten thousand? Will their work save lives, support others, create a breakthrough product, or increase sales? Be specific. People are motivated by very different kinds of achievement, but all top performers—the A+ students of the professional world—want to know precisely how they will be graded. They want to understand how your environment will enable them to do their best work.

To attract the most achievement-oriented people, make your expectations apparent. Imagine yourself at your new hire's first performance review a year from today. These are the tough questions a hiring manager needs to answer to clarify expectations properly.

### Consider these:

- What business results would they need to achieve for you to be thrilled with their performance?
- What challenges would they need to overcome?
- How would you measure success throughout the year, so you both know you are on track?

### Here are some things to avoid:

- Relying on vague generalities in describing the job. Using abstract language instead of tangible examples in plain language.
- Failing to use hard metrics to gauge job performance—no dashboard, no checkpoints, no indicators.
- Relying on credentials (e.g., “10 years of industry experience and an MBA”) instead of capabilities (e.g., “the ability to analyze and find solutions to this type of problem”).

Top performers gravitate to jobs where their performance is judged objectively. It's critical to describe what is difficult about the job, what is intrinsically rewarding, and what is most important versus what takes the most time.

Small organizations are filled with one-of-a-kind jobs. Departments are often small, responsibilities large, and only a few people in the organization truly understand each job. So if no one really understands a position, how can you reduce your risk of hiring the wrong person? [Here are a few tips for that situation.](#)



## Step 4: Prioritize What is Most Important

Once you define the level of performance you expect from your new hire, prioritize. Which capabilities and experience are most important? With most jobs, only a handful of factors are critically important, while others are only “nice to have.” (Experience handling international mergers might be imperative, but an MBA is usually not.)

Make it your goal to expand the universe of candidates you might consider. Competition between highly qualified candidates raises hiring standards and increases the quality of your hires.

### Common mistakes and how to avoid them:

- In trying to be selective, managers do the very thing that reduces selectivity: they include a long list of job requirements. But the more requirements listed, the less selective you can be. Many people will not apply to jobs if they are missing a listed job requirement, resulting in fewer candidates to consider. Avoid this problem by narrowing your requirements to the most essential and making everything else “preferred.”
- In trying to find people who will hit the ground running, a long list of job requirements only drags the hiring process to a crawl. Long lists eliminate most of the highly qualified people who would want to grow into the job. When your requirements specify only people who already hold a similar role, why would they want your job? Top performers want career growth.

### The best way to attract top performers is to stop thinking about what you want and start thinking about what the ideal candidate wants:

- What will the successful candidate find intrinsically rewarding about the job?
- What is it about this job that is uniquely attractive for your organization right now?
- What kinds of people tend to thrive in your organization?
- What kinds of personal values and working styles make people stick around?

It's important to remember that you are always locked in competition with other employers.

Ultimately, your success is determined by what you and your organization can offer, what a candidate can offer your organization, and how you can work together to make great things happen.



## Step 5: Put it All Together

With Steps 1-4 complete, you are ready to write an effective position overview for recruiting. The guidelines below are a suggestion—you will need to experiment with the order of the information. Sometimes you might lead with the story about the organization. Other times you might lead with the story about the job.



### The Overview

- The top 3 sentences of your ad get the most attention, so lead with the good stuff. Perhaps a few sentences about who the organization is, what it does, and why it does it. Or perhaps a few choice sentences about the importance of, or challenge inherent in, the job.
- Don't forget a few hyperlinks (limit to three or four). They help illuminate details without making your ads too long. And they facilitate curiosity, which helps to build interest in the position.
- Explain the context of the job: who they report to, who reports to them, who they will interact with most often, annual revenue, number of employees, and anything else that helps orient someone to the position.
- Include your performance expectations to pique the interest of top performers.

### Main Responsibilities

- This is where you describe how the person will make an impact in the role. Use personal, storytelling language, and share concrete details like numbers and facts wherever possible. Example: "You will support a team of 28 people working in 4 states."
- Beyond duties and responsibilities, share percentages to describe a typical day. ("30 percent of your day will be spent ...")
- Avoid long lists. List the responsibilities in priority order, highlighting the most important elements. Move less important tasks to a section called "Other Responsibilities."

### Qualifications

- Wanting the most qualified people is not the same as wanting people with the most qualifications. More years of experience or a more advanced degree do not necessarily predict a great ability to deliver business results.
- Typically, only a handful of qualifications are "must-haves." If you don't absolutely, positively need something, say the qualification is "preferred." Otherwise, many highly-qualified candidates will not apply for a job because they don't meet the specific qualifications listed.



## Step 6: Pick the Right Title and Post in the Right Places

Five times more people will read the title and organization name than the ad itself. You have a split second to capture someone's attention. It doesn't matter how great your ad is if no one sees it.

Think about the title your reader will be using to search for jobs—use a title they expect. You may think you are using a standard title, but titles go in and out of fashion. Be skeptical of using obscure or clever titles like “Rockstar,” “Maven,” “Ninja,” or a title that you've only seen in your organization. And because titles vary with the organization's size, your director-level position may appeal more to someone at the vice president level or vice versa.

Determining the title people expect can be tricky. Look at other job ads to determine which jobs are most like your position, and then use a similar title. If that is different than the title you use internally, just disclose the difference in the ad. Include a note near your “To Apply” section stating, “Please note that the internal title for this position is [Assistant Vice President].”

When it's time to post your ad, let Google point the way. Seventy-three percent of job seekers start their search with Google, not a specific job board. If you want your ad to get maximum visibility, follow their lead. Search Google for the job title and your city name. Then post your ad wherever Google is sending candidates.

### Conclusion

Searching for a job is frustrating for even the most experienced candidates. Your ideal next hire is probably busy achieving great things for their current employer. Set the tone for your new business relationship by being approachable and respectful of their time. Clear a path to your front door and put out the welcome mat by writing a compelling and clear job ad. Then treat candidates respectfully in the interview process. Before you know it, your new employees will be hard at work, helping you achieve your clearly defined goals.



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