Why Are Job Descriptions Useful?

Although almost large theatre companies have job descriptions, some smaller ones do not. It's just not a priority for them, and they feel that everyone knows what they're supposed to be doing.

But regardless of the size of your organization, it pays to have a clear, definitive, written description of the content of each person's position—whether paid or not.

Effectively developed, the job description is a communication tool that can contribute significantly to your theatre's success in terms of giving people a clear focus and helping them to set priorities. A poorly written job description on the other hand leads to role ambiguity, complicates communication, and can make your staff and volunteers feel that they don't know what's expected of them.

A job description is a written statement of the duties, responsibilities, required qualifications, and reporting relationships of a particular job. It's based on information obtained through analyzing the job, an understanding of the competencies and skills required to accomplish needed tasks, and the needs of your organization to get things done. The job description clearly identifies and spells out the responsibilities of a specific job. Where relevant, it also includes information about working conditions, physical demands, knowledge and skills needed, and relationships with other positions.

Still unsure about the value of job descriptions? Here are more benefits:

- Job descriptions give you an opportunity to clearly communicate your organization's direction and where your staff fit into the "big picture".

- Job descriptions not only enable your employees to assess the relative importance of everything they're responsible for, but also give a sense of where their jobs fit into the organization as a whole.

- Whether you're a small or large theatre company, well-written job descriptions help crystallize the organization structure for your employees. They will help you to align their activities with your goals, vision, and mission. They also clarify the interrelationship between roles - where one person's job stops and another one starts.

- Job descriptions lay out clearly what you expect from people. Very often this is the first place to look if people get the feeling that they aren't doing what you want them to do. You need to make certain that they clearly understand your expectations and this understanding starts with the job description.
• Job descriptions help you cover all your legal bases. You'll want to make sure your job descriptions are accurate, complete and up-to-date in case you are ever involved in a legal dispute over someone's job (e.g. an employee who has been terminated, feels it was unjust, is angry and takes legal action).

• Whether you're recruiting new people or promoting from within, the job description tells candidates exactly what you want in the new person. A clear job description can help you select your preferred candidate, and if necessary, respond to issues and questions raised by individuals who were not selected.

• A well-written job description helps other staff, who will be working with the person hired, understand the scope and limits of the person's responsibilities. Staff who have been involved in the hiring process are more likely to support the success of the new employee or promoted co-worker. Involving them in developing or vetting job descriptions is an easy way to help them contribute to the success of the new hire.

• All the above relate to volunteer positions, as well as paid positions.

Potential Problems

In spite of those benefits described above, given the pace and work demands of most organizations—and the multi-tasking that is so much a part of cultural work—job descriptions can slow you down. Unless well-managed, they can interfere with your progress and put people back into the organizational chart boxes you've been asking them to break out of for years. Unless well-written, they may provide a refuge for staff whose commitment is limited and who aren't interested in multi-tasking.

Some organizations have job description processes that create barriers and bottle-necks in the effort of acquiring and assimilating new talent into an organization quickly. Job descriptions do your organization no good when the whole process becomes a challenge to produce and maintain, especially when the organization fails to actively use job descriptions to positively impact employee performance.

Here are key points to help you avoid the most common problems with job descriptions:

• Be aware that job descriptions become dated as soon as you write them, especially in fast-paced, changing, responsive cultural environments.

• You need to supplement job descriptions with regularly discussed goals and development activities, at a minimum annually, preferably twice-annually. This means meeting with each of your staff or your team to ensure that their focus and priorities are in line with current initiatives in the organization. And, of course, these initiatives change frequently.

This meeting has to be realistic. If your employee continually gets new tasks assigned as new projects open up, and yet is still responsible for every task in their original job description, they might be resentful - and their complaint could well be legitimate. Look
at where you really want the individual to be spending their time. If the job description gives the wrong picture, change the job description.

- Make sure the job description doesn't restrict flexibility.

The job description has to be flexible so that people are comfortable cross-training, getting involved outside their normal work area (e.g. especially relevant for arts organizations that have "seasons" at which time work demands can be particularly varied and intense) and confident they can make appropriate decisions. Cultural managers need staff who are comfortable taking reasonable chances, are willing to multi-task and stretch their limits. You don't want to encourage an environment where your staff withdraw from a vital task, thinking "That's not my job".

- Poorly-written or out-dated job descriptions can be used as evidence of wrong-doing or wrong-telling in a wrongful termination lawsuit. Avoid this by ensuring that job descriptions are accurate, specific and complete.

- A job description that sits filed and unused in a drawer is a waste of time. Job descriptions must be an integral part of your hiring and performance management processes. Use them to get employee ownership and support for their position and to recognize the parameters of the skills and abilities you need for the position. In hiring, the well-written job description can help you make the right selection decisions. And hiring the right team is of course critical to your future success.

Your goal? A job description that gives the positive impacts described earlier, without the potential negatives described above. You can create the balance that allows the job description to inform, communicate, and align performance without damaging the speed, flexibility, and forward-looking attitude you need to make your cultural organization a success.

Recognize that job descriptions are a vital part of an effective performance management system.

**Writing the Job Description**

There is no one best format for job descriptions. There are many different, good formats, depending on the size and complexity of an organization. Whatever format you choose, the fundamental features and qualities of a good job description are the same, and there is the same potential for producing a poorly-written job description.

A well-written job description might include any or all of the following sections:

1. **Title and Reporting Relationships**
2. **Purpose of Job**
3. **Primary Responsibilities**
4. **Secondary Responsibilities**
5. Supervisory Responsibilities

6. Financial Responsibilities

7. Interaction with Patrons and Public

8. Physical Demands

9. Working Conditions and Environment

10. Knowledge and Skills Required

*Note:* Very few organizations will need to incorporate all these sections into all their job descriptions. For example, where a position has no supervisory responsibilities, or no professional dealings with people outside the office, or no exceptional physical demands made on them, you may choose to leave these sections out.

Following are guidelines for completing these sections:

1. **Title and Reporting Relationships:** The job title, department, the position to which it reports, and the positions that report directly to it.

2. **Purpose of Job.** This should be a fairly brief section that gives a "thumbnail sketch" of the position, in one to four sentences. Particularly useful for including in job advertisements. It usually includes:
   - an overview of the main responsibilities of the position
   - the degree of supervision/management received
   - the degree of supervision/management of others

3. **Primary Responsibilities.** This is the key (and most difficult to write) section, which describes the essential responsibilities of the position. It's particularly hard to write "from scratch" when you have little or no job activities in writing. This can be the case in small and new cultural organizations, and is usually the case for newly-created positions.

   If you're originating a new job description, here are some suggestions:
   - Begin with the general descriptions on the website of the American Association of Community Theatre [www.aact.org/people].
   - Note down all of the aspects of the job—in no particular order at this point. Think about work processes, planning, executing, reporting, communicating, working with others, resources, money, information, inputs/outputs, etc.
   - Combine and develop the random collection tasks into a set of 5-15 key responsibilities.
• Rank them roughly in order of importance.

• Double-check that everything on the list is genuinely important and achievable, and that nothing has been left out.

• You should have 5-15 primary responsibilities, depending on the complexity/seniority of the job.

• Start each sentence with an action verb (e.g. “develops,” “maintains,” “compiles,” “coordinates”).

• Avoid vague terms such as "helps with" or "is responsible for" in statements of Primary Responsibilities (although "is responsible for" is acceptable if used as an overview statement in the Purpose of Job section). Why? Because “responsible for” doesn’t really say who actually does the work.

• Include details of decisions the job holder is expected to make, and levels of authority over staff and financial matters.

• Keep sentence structure as simple as possible. Leave out unnecessary words that don't provide specific information.

• Do not put goals or objectives on a job description. They change through the year, depending on current priorities and projects.

4. Secondary Responsibilities. These are non-essential and/or infrequent activities that, if carried out by someone else, would not affect the essence of the position. The same guidelines as in Section 3 apply.

5. Staff Supervisory/Management Responsibilities. Include the number and titles of staff supervised by this position, and if necessary for clarity, a very brief statement (one sentence) of the responsibilities of those staff roles. Also include details of staff over whom this position has partial or occasional supervisory/managerial authority.

6. Financial Responsibilities. Indicate any budget responsibility (including signing authority), and activities related to accounting, bookkeeping, investments, banking, etc.

7. Interaction with Patrons and Public. List the types of external individuals and organizations with which the person has contact, and the frequency/type of contact (e.g. phone, in person, written). Include, as applicable, other cultural organizations, patrons, general public, funders, associations, etc.

8. Physical Demands. Include only those physical requirements that are essential to the job and that require unusual effort (i.e. anything outside a normal office environment). These may
include lifting heavy equipment, working on elevated catwalks, working on complex theatre sets, close contact with high-voltage electrical equipment, climbing book/record cases, etc.

9. Working Conditions and Environment. Use this section to describe anything unusual about work schedules/hours or terms of employment. This could include regular or frequent evening and weekend work, considerable travel, outdoor work, particularly hazardous work environments, etc.

10. Knowledge and Skills Required. This section should describe the specific knowledge, skills and abilities that are required to perform the various functions of the position. They should be stated as the minimum requirements and should include any physical abilities required to perform the activities as detailed in the "Physical Demands" section above.

Summary
As has been stressed, just going through the process of writing clear job descriptions for all your staff is not enough. They need to be regarded as an important, dynamic management tool, and used effectively - updated regularly, changed when organizational needs change, be a central focus for any recruiting activity.
Otherwise your initial effort and commitment to this task - and very few people really get a kick out of writing job descriptions - will probably have been a waste of time.