

# The Job Description as Contract

By Jerry Wilt



"That's okay," he said. "We'll work that out later." He was my boss at the credit union. I had just begun my new job as a loan officer and was asking for clarification on an unexpected item in my job description – *Make presentations to the Board of Directors as required*. Make what to who? I was looking for an entry-level job, not a management career.

Thirty-five years and hundreds of presentations later, I still recall how I refused to make the first one when called upon. My boss, who had told me we'd work it out later, worked it out by handing me the pointer and telling me to get up and do it.

Okay, it had been in my job description, but I never thought I'd actually have to do it. I was unprepared and surly, and my boss was disappointed in my presentation. We'd both missed out on excellent opportunities earlier while discussing my job description: his to manage my expectations and mine to acquire a new and valuable skill.

Fast-forwarding to the present, the one comment I hear most often from my clients when assessing their performance gap is, "This work force today doesn't have the same work ethic I did when I first started out." Well, that's true in one respect. They don't have the same work ethic, but theirs is not worse, it's just different. To them, the job description is not a tablet of commandments but rather a set of guidelines. It no longer seems to wield the power of enforcement that it once did.

Treat the job description as an employment contract, whether an employment contract is part of your hiring process or not. An employment contract details the rights and obligations of both the employer and employee. Often, the job description is included as an exhibit or addendum, and is non-negotiable. Let's look at the job description in a different light.

## The sign-off

Each item in the job description should be discussed in detail, and then initialed individually by both the employer and employee. The legal department will be satisfied with a signature on the bottom, but initialing each task and each responsibility affords the employee an opportunity (or forces them) to review his or her job in depth. This added security also provides the employer with a basis to call the employee to better performance when his or her performance has slipped to substandard.

## The negotiation

Most of the tasks and responsibilities on a detailed job description will be non-negotiable. However, it makes sense to look for opportunities to allow the employee to co-create with the employer some of the finer points of his or her job. Creating a space on the job description for "employee comments" will help manage expectations from both viewpoints as well as allow for creativity from the employee as he or she performs.

Ultimately, the job description is a recipe for success. Viewing it as a collaborative, contractual document helps manage expectations all around and lets the organization move from a mindset of accountability to one of stewardship.