

# Job Descriptions: Keeping Them Updated

by Carey D. Jones, CCA

**CHURCH PERSONNEL** committees and many pastors struggle with the importance of the role of job descriptions. It has been said that the constitution of the United States is a “living document.” Job descriptions should also be “living documents” if they are to be effective.

Churches need to place a greater importance on these documents for various reasons. The most obvious is that it is just the fair thing to do for any employees. Expectations are understood and nothing is presumed. In his *Personnel Administration Guide*, Tim Holcomb says that the job description is the “first” step in the hiring process. If a good job description is written before a single person is interviewed, the supervisor and employee will be spared much confusion and disappointment.

“That’s not my job!” is a familiar phrase in the workforce today. An unpleasant task is either really not that person’s duty or the employees have vague job descriptions that allow them to pick and choose what they want to do. Peter Drucker, considered by many to be most famous thinker in the business world, has observed that one of the major problems in business today is that employees often see their primary tasks differently than do their employers.

Sadly, it is no different in the church. The trust that lay people have put into church staff has led to many employees exceeding their authority or neglecting some duties they were originally hired to do. This confusion can be a result of no job descriptions at all, descriptions that are too vague, or descriptions that are outdated.

Because job descriptions for staff often do not keep up with technological advances or legal changes in the business environment, churches cannot afford to neglect the importance of updating job descriptions. The job description is the standard by which an employee will be analyzed or evaluated. If an employee is terminated the job description could be a factor in a lawsuit against the church. Besides all the negative aspects of poor job descriptions, it is not a good testimony of the church to the world. The apostle Paul likened the church to the human body. Each part had an important function, but all were mutually dependent. The church staff is no different. If it is going to be a model of efficiency and surpass the stereotypes in church members’ minds, then each staff member must live by a well-managed job description that is updated to reflect what that employee does.

## **A THEOLOGY OF JOB DESCRIPTIONS**

In order to provide a theological basis for job descriptions it is appropriate to

define a job description properly. This may be where many make mistakes that lead to subjective interpretations by the employee. Holcomb quotes Robert Gray who put it best: “Many job descriptions reveal little about the job because they are so vague in nature.” The job description should provide specifics about the duties. Holcomb outlined four main functions of a job description:

1. To give an overall concept of the tasks performed in each position
2. To show how each job differs from the others
3. To identify the job qualifications required to perform each job
4. To provide an objective method to determine each job’s relative worth when compared to other staff jobs.

Basically, the job description gives an overall picture of what the expectations are and to whom the employee is accountable. While exploring the scriptures it becomes obvious that all biblical servants called by God were given specific instructions in completing their mission. Adam was told to tend the garden, but warned not to eat the forbidden fruit (Genesis 2:15–18). Noah was singled out by God and given specific instructions in surviving the flood. All the Patriarchs were told what they were to do for God.

The same model is seen frequently throughout the Bible:

- The servant is called of God.
- God gives the servant instructions on what to do.
- The servant carries out the commands.
- God then rewards or punishes the servant based on obedience.

While this model is frequent in the scriptures there are also examples of an indi-

vidual providing such job descriptions to others in delegating the work of God.

In Numbers 3 we read about the Levites being chosen to carry out the priestly functions of the tabernacle. The Levites were Holy, set apart by God himself. Verses 3:14–4:33 can be considered a job description. In these verses each clan of the Levites was given specific duties that did not overlap another tribe's responsibility. Each tribe was accountable to one of the priests.

### Summary

- Churches need to place a greater importance on these job descriptions for various reasons.
- The trust that lay people have put into church staff has led to many employees exceeding their authority or neglecting some duties they were originally hired to do.
- The job description is the standard by which an employee will be analyzed or evaluated. If an employee is terminated the job description could be a factor in a lawsuit against the church.
- The job description should provide specifics about the duties and give an overall picture of what the expectations are and to whom the employee is accountable.
- Scriptural basis and examples are given here of biblical servants called by God who were given specific instructions in completing their mission.
- Good job descriptions result in good ministry when everyone knows what is expected and who is responsible.
- The worth of a job description is a vital part in establishing a salary plan for the position and evaluations.
- When updating a job description, it should be written as if the position were open for the first time.
- A principal function statement should be a broad description of the job duties.
- The job description should identify the employee's supervisor.
- A list of "regular duties" in a summary fashion will complete the job description, but by no means should the impression be left that the general duties listed are exhaustive.
- A general meeting with the staff should be held to describe the process of keeping job descriptions current. Instead of the supervisor having all the responsibility, the staff members should also share in the responsibility of keeping their job descriptions current.
- An annual evaluation is the most likely time for review and updating descriptions because it is the most obvious time to consider pay raises.
- Keeping job descriptions current is a work in progress.

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In the New Testament, Jesus told the parable of the talents, where we read how the master gave instruction to his servants and later evaluated their performance. The Apostle Paul made a practice of selecting leaders of local churches. We read in Timothy and Titus that Paul gave clear instructions about their duties.

The church should be leading the way as an example of human resource management. Sadly, this is not the case. The church can be efficient and fair to all ministers and employees without being worldly and cold. Good job descriptions result in good ministry when everyone knows what is expected and who is responsible.

### UPDATING STAFF JOB DESCRIPTIONS

A decision to update staff job descriptions should include senior staff with authority to undertake such a task. Many congregations will involve a personnel or parish relation committee. This is a sensitive area to some employees and explanation is due. Explanations of why the update is being done and the objective should be made as a way to bring everyone on board with the process.

Staff should be asked to document everything they did over a period of about six weeks. In addition they will need to document seasonal duties they did annually. This should be reviewed and compared with the current job description.

Giving detail in job descriptions when hiring new staff is important for more than one reason. First, the candidate has a more accurate idea of the required skills and workload. Second, details help to give a more accurate worth to the job. The worth of a job description is a vital part in establishing a salary plan for the position and evaluations.

While it is imperative to get input from the employee on what the job involves, it is the responsibility of the supervisor to write the final, official job description that will be the standard by which the

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employee is evaluated. The drawback of a committee writing the job description should be obvious to all in vocational ministry. A committee may not have adequate information about the unique aspects of a specific job.

After data is collected the task of writing the formal documents begins. The job description should be written as if the position were open for the first time. Bill Caldwell provides some helpful questions in *The Church Administration Handbook*:

- What task is to be accomplished with this staff member? Does this task match our objective?
- Why is it important to the church? Is this position really needed? Would a part-time position work?
- What skills will this person need?
- What will happen if we don't fill this position?

Asking these types of questions will take out the personalities and show the position objectively. For example, in writing an official job description one supervisor discovered that an administrative support person was doing some things that actually were part of the music minister's responsibilities and that her work load had diminished some with technological advances and a change in the church newsletter frequency. In instances like this, updating job descriptions can affect people in a negative way.

What was the supervisor to do? Dismiss her? Depending on the church's financial condition that might have been an option, but after some creative thinking and conversing with the support person,

it was decided that she would gain additional training and use her extra time to maintain the church Web site. Another way to reduce staff is by attrition. Simply not filling the vacancy and reassigning tasks is often how churches can vacate a position without the negative affects of dismissal.

There are four parts to an official job description:

1. The job title
2. A principal function statement
3. The identification of the position's supervisor
4. A listing of the responsibilities and duties in a summary fashion.

The correct job title is important because it is the most obvious description by which people judge the position. Many times job titles become obsolete because the business world has changed its titles, but as usual, many church's office nomenclature have remained Neolithic. Since the people of the church work and do business in the world on a daily basis, the church needs to keep its job titles up-to-date and recognizable to laity.

In addition to keeping titles contemporary, job titles need to reflect the responsibilities accurately. When roles and duties change the job title should be changed to reflect the major duties of the job accurately.

The second item is a principal function statement. Such a statement should be a broad description of the job duties. For example, a custodian's principal function statement might read, "Maintain cleanli-

ness of church buildings and grounds." A brief statement like this one gives a general idea of what is expected of the employee and leaves no doubt what the general expectations are. The temptation all too often is the supervisor tries to imagine every possible task expected out of the employee. The result is usually a list that resembles a "honey-do" list rather than a professional job description.

The third item that needs to be included is an identification of who the employee's supervisor is. Such a statement might read, "The custodian is responsible to the minister of administration for maintaining the cleanliness of the church buildings and grounds." There should be a clear understanding of supervision relationships.

Finally, a list of "regular duties" in a summary fashion will complete the job description. This list need not be in complete sentences, but only brief descriptions of duties expected in a bullet fashion, for example, these regular duties listed for a custodian:

- Sweep, mop and wax floors according to schedule
- Clean bathrooms; clean mirrors, refill paper goods
- Vacuum floors; shampoo as needed or per schedule
- Set up rooms; arrange tables and chairs per schedule or as requested

By no means should the impression be left that the general duties listed are exhaustive. These are only minimum expectations. The supervisor should make it known that he/she, as the supervisor, will teach the candidate the standards expected. "Clean bathrooms" can mean different things to different people since such statements rely on subjectivity.

It is the job of the supervisor to define the standards expected. In addition, it is a good idea to conclude the regular duties section with a statement like; "assist as requested" to allow for the expansion of duties as they come up or unusual events that might occur.

The list of duties in job descriptions should be as short as possible to keep the document from resembling a grocery list. If a job description is kept brief, it is essential that the supervisor make sure the employee understands all the duties that fall into each responsibility. Four or six broad responsibilities may not be enough, especially with support staff that may have many tasks that might overlap with someone else's duties.

Above all else, when writing and comparing job descriptions, make sure that responsibilities do not overlap. Not only will this cause confusion, but it can lead to conflict between employees. Employees need to know what their "territory" is. When the lines of responsibility are not defined, hurt feelings and other staff problems may occur.

In addition to a clear job description it is wise to have some redundancy in some critical staff responsibilities in place. This requires at least one other person to having a working knowledge of another's duties which are critical to the daily functions of the church office. No one person should have exclusive knowledge in one area.

The loss of a staff member with such knowledge could temporarily cripple the daily functions of the church office until that knowledge could be restored. Worse than that, a staff member could almost become indispensable to the organization. In reality, any staff person should be expendable at will without bringing harm to the regular functions of the office.

After the job descriptions are written, they should be reviewed by the staff members, in order to seek mutual agreement. After corrections are made and there is mutual agreement, a copy of all job descriptions should be available to all staff.

It is at this point that all of this work could be in vain. If there is no plan in place for updating, the church would be right back where it started because job descriptions quickly shift with time. A general meeting

with the staff should be held to describe the process of keeping job descriptions current. Instead of the supervisor having all the responsibility, the staff members should also share in the responsibility of keeping their job descriptions current.

### **KEEPING JOB DESCRIPTIONS CURRENT: THE PLAN**

The staff should keep their job descriptions in a visible place in order to remind them to review responsibilities periodically. A regular review will keep them aware of additional responsibilities they are doing that either could be added to their job descriptions or serve as a reminder that they may be doing something that is someone else's responsibility. They should keep notes of such changes to point out at their scheduled evaluations. If the changes are significant enough they have every right to speak to the supervisor about the added responsibilities at any time.

The Bible says in Luke 10:7, "The worker deserves his wages." It is unfair to add duties to a job description without additional pay. If we are going to subject staff to evaluations to determine performance, then they too should have the freedom to point out added responsibilities. When a staff member is reviewed and it is discovered that additional duties have been absorbed, the supervisor has a choice to make. Discover why the staff person has the added duties and correct it, or amend the job description and recommend an appropriate increase to their salary.

Job descriptions cannot be allowed to expand without some attention or action being taken. Usually the supervisor will be aware of added responsibility if it is due to losing a staff member or reorganization; however, there are instances when it might go unnoticed.

This possible financial incentive should motivate employees to stay aware of their responsibilities and make sure their job descriptions stay current. This helps take the burden of reviewing and updating job descriptions off the supervisor and hopefully negates the possibility of the process

becoming stagnant. The result should be a process that will work to keep job descriptions from becoming obsolete.

The annual evaluation of employees is the natural event for updating job descriptions. Tim Holcomb lists several benefits of performance evaluations:

- "Relating performance to church goals
- Clarifying the expectations and the job to be done
- Facilitating the competence of personnel
- Providing recognition commensurate with results
- Stimulating motivation of personnel
- Providing a process of organizational control
- Identifying training and education needs of personnel."

There does not have to be a fixed time for the review but many will schedule evaluations prior to budget preparation. This is the most likely time because it is the most obvious time to consider pay raises. Pay raises are usually and best determined on performance and not tenure. It will be during the evaluation that attention to the job description will be given. The supervisor should ask the employee if they feel it is accurate. If they do not feel it is accurate they should have the freedom to explain. The supervisor should be careful to give attention and make sure the "added responsibilities" or the neglect of duties is really due to an inaccurate job description or if there is some responsibilities that are someone else's. This is why the supervisor needs to stay aware of which responsibilities belong to whom.

The process of keeping job descriptions current is a work in progress. Having job descriptions can provide a much more reliable tool in evaluating staff.


Completing new job descriptions takes time. When staff have long tenures where descriptions have not been kept current some may have suspicions of the motives. Some may be afraid they might lose some of their "territory" or that they are about

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to be replaced. Whatever the case, it is essential the supervisor explain a rationale for the action and reassure staff this process is in their best interest. It is just common courtesy to educate employees properly about things that directly relate to them, so it is best that there be an orien-

tation with all involved before this process begins.

There may be nothing more important than an updated job description to head off misunderstanding, poor performance and mismatched job skills. The church

will benefit by taking time to keep these documents alive and useful. 

*This article was adapted from a certification project by Carey D. Jones, Southside Baptist Church. The full project, entitled Support Staff Job Descriptions: Keeping Them Updated (2004), can be downloaded from the resource store on the NACBA Web site and is free to national members.*

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