

[Home](#) • [IT Management](#) • 11 tips for crafting highly effective job descriptionsby **Christina Wood**
Contributing writer

11 tips for crafting highly effective job descriptions

Feature

Jul 04, 2023 • 14 mins

[Careers](#) [IT Jobs](#) [IT Leadership](#)

Hiring great talent starts with an enticing job posting. Here's how to create effective, engaging, and inclusive job descriptions sure to lure the best candidates for the job.



CREDIT: GAUDILAB / SHUTTERSTOCK

Writing job descriptions for open positions might feel like a chore to pass off to someone with less on their plate, or something to shortcut by dusting off copy from the last time you hired for this role, but an on-target job description is a vital step in landing talent — especially in tight markets. All too often, it's in the job description where recruiting efforts start to fizzle.

A job posting is a representation of your company, culture, and successes, to be read by a lot of people. How you phrase a job description, what you say about the role, even the words you choose to describe expectations and requirements hold sway over whether people will be attracted to or repelled by this job — and your company.

"This is a marketing tool," explains Ryan Whitacre, partner at executive search firm Bridge Partners. "You want to cast as wide a net as possible."

You might believe what you want is for just two perfect people to apply so you don't have to spend hours in interviews. But Whitacre comes to his perspective honestly. "When I suggest two excellent candidates to my clients," he says, "They ask, 'Who else is there?' Every single time."

You are fishing. You are also doing some marketing. The job description is the lure. And the way it's written makes a valuable first impression to anyone who reads it. It's worth the time to get it right.

I asked experts on this form of writing for tips on how to do it well. Here is their advice.

1. Make a good first impression

"First impressions matter," says Kaitlin Kincaid, senior managing director of recruiting firm Keller Augusta. This job description might be everything the reader knows about your company, whether they apply or not. "Use it as an opportunity to showcase the company," she says. "Highlight your culture and the successes."

Trevor Bogan, regional director for the Americas at Top Employers Institute, agrees. "Tell the reader what makes you unique, particularly if your organization participates in sustainability or inclusion initiatives," he says.

If sustainability isn't yet your proudest moment, tout the amazing benefits, growth, travel, or learning opportunities your company provides. "Prospective employees want to work at a place where they can grow their careers and develop new skills," says Bogan.

2. Lead with what's most important

Applicants are scanning a job board, either at your site or an aggregator's and won't read your posting unless the title and the first few sentences pull them in.

"Use a clear and concise job title that accurately reflects the position," says Kristen Tronsky, chief people officer at DoiT International. "This helps attract candidates with appropriate skills and experience."

If the headline hooks someone, the first paragraph is where you lure them in. This is where you brag about how cool your company is and why people want to join your team.

"Start with a compelling summary," says Scott Poniewaz, CEO of EXEC. "Begin with a brief, catchy introduction to the role and your company to give applicants a clear idea of what the job entails and why they should be interested in applying."

That's your opportunity to showcase everything from your remote options to your learning-forward culture, to your generous work/life balance perks. Why do you love your company? That goes in the summary.

After you have your potential applicant reading, you can get into the technical requirements. But be sure and rank them in order of importance so you don't lose someone early over a skill that isn't a must-have for you.

3. Look at it through a lens of inclusion

"It's well worth putting time and care to make this as inclusive as possible," says Carolyn Walker, global HR director for Nigel Frank. "That might mean looking at your benefits packages, or considering how you can make the application process itself more accessible."

Comb through the words, metaphors, and even the list of required skills and training with an eye to who might be discouraged by the way you are phrasing things or what you are asking for. Ask yourself if excluding people is your goal.

"Exclusionary language can put off prospective marginalized candidates," says Walker. "If you're serious about inclusion and allyship, you have to think about what you're sending out into the world, and job descriptions are absolutely a part of that."

Bogan agrees, adding that research his firm has done indicates that in 2023 DEI is more important than ever. "Inclusive language promotes diversity and sends a message that the organization is committed to inclusion," he says. "Avoid using gender-specific terminology that may alienate certain groups."

4. Skip the cliches

"Don't use expressions like rockstar, ninja, or other cliches," says Kim Jones, vice president of human resources at Toshiba. This terminology has become common but is layered with problems. "These are highly intelligent, skilled professionals who want to know what the position requires," she says. "You lose top talent when you resort to these types of phrases."

The word “requirements” is also a cliché and probably not the meaning you intend.

Claire Rutkowski, senior vice president and CIO Champion at Bentley Systems, has seen this play out herself: That word drives people away, she says. “For engineering firms to be more inclusive they need to use the words ‘preferred qualifications’ instead of ‘requirements,’” she says. When you say something is “required” many people will take that literally. And a high percentage of those people will be women.

“Women tend to feel that they need to meet 100% of the criteria,” says Rutkowski. And they won’t apply if they are missing even one small item on your list. “Men feel like, ‘Well if it’s 60%, I’m going to apply anyway,’” she says.

5. Whittle down the requirements

A long list of requirements — even if you call them preferred qualifications — isn’t a good idea. Instead weed out what you can — especially expectations that are not skills but rather specific or advanced degrees not necessary to the role.

“Be realistic about background and experience requirements,” says Linda Pophal, founder and owner of Strategic Communications. “Requiring degrees can result in missing out on talent who could do the job quite well — it’s also risky from a discrimination standpoint because certain population segments may be adversely impacted by degree requirements.”

A job description that asks for specific degrees, graduate degrees, and many years of experience — especially in fields that are so new it’s not possible — is often a sign of a company not putting in the work to refresh job descriptions, Whitacre says.

“Most times, that job description comes from the person who’s in the chair now,” he says. “These are snapshots in time. Over time, jobs change and those descriptions can be using stale terms — and stale requirements.”

Take a long, hard look at that shopping list of qualifications. Do you really want — in this hiring climate, with present-day attitudes toward education, amid today’s speed of technical change and access to alternate education paths — to eliminate everyone who doesn’t meet that requirement for 10 years of on-the-job experience and a specific degree?

6. Do a bias check

Whether you updated a job listing someone else wrote or started from scratch, perform a bias check. “Recognize that you will have bias,” says Whitacre. No matter how evolved you believe yourself to be or how hard you try, it isn’t possible to exist without some sort of bias. Your bias, though, will be different from another person’s bias. “So have other people take a look at it,” he says.

And not just the manager or the person this new hire will report to. “Ask lots of people to look at it with an eye towards capturing bias,” he

CIO

And tell these people what you are looking for. If they know you are trying to eliminate bias, they will know it’s okay to tell you that your worldview is privileged.

There are also online tools — such as Textio — that run your job description through an AI that will find bias and offer alternative wording.

7. Be crystal clear about location

“Indicate whether the role is 100% telecommuting, 100% in the office, or hybrid — and what that hybrid schedule would be,” says Toshiba’s Jones.

In IT you should absolutely be prepared to offer a remote option, though. “Having a remote option is a huge draw,” says Whitacre. But don’t say it if you don’t mean it. “You can’t just use it as a bait-and-switch maneuver,” he says. “You have to truly be open to it and have that conversation.”

This has become so important to the technical talent pool that you can’t really avoid it.

"Prior to the pandemic," says Whitacre. "The first questions I got — from the CEO on down — was about compensation. Now, the first question everyone asks is, 'Do I have to move? Is it remote? Is it hybrid? How many days a week?' Those are the questions on people's minds now."

This is borne out by research as well. According to a [recent survey](#), 58% of top employers offer some kind of flexible working arrangement. A [2023 Gartner study](#) predicts that 39% of knowledge workers will work hybrid by the end of 2023.

8. Don't be vague

Be specific about the actual role, not vague about the type of person you are looking for.

When you are vague about what will be expected of the candidate, they will assume they will be asked to do everything. "I don't want to be the person that's wearing all the hats," says Kincaid. "Tell me how I am going to be successful in this job." How will their success be evaluated? How will they be compensated? What are the benefits?

"Candidates want to know, 'What's in it for me,'" she says. So, if you want them to apply, tell them the details, rather than offering fuzzy catchalls like "terrific benefits" or "room to grow."

"They will do the job," she says. "But they want to know what's beyond that. 'How am I going to grow professionally? How am I going to be incentivized financially?'"

Be as specific as possible. Not only is this good writing in general, but in a job description specificity attracts the right candidates. "Being specific draws in qualified candidates who possess the relevant skills so your applicant pool will be more qualified," Kincaid says.

Be specific, too, about the technology the candidate will use in the job. "Clearly outline and identify the technology that will be used on a day-to-day basis and the required technical skills," says Tronsky. If some of this can be learned on the job, she says, spell that out.

9. Highlight the company culture and tech stack

Be sure your job description doesn't lean too heavily on what you want candidates to bring to the job. You need to include that, of course, but it's also important to consider what candidates might want to know going into the job.

"What's more important is that a job description highlights culture, mission, and work-life balance benefits," says Nancy Drees, CEO of Vacare Group. "Also, play up your cool tech stack or the technical challenges your employees enjoy. These are the things that are going to catch somebody's eye."

You are looking for technical creatives. And those people love to solve technical problems, learn, and maybe communicate and create using slick collaborative tools from some distant beach.

If you have a beautifully diverse, interesting, and collaborative organization, play that up, too. "Candidates who have opportunities to learn from different departments and work with diverse teams feel more engaged in their roles," says Bogan. "Top performers want to grow and learn."

10. Think about SEO

"Applicants are typically searching a job board," explains Scott Lieberman, founder of Touchdown Money. And those rely on search engines to deliver the right job to the right person.

So, it's worth brushing up on search engine optimization or bringing in someone who is good at it. After all, you don't want your brilliant job description to go unseen by prime candidates searching for jobs.

"Using keywords related to the job and the industry in the job description will help your job description stand out in search results and ensure it is seen by the right applicants," says Poniewaz.

Ask your SEO expert to be creative about search terms if you are looking for someone with a specific interest or specialty to ensure your job lands in front of precisely the people you are looking for.

11. Use clear, action-oriented language

Passive voice in general puts people to sleep, so if you want people to read your job posting, use active language.

“Using active voice and action-oriented language makes the job description more engaging and exciting,” says Tronsky. “It conveys a sense of urgency by indicating that the job is important and needs to be filled quickly.”

Use a light, engaging tone, too, that reflects the voice of your culture. Are you entrepreneurs working at the cutting edge of technology? Use language that feels comfortable to you. Are you bankers? Use a tone that reflects who you are.

You may be working in technology where acronyms reign supreme but leave those out of the job description. Your team might bandy about jargon with frequency but those specific terms might not translate outside your culture.

“Don’t use lots of jargon or technical language,” says Tronsky. “That can make it difficult for candidates to understand the job requirements, leading to confusion and potentially deterring qualified candidates from applying and increasing your unqualified applicant pool.”

More on effective hiring and staff management:

- [6 hot IT hiring trends — and 5 going cold](#)
- [7 interview mistakes that cost you key hires](#)
- [Employee retention: 10 strategies for retaining top talent](#)
- [9 reasons good employees leave — and how you can prevent it](#)
- [Diversity and inclusion: 8 best practices for changing your culture](#)

by **Christina Wood**
Contributing writer

More from this author



Show me more

- POPULAR
- ARTICLES
- PODCASTS
- VIDEOS

01

FEATURE

Deepfakes are a real threat to India’s FSI sector, say tech leaders

By Qiraat Attar
Sep 01, 2024 • 6 mins

Financial Services Industry Artificial Intelligence

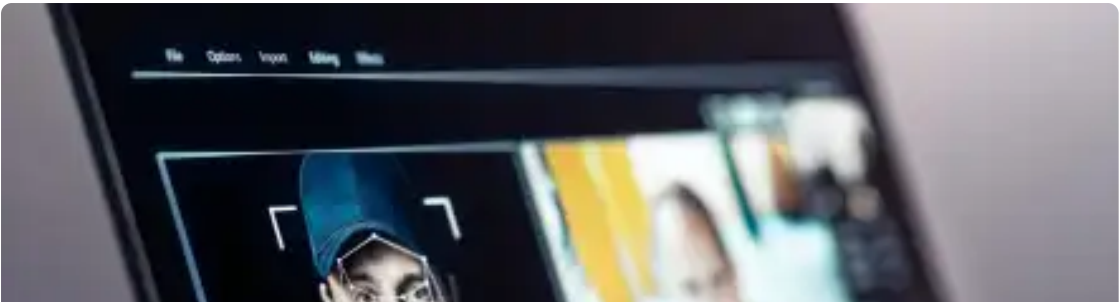
02

PODCAST

CIO Leadership Live Australia wi

Aug 26, 2024 • 28 mins

CIO Leadership Live



About



[About Us](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Foundry Careers](#)

[Reprints](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[BrandPosts](#)

Policies



[Terms of Service](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Cookie Policy](#)

[Copyright Notice](#)

[Member Preferences](#)

[About AdChoices](#)

[Your California Privacy Rights](#)

[Privacy Settings](#)

Our Network



[Computerworld](#)

[CSO](#)

[Infoworld](#)

[Network World](#)



Copyright © 2024 IDG Communications, Inc.