

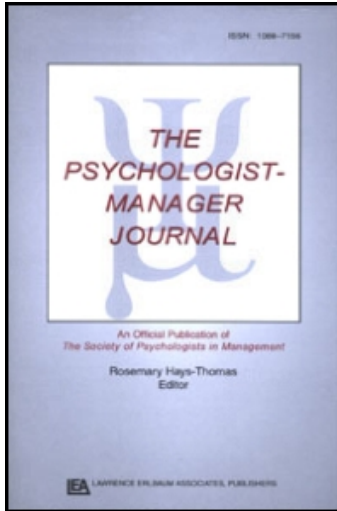
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Managing the Inner Contradictions of Job Descriptions: A Technique for Use in Recruitment

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III. LIVE FROM THE FIRING LINE: DILEMMAS IN RECRUITING

Managing the Inner Contradictions of Job Descriptions: A Technique for Use in Recruitment

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Job descriptions are building blocks for internal-oriented talent management processes such as recruitment, succession planning, coaching, training, and compensation. However, job descriptions also have an external audience when used as part of a recruitment program. In the recruitment situation, these multiple constituencies can cause a conflict, resulting in job descriptions that either lack validity or lack critical information necessary for valid hiring decisions. This article explores the inner contradictions of job descriptions and suggests an approach companies can use to make these basic tools more useful in recruitment.

Job descriptions today are documents containing job title, reporting relationships, summary of responsibilities, job span (e.g., budget, staff), primary accountabilities and responsibilities; decision-making authority; and hiring requirements (e.g., knowledge, skills, abilities, certifications, degrees). This one document has become the basic building block for enterprisewide talent management systems such as the following: recruitment, performance assessment, succession planning, coaching, training, or job-competency modeling. With one major exception, the intended audience for corporate-generated job descriptions is within the company. That one exception is recruitment: Job descriptions and summaries of

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job descriptions that are used for job postings are created with both internal and external audiences in mind. The internal readership would place a premium on job descriptions having valid data. However, company officials responsible for managing external product and company reputation might wish to portray the company in the best possible light.

For example, I reviewed the first 24 chief executive officer positions reporting to the CEO that yielded from a Monster.com search on November 29, 2009 using the keywords *chief financial officer*. Of the 24 job descriptions reviewed, 6 (25%) of the job descriptions specifically portrayed the opportunity as one of managing growth (“aggressively growing,” “significant growth over the next 1–3 years”). Three defined the job as a “raw startup.” The remaining 15 (63%) were silent or vague regarding leadership context. Example phrases are “join a health-care organization as a key leader,” “well-respected midsize manufacturing company,” and “operates in a dynamic marketplace.”

However, when those same documents become the foundation for screening candidates, there may be a bias toward hiring leaders on the basis of “wish to have” rather than “need to have.”

In an earlier article, Stybel and Peabody (2007) discussed the importance of clearly defining the Leadership Mandate in recruitment and structuring the onboarding program. *Leadership Mandate* means that portion of a job description articulating how the leader advances the strategic goals of the company. Typical mandates might be “start up,” “growth,” “good to great,” “maintenance,” “turnaround,” “stealth,” or “shut down.”

When we conduct a retained search, we create two documents rather than one. The first is the traditional job description; the second is the Leadership Mandate. The job description is the one that is advertised and the one used to screen the first round of candidates. The Leadership Mandate will not be given to the top two finalists, but it will be verbally described to the finalists. By calling the documents two different names and not providing candidates copies of the Leadership Mandate, we protect the company against charges of fraud. The Leadership Mandate would, however, be given to the successful candidate and would be the basis on which the onboarding program is conducted. For example, consider the following two sample situations:

- Company A is a privately held company in which the founder will assume the role of chairman of the board. The board seeks a new CEO. The job description talks about a Good to Great Leadership Mandate. In conversations with the founder, it is clear that the company is *his* baby, and he will only accept business process changes at the margins. He will oppose key strategic changes and changes in corporate culture. The founder is 51% owner of the company, and the board was handpicked by the founder. A job description featuring a context of good to great is misleading. Any good to

great leader who is hired is doomed to fail. The true Leadership Mandate is to find someone who can maintain what works and maintain a good relationship with the founder.

- Company B is a privately held company in which the founder will assume the role of chairman of the board. The board seeks a new CEO. The job description talks about good to great. In conversations with the founder, it is clear that the company is *his* baby, and he will only accept business process changes at the margins. He will oppose key strategic changes and changes in corporate culture. He has a major equity stake in the company. However, the board intends to buy him out and have him depart from the board within 6 months. The board wishes to send a message to potential acquirers that the company has outgrown its founder. This is an example of situation in which the public description and the true Leadership Mandate coincide.

The Leadership Job Mandate is the standard job description with the addition of a section called *Leadership Mandate*. This section clearly spells out the following issues:

- *What's to be changed in the next 90–120 days?* Change involves business processes, technology, and people and culture.
- *What's to be back-burnered or honored in the next 90–120 days?* This also involves business processes, technology, and people and culture. We differentiate *honored* as a factor critical to the organization's success versus *back-burnered* as an issue that does not require attention over the next 4 months.
- *What's to be avoided at all costs in the next 90–120 days?* This is the most difficult section of all to complete because hiring managers love to tell candidates that they will have *carte blanche* to make necessary changes. Most newly hired leaders quickly learn that the term *carte blanche* is a cliché that is confined to recruiting desired candidates. It has little value once the person begins a leadership role.

WHY ARE THESE THREE QUESTIONS IMPORTANT?

Having client companies go through this structured discussion to sort out these priorities is useful because it forces them to confront the valid leadership contextual issues that determine or undermine success.

Most job descriptions only focus on what is to be changed. As a result, the Leadership Mandate is one dimensional. We tell our clients to think of change as a three-dimensional concept with “What’s to be changed?”; “What’s to be back-burnered or honored?”; and “What’s to be avoided at all costs?” as the three

TABLE 1
Sample Job Description

<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>
Company	North American division of a Swedish consumer products company
Position	Vice president, human resources
Direct report to	Executive vice president, North America
Dotted line report	Group director, human resources, global parent company, Sweden
Reporting to the position	Human resources director (in Texas operation) and human resources manager (in Canadian operation); total human resources staff of 5
Peers	Vice president, operations; vice president, finance & administration; vice president, sales
North American division employees	550 in 3 locations near Houston, Los Angeles, and Montreal; some of these employees are unionized
2010 sales	\$200 million
Core objectives	Manage the integration of 3 operating units
Nature of the market	Growing consumer product market specializing in high-quality toys
Must haves	Consumer products experience Experience negotiating union contracts and working in a unionized environment Ability to start a human resources function from ground zero Experience working in a matrix environment Success in post-M&A talent integration

Note: M&A = Mergers & Acquisitions.

dimensions. These three dimensions cannot meaningfully be discussed in a document subject to public viewing.

We pay attention to our clients’ responses to the question, “What’s to be backburnered or honored over the next 12 months?” In a true turnaround situation, clients bitterly complain that nothing is worth honoring. If there is a big list of issues to be honored, can the Leadership Mandate truly be a turnaround? It is a subject worth discussing with clients.

In a true good-to-great situation, there will be a consistent message of what is worth honoring.

In response to the question, “What’s to be avoided at all costs?” I sometimes get the response, “Nothing is sacred.” Who likes to admit to institutional taboos, particularly in front of strangers? I usually follow up the predicted response of “nothing” with a soft “Really?” I keep my eyes on the floor and my mouth shut. I let the quiet of the moment create the tension needed for clients to begin responding with, “Well, if you must know. . .”

TABLE 2
Sample Leadership Mandate

<i>What's to be changed in the first 12 months</i>	
Business processes	There is no system for collecting compensation data. We need a system in place within 6 months that can be applied in Montreal in advance of union negotiations.
People	Begin work with our Montreal labor attorney on the Canadian union contract. It expires in 8 months. There have been complaints about the human resources person in Los Angeles. It will be up to you to determine whether this person needs to be replaced or can be coached. Gather data and make your own independent assessment.
Culture	The consumer thinks we have a global brand. Internally, our employees still think of themselves in terms of the products they worked on before we acquired their companies. We want to create a global corporate brand. But our employee population tends to see things in the context of their provincial needs. We want them to view things from a global corporate and then a North American perspective. Last, they can view things from a Houston, Los Angeles, or Montreal perspective. We want you to change the way people talk and the way people think. Right now, conversations tend to be about local needs only. We are ultimately evaluated by our owners on positive change in net income rather than gross sales. We want a culture that is focused on net income and a compensation system that is aligned with that new culture.
What's to be honored in the first 12 months	This is a Swedish company. Our culture is to be low key and avoid being hierarchical. These values are values we wish to keep and extend. Our being a Swedish company is a value proposition we wish to expand internally. It is part of the unique brand we have with customers, and we wish that culture to be a reality in-house.
What's to be back-burnered in the first 12 months	Recruitment is a back-burner issue. We don't expect to do much hiring in the next 12 months. This does not imply that we are satisfied with the North American recruitment process or with the costs of recruitment. Deal with it at a later time.
What's to be avoided at all costs	The vice president global human resources in Sweden is well thought of by the chief executive officer. Keep her on your side!
	She will say to you, "North America is your responsibility. I don't want to meddle. You do what you think is best." It would be a mistake to assume that she means you have a free hand. She is just being nice and does not like to directly confront. It is important that she perceive that the program has her fingerprints on it as well as yours.
	Work with her early and work with her often. Seek her out. If she says, "I know a consultant in Los Angeles who is quite good but I am sure you know many good people. Use the people you feel comfortable with" assume she just told you, "I want you to use my person in Los Angeles."

Note. This sample Leadership Mandate is to be the basis of job interviews with the final 2 candidates; discussed but not shown to the final 2 candidates; given to selected candidate and used to frame the onboarding program.

As an example, Table 1 shows how we recently advertised a position; Table 2 shows the other points discussed with the final candidates.

Writing two documents is a burden, but it is appropriate because it recognizes the conflicting constituencies that will review the core document called the *corporate job description*. This technique helps to advance the goal of making these conflicts discussable and provides a practical way of dealing with them.

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