

HOW TO WRITE AN EFFECTIVE POSITION DESCRIPTION

by Laura Gassner Otting

THE DEPARTURE of a key employee can cause a great deal of anxiety for churches. The first worry-driven thought that runs through many administrators' and ministers' minds is "How can I find someone who combines the skills and experiences of this person, as well as the knowledge of and connections to our constituents?" However, instead of just filling the shoes of the former staff member, replacing staff or creating and filling a new position can provide a good opportunity for strategic reflection and redirection.

COMPONENTS OF A WELL-WRITTEN POSITION DESCRIPTION

Position descriptions are read by candidates and colleagues alike and may serve many purposes. A good job description will excite candidates to apply—especially those who might not have applied—after reading only a few paragraphs of boilerplate information. Joyce Lapenn, a vice president with DRG (Development Resource Group, Inc.) in

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New York City and the former executive director of Graham Windham, a major family and children's services agency emphasizes the need for a thoughtful, accurate description:

Crafting an attractive position description to generate genuine interest comes after a very thoughtful assessment of the needs of the organization and how the open position relates to these needs. The employer should put some real effort into this document and exclude, for example, such usual 'pat' phrases such as 'good interpersonal skills.' How and to whom this position relates is more fundamental and ultimately more meaningful for potential candidates.

A good position description will also bring together a church around the central themes and challenges facing the new hire, many of which will be used in both the interviewing and weighing of candidates, as well as in their performance evaluations in the months and years to come. In other words, a good position description will sell the church organization, serve as a mini-strategic planning session, and provide performance evaluation clear to the hire and the supervising minister or administrator.

THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every position description should start with an executive summary. Not everyone will want to read the entire position description. Further, some outreach

vehicles will only let you post a paragraph or two, and having this summary done ahead of time will make you more efficient later.

BACKGROUND

A nice way to ease into the duties, responsibilities, challenges and potential problems facing the next hire is to describe the inspirational story of the founding of your church and the context in which this hire will have to work. Providing a framework in which the candidate can imagine day-to-day activities and long-term projects helps candidates rule themselves in or out of a search before wasting anyone's time. More importantly, the background can

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elicit intelligent questions and conversations from your candidates, helping you to determine which candidates are stronger than others.

POSITION-SPECIFIC CHALLENGES

Each role in a church staff organization fulfills some basic need that keeps that organization running smoothly and, hopefully, raises it to a new level. These are the challenges set forth for a particular job. Challenges allow the realities of a church's past to meet the hopes for its future. A well-written challenge statement can be measured during the interview process against the candidate's past track record, and then later against his or her performance on the job. When challenges are met, they allow hiring administrators and ministers to measure fundamental differences in a staff, such as whether difficulties have been abated or new opportunities opened.

QUALIFICATIONS

From the challenges facing this job, a clearer picture will appear regarding the specific professional and personal qualifications needed for success. Professional qualifications include a candidate's career track record, education and training; further, these qualifications can be tailored to the size and scope of the position at hand. Personal qualifications might include a candidate's background, experience, character, personality, exposure, or outlook.

Finally, be sure to include any compensation, application deadlines, and contact information relevant to the position. A trick used by nonprofit executive recruiters when the compensation is open or when they want to survey the field is to avoid listing the compensation and, instead, ask for a salary history from applicants. From there, you can determine what you'll need to pay for the level of talent you wish to hire without upsetting or offending potential applicants.

5 PEARLS OF WISDOM: WRITING MORE ENGAGING POSITION DESCRIPTIONS

By putting forth a strong effort at the beginning of a search to quantify and assess its needs, a church can assure a more strategic search, a broader candidate pool, and a smarter hire. Before you sit down to write a position description, take time to do your research, asking key staff and layman these important questions:

1. What is the context within which this person must work? What are the particular challenges facing the church at this time? Which challenges will the new person need to tackle? What is the timeline to meet these challenges? What tools are available?
2. What fundamental differences do you see in this church staff organization 12 months, 18 months, and 24 months after this person is on board? What outcomes—subjective and objective—will be used to determine success?

3. Describe the education and training background ideal for this position. From what kinds of backgrounds might this person come? What types of roles might he/she have held in the past?
4. What activities, programs, and staff need to be sustained? Which ones need to be enhanced, initiated, diversified, recalibrated, reassessed, or eliminated?
5. Are there resources or advertising vehicles that should be considered, such as online discussion forums, newsgroups, publications or Web sites that are organized to assist nonprofit organizations reach out to potential candidates? In addition, are there any other sources of candidates that ought to be tapped? **Fi**



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