

HIRE FOR SUCCESS - BUILD JOB DESCRIPTIONS BASED ON STRATEGIC GOALS

Product No. 10033

ResponseDesignCorporation 
CREATING THE UNCOMMON CALL CENTER



Hire for Success - Build Job Descriptions based on Strategic Goals

Abstract

Walk through the process of hiring an agent—from the preparation of a job description to the validation of your hiring choice. The consequences of hiring the wrong person as an agent are serious—for you, for the center, and for the person you hire. The article shows you how to translate strategic goals and critical success factors into job descriptions. It helps you understand the unique mix of knowledge, skills and attributes that would make agents successful in your center. And it helps you prioritize your hiring needs using a selection criteria matrix.

The author suggests that you align performance management and compensation with the hiring process so that—once you find Mr. or Ms. Right—you can compensate and reward them for the same reasons you hired them.

Hiring the best has a big pay-off. Agents will understand what management expects of them and they will be willing and well-prepared to serve customers, enhance profitability and add value to your company.



Hire for Success - Build Job Descriptions based on Strategic Goals

Kathryn E. Jackson, Ph.D.

“Never try to teach a pig to sing...
It wastes your time and annoys the pig.”

The last statistic I heard on the subject was that over 50 percent of us are in the wrong job. It reminds me of the above quote. Hiring the wrong person for a job results in our trying “to teach a pig to sing.” Now, there is nothing wrong with pigs. Pigs have their mission in life. However, that mission does not include singing. Likewise, when we hire people to work on the phone who have no inclination for phone work, we do everyone a disservice. We get frustrated and they get annoyed. It’s no wonder we all struggle so much.

Often, in the contact center, hiring becomes one of those “urgent” things that just has to get done right away. The cry of, “We need thirty new hires on the phone by the end of the month,” is not unusual. We scramble to find **warm** bodies to fill the positions. Finding the **right** body is often not an option. We figure we can “fix” the process later and hey, the turnover is so high the “wrong” people will be gone in a few months anyway.

In LeapFrog!™, Response Design’s metric database, we see how tough it is to get it right. As of 2000, the average annual negative turnover (in which agents leave the company) is 23 percent while the average annual positive turnover (in which agents are promoted or move laterally within the company) is 16 percent. Twenty-four percent of the companies do not require any type of pre-employment testing. The average number of applicants screened per hire is 10 and the average cost per hire is over \$4,000.

Therefore, selecting the right people to serve your customers is critically important. The wrong person on the phone can never deliver WOW service or sales. In addition to impacting customer relations, errors in hiring have serious long-term consequences for the newly selected individual, that individual’s supervisor, and the organization. For example, supervisors spend more time coaching, trying to raise performance to an acceptable level. Management provides more training than anticipated, which requires additional expense and time. Supervisors try to compensate for inadequate performance, either by more frequent reviews and corrections or by taking over some of the non-performer’s responsibilities. If performance continues to be inadequate, supervisors spend time documenting the performance problems, providing feedback, and allowing sufficient opportunity to improve. If all else fails, the inadequate performer is removed (fired or transferred), an experience that is emotionally draining for all concerned, very time-consuming, and frequently expensive. Morale problems are also likely. The inadequate performer probably knows all is not well and is frustrated. Employees who must compensate for the problem performer may be resentful. If an employee is fired (or transferred against his or her wishes), the individual may complain formally, through a grievance process, or informally. Both types of complaints have a negative impact on the morale of co-workers and require significant management time. All these consequences lead to declining performance and loss of productivity over extended periods.

Even though the time required to do a sound job of personnel selection may seem great, the time and other costs required to “teach a pig to sing” is far greater. Why companies choose to “teach pigs to sing” is complicated and I don’t propose to know all the answers. What I have learned is that many companies lack a systematic approach to hiring and often the willpower (or authority) to say “no” to the wrong candidates in times of urgency.



I can't give you willpower or authority, but I can give you an approach to hiring that increases the odds of employee success. This systematic approach includes:

- describing the function of the position to be filled;
- analyzing the position to identify the skills, knowledge, and other characteristics necessary to perform these functions;
- determining the selection criteria (characteristics that an individual must possess at the time of hiring) as well as those that will be developed (through training or other means) while on the job;
- developing a recruitment strategy; and
- developing systematic, objective procedures for assessing the extent to which each candidate meets the selection criteria and for subsequent development of those individuals selected.

Describing the Job

The starting point in the successful selection of employees is an accurate and complete description of the position. An analysis of the job, with the results expressed as major tasks to be performed, is the essential foundation of the entire personnel selection system.

The job analysis should involve all the important tasks, including activities and decisions, as well as any special conditions or constraints under which the tasks occur.

The primary sources of information about a job are the position's supervisor, the individual currently occupying the position, and personnel in similar positions. Other potentially helpful sources of information are the customers of the position's outputs.

In our tour of corporate America, Response Design has found formal job descriptions are often out of date, overblown in order to justify particular salary levels, or devoid of important job dimensions that may be hard to express or quantify.

The first step in preparing a job description is to express the major tasks of the job as explicit, specific (not open to wide variations in interpretation), measurable statements of desired job performance. These precise, explicit performance objectives ensure that the supervisor of the position to be filled, candidates for the position, and all others involved in the selection process have the same understanding of what the desired job performance entails. The target for what a new hire will be expected to do, and at what level of proficiency, is clearly identified.

Job analysis example

For example, let's say the job analysis for your front-line agents reveals two items. It says:

1. Makes quality reservations via the phone.
2. Handles customers' questions and complaints.

Tasks

From these two line items from the job analysis, we can determine several task requirements. They might include:

- Discusses appropriate product with customer.
- Enters correct customer data.
- Handles irate customers.



Identifying Knowledge, Skills and Attributes (KSAs)

Once you identify and describe the major tasks of a job, you can determine the skills, knowledge, and other characteristics (such as personal attributes) needed to perform those functions successfully. At this point, if you specify all the skills and other characteristics needed to perform the job; you will specify those skills the candidate must possess to enter the position subsequently.

A common error in carrying out this step is to attempt to specify skills, knowledge, and other selection criteria without basing them on tasks. The development of a selection process must be a top-down approach. You must derive KSAs from the tasks that are derived from the job description.

Attributes, such as flexibility or integrity, may be quite difficult to identify and express. You will need to ask probing questions and read between the lines in order to get a complete picture of these less tangible requisites.

Nevertheless, identifying these other characteristics is of crucial importance. These traits are often what will determine whether a candidate is a good fit in the long run.

KSA example

If we were to brainstorm the KSAs for our previous example, we might list:

- Knowledge = product knowledge (to discuss the appropriate product with customer)
- Skill = keyboard skills (to enter correct customer data)
- Attribute = stress tolerance (to handle irate customers)

Remember, this is only an example. In a “real” scenario, the job description would be much more complex and there would be many more tasks, knowledge, skills, and attributes defined.

Deciding on selection criteria

After you have specified all the knowledge, skills, and attributes desired in an ideal performer; reality intrudes. No one person is likely to meet all the criteria identified. The next step is to decide which criteria are essential for entry into the job.

A variety of options are available. You might simply label each criterion as either essential or nonessential. You might group criteria into categories of high, medium, and low priority. You might also try a more sophisticated system of assigning numerical weights to the criteria according to their relative importance. You can obtain information on what weight to assign to each criterion from the position’s supervisor, from competent performers in the position, and from experts.

Bear in mind, the essential criteria are those required of someone entering a job, not those expected of a master performer. You will have to distinguish KSAs that can be readily acquired from those that would be excessively time-consuming, expensive, or impossible to acquire after hiring. Some skills—responding to a customer’s dilemma with empathy, for example—are readily learned on-the-job or through short-term activities. Others, such as accents or proper grammar, may require such extensive training and close supervision that the cost becomes prohibitive. Therefore, crucial skills and knowledge, as well as other characteristics that the organization is unable or unwilling to provide, must be considered high-priority selection criteria.

An example of a selection criteria matrix follows:



KSAs	KSA Definition	Hire?	Hiring Proficiency	Train?	Training Proficiency
Product Knowledge	Understanding of features, benefits and amenities of products and services.	No	NA	Yes	95%*
Keyboard skills	Ability to utilize the keyboard to accurately and efficiently enter data.	Yes	40 wpm and 85% accuracy	Yes	60 wpm and 90% accuracy
Stress tolerance	Ability to handle emotionally charged situations and to resist burnout in demanding environments.	Yes	60%	Yes	95%

**the numbers in this matrix are examples only*

Knowledge, skills, and attributes often gleaned from the job description and task list for customer contact agents include:

- Sales responsibility: extent to which applicants feel responsible for and in control of their sales performance and advancement potential.
- Productivity: the capacity to plan, organize, and complete projects on time.
- Stress tolerance: the ability to handle emotionally charged situations and to resist burnout in demanding work.
- Job stability: valuing long-term rewards over short-term payoffs, commitment to an employer.
- Communication: desire and ability to communicate effectively.
- Customer service orientation: the desire to WOW customers.
- Interpersonal orientation: investment in social interaction and desire to be with other people.
- Applied verbal reasoning: applicant's verbal reasoning ability in the context of a work environment.
- Basic key skills (often referred to as soft skills): those skills identified on the call observation form such as assessment and problem solving, listening, speaking, courtesy, etc.
- Professional attributes: attendance, drug free, felony free, etc.



Recruitment Strategy Matrix

Once we determine which KSAs we will hire for, then we determine the best way to recruit. First, we must list all our recruitment options (such as local college, employment agency, local newspaper, and temporary agency). Then, we create another matrix to determine which option best serves which KSAs. We determine the best mix for our recruitment. Since product knowledge was not something we defined applicants needing to possess at hiring (in the above example), it is not in this matrix.

KSAs	Local College	Temporary Agency	Employment Agency	Local Newspaper	Other:
Keyboard skills					
Stress tolerance					

Hiring Methodology and Tools Matrix

Once people are recruited, you could use various assessment procedures to select candidates. The choice of a procedure should be based on how well it meets the criteria of validity, cost-effectiveness, and reliability.

Validity refers to the extent to which the assessment procedure accurately measures what it is intended to measure. Many people, under pressure to fill vacancies quickly, fail to collect essential data on the validity of their selection procedures and the cost of using them. This failure prevents the organization from obtaining valuable feedback about what assessment procedures are working and what the process is actually costing. It also leaves organizations that cannot document the validity of their assessment procedures open to legal challenges from rejected candidates, who may perceive the assessment process as biased against them.

Cost effectiveness is a judgment that weighs the primary benefit of the assessment procedures (selecting candidates who meet performance expectations) against the method's developmental and operating costs. An assessment procedure is considered reliable if it consistently measures, time after time, what it is designed to measure.

Frequently used methods

Interviews (including telephone and face-to-face), reference checks, paper-and-pencil tests, biographical data, academic achievement, and work samples are commonly used means of assessing candidates. Computer simulation is becoming more and more popular in the contact center. Computer simulations give people a sense of what the job would be like. Many people have said that some job applicants take themselves out of the running after dealing with simulated customers.

Through this process you determine what hiring methodology is most appropriate for each KSA, then you determine what tools are available for each methodology. Your team discusses the pros and cons for each methodology and tool so the best options are selected.



First, make a list of all possible methodologies. The list may contain:

- face-to-face interviews,
- telephone interviews,
- computer simulations,
- role plays,
- verbal tests,
- written tests,
- facility tours,
- observations of job,
- presentations by candidate,
- drug test, and
- background investigation.

Then, make a list of available personnel, such as:

- manager,
- supervisor,
- front-line agent, and
- recruiter.

Following is an example of a methodology and tools matrix:

KSA	Methodology				Tools		
	Description	Who?	Pro	Con	Description	Pro	Con
Keyboard skills	Test	Recruiter			Company X	ROI	Too expensive
					Company Y	Cheap	accuracy
Stress tolerance	Face to face	Manager or recruiter					
	Telephone interview	Recruiter					
	Role play	Manager					
	Written test	Recruiter					
	Observation of job	Supervisor					



Linkages

Once this is done, the hiring team members decide on the best options and puts the system into place. At this point, they also pass their findings along to the training department to ensure they know what to expect in initial and on-going training. You also incorporate the identified KSAs into the incentive and performance appraisal system to ensure the loop is complete. The importance of this is immeasurable.

Everything in the contact center is linked to everything else. Strategic goals are linked to critical success factors. Critical success factors are linked to job descriptions. Job descriptions are linked to hiring criteria, performance appraisals and call monitoring sheets. Hiring criteria, performance appraisals, and call monitoring sheets are linked to training and incentives. If we don't consciously think through the linkages, each time we make a decision, we add to our frustration. Agents receive mixed messages about what is important and don't get the help they need to become experts.

Take a simple linkage test: Look at your job description for your customer contact agent. Trace the job requirements through the hiring criteria, the call monitoring sheet, initial training, the reward and recognition program and the training library. Is each job requirement traceable through the maze? If not, you have a linkage problem. Much of the work we do at Response Design is helping companies fine-tune the linkages so a consistent message is sent to each employee and so the customer experiences nothing but WOW service and sales.

Minimizing Selection Error

Once all of this is done, there are still some hints that help minimize selection error. Consider the following recommendations:

- There are no shortcuts to excellence in personnel selection. Be prepared to devote time and effort to this endeavor. Careful planning and attention to detail are necessary. The benefits of selecting outstanding personnel will be directly observable to the extent to which these individuals exceed performance expectations and thus significantly contribute to the achievement of organizational objectives.
- Use the above procedures to maximize the likelihood of selecting personnel who will meet or exceed performance expectations.
- Rely on several assessment procedures, rather than one. Each procedure has its limitations. Interpret all results with caution.
- Be wary of educational requirements. For example, consider a job applicant for an accounting position. To put "Bachelors degree in accounting" as a requirement is pretty secure. We know what most schools require for accounting degrees. However, in our interview, depending on the experience level of the applicant, we may still want to check if the required learning took place. The problem with the contact center industry is that there are no guarantees that the required KSAs have been learned through education or prior experience. There are few degrees or certificates in telemarketing or customer service. Even prior experience is no guarantee. Many contact center jobs do not teach the KSAs you are requiring. We must verify through the hiring process whatever requirements we state in the job description for education or experience.



- Have applicants demonstrate relevant performance. If they can reasonably be expected to possess essential KSAs, have them perform some aspect of the job. This is a situation in which computer simulation and role-playing are a plus.
- Conduct structured, in-depth interviews. Ensure that the objectives of each stage in the process are specific, demonstrable, and appropriate.
- Have several people (preferably including potential co-workers) participate in the selection process. No matter how much quantifiable information has been gathered, the selection decision will ultimately reflect a judgment. One way of increasing the objectivity of this judgment is to include several others in the process. An interesting study stated that many interviewers trusted their intuition over any objective data discovered in the interview process. When you combine that with the fact that most of us hire people who are like us, you can see how we can miss many good candidates (simply because they did not match our style).
- Use an assessment procedure to conduct initial screening of applicants. Narrow the field down to a manageable number of finalists before using more expensive, time-consuming procedures. Many contact centers use a telephone interview or an automated system to first evaluate the candidate's speech patterns. If you don't like the way he or she sounds on the phone, why waste everyone's time "trying to teach a pig to sing?"
- When a decision is imminent, conduct a potential problem analysis on each remaining candidate. Look at all the information that has been gathered for each one, and ask the following questions: "If this person were selected and turned out to be a problem to the organization, what would the problem be? How would it make itself known? Why would it occur? What selection criteria would not have been fully met?" If it is clear that the candidate does not meet the selection criterion in question, ask whether training, mentoring, or other supervisory activity could prevent the problem. If so, would it be worth the additional cost? If not, can the organization live with the problem?
- Keep accurate records. Ensure that relevant information is collected and used to assess the validity, cost-effectiveness, and reliability of the selection procedures. Review this data periodically. It is the only way to objectively improve the assessment process.

The time and other resources required to establish this type of selection system may seem costly at first, but the cost will be significantly lower than those associated with correcting an error in hiring. Remember, it is always more expensive to solve a performance problem than to prevent it. Besides, who wants to teach a pig to sing?



Kathryn Jackson, co-founder of Response Design Corporation (RDC) and call center expert helps professionals get more from their call center. Response Design is the how-to source for integrating the call center into the customer relationship. Its independent consultants use call center web seminars, contact center consulting, call center tutorials, call center benchmarking, world class customer service articles, and best-in-class customer service practices to ensure you get the most from your call center investment.

Claim your free report [Creating Strong Customer Relationships through E-mail](#) by clicking on the title or e-mailing FreeReport@ResponseDesign.com. For additional uncommon call center ideas don't miss Kathryn's blog at www.respondedesign.com/corner.html.

Reprint permission

If you wish to reprint this article for non-commercial use, article must be complete and include all contact information. Commercial use of this article requires copyright reprint permission. Apply to Reprint@ResponseDesign.com.