

The Value and Common Sense of Job Descriptions

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The dairy world has an interesting job description gap. Most dairy farm employees want job descriptions. Few dairy farmers provide them. More important, dairy farmers who work with their employees to write and use job descriptions praise their benefits. Most labor management specialists highly recommend job descriptions.

We start with an employee perspective. “Why didn’t you tell me what the job really is when you hired me?” “Why should I get blamed for not doing something that I didn’t know I was supposed to do?” “How can you expect me to do what you want, the way you want it done, and at exactly the right time if you haven’t taken the time to tell me?” We should expect these reasonable questions from people who do not have job descriptions.

Dairy employers also have questions. “Must I accept an employee saying no to something that needs to be done because it wasn’t precisely explained in her job description.” “No two days are alike so how can a job description cover everything that will come up?” “Why aren’t milker, and worker perfectly good job descriptions?” These too are reasonable questions.

Job descriptions gain support because they clarify duties and responsibilities, provide performance standards to be achieved and improve communication. They also help to sell jobs to recruits, develop training programs, motivate employees, make evaluation simpler, reduce turnover and reduce chances of litigation.

An effective job description need not be a long, detailed and legalistic document. One page is often enough. The job description should include at least a job title, a one or two-sentence overview of the job, a list of duties, percentage of time devoted to each duty, who the supervisor is and qualifications for a person to successfully do the job.

Some tips on writing your first job descriptions or improving the ones you have are:

1. Involve your employees. They best understand what they are now doing. You are not ready to write a job description until you clearly understand the job and what you expect the person in the job to accomplish. Avoid the impression that you don’t have job descriptions because you have not thought through each job.
2. Accept that writing job descriptions is time consuming in the short-run and timesaving in the long-run.
3. Get copies of job descriptions from other dairy farmers and from nonfarm employers in your community.
4. Write the duties first and then add a title and summary that fits the duties.

5. Limit the number of major duties to eight or fewer. Shoot for four or five major duties. Expand on major duties by listing sub-duties.
6. State one duty as an elastic clause, e.g., assist with other duties for the good of co-workers and the business.
7. Begin each duty with an action verb, e.g., check, clean, move, help, repair and feed.
8. Avoid words that have many different meanings among dairy employees, e.g., milker, feeder and mechanic.
9. Match the job description to the actual job. Describe the job as it is. Avoid adding glamorous but unreal duties. A.I. work, selecting bulls and consulting with the veterinarian may be attractive to potential employees. Include these duties only if they are a real part of the job. Assistant herdsman may be an attractive title. Avoid using it to describe a position that is 90 per cent milking. If a job requires a person to be a generalist, e.g., dairy, crops and machinery, reflect the need for flexibility in the duties.
10. Take advantage of vacancies as a time to write new job descriptions.
11. Keep job descriptions current and accurate. Making review and update of job descriptions part of annual performance reviews avoids the job descriptions becoming useless paperwork.

In summary, job descriptions have great value for both employers and employees. A common sense approach best guides making them a valuable human resource management tool. David Sumrall, a Colorado dairy manager writing in the September 10, 1999 Hoard's Dairyman, wonderfully challenged other dairy managers, "We simply must do a better job of informing and training our workers. How can you expect an employee to do what you want, the way you want it done, and on your time schedule when you will not even take the time to tell them what it is you want done?"