JOB DESCRIPTIONS: IMPROVING THEIR CURRENCY, ACCURACY AND USEFULNESS

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

Many libraries devote a great deal of time and resources to developing job descriptions, but are they relevant, current and useful? The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) Dunn and Wilson Scholarship allowed this question to be researched. This research project focused on examining job descriptions from an organisational perspective. The objectives of the project were to:

- determine the current practice of the role of job descriptions in Australian libraries, using Library Technicians as a sample group;
- collate examples of Library Technician job descriptions to determine the type of information contained in them;
- identify best practice in the design, content and uses of job descriptions; and
- present recommendations to the library profession which would aid them in developing effective job descriptions that are current, relevant, accurate and useful.

The project consisted of three stages. Stage one involved a literature review covering the period 1988-1998. This review identified why job descriptions are important, what they are used for, what is included in job descriptions and trends in the literature.

Stage two surveyed a sample group of library technicians in Australian libraries in order to determine the usefulness, currency and accuracy of job descriptions within the Australian library industry. As the survey response rate was 66 percent a number of findings are generalised to the library industry.

Stage three gained a wider perspective on the uses of job descriptions and the type of information contained in them, by surveying a sample group of organisations who were considered best practice in human resource management. The findings from the Library Technician survey and organisational survey are compared. Based on information obtained through this research project a number of recommendations to improve the usefulness of job descriptions is provided, including a sample job description which incorporates the of recommendations.

1. introduction

1.1 Scope of the research

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) Dunn and Wilson scholarship made this research project possible. The following question prompted me to conduct this research:

A great deal of time and resources are devoted to developing job descriptions in libraries, but are they relevant, current, accurate and useful?

This research project focused on examining job descriptions from an organisational library perspective in order to answer these questions.

The objectives of this research project were to:

- determine the current practice of the role of job descriptions in Australian libraries, using Library Technicians as a sample group;
- collate examples of Library Technician job descriptions to determine the type of information contained in them;
- identify best practice in the design, content and uses of job descriptions; and
- present recommendations to the library profession which would aid them in developing effective job descriptions that are current, relevant, accurate and useful.

The project was not concerned with job analysis or job design, the focus is on the actual job description and their content as this was the central issue dealt with in the research project. The research was conducted from September 1997 to February 1999.

The project consisted of three stages. Stage one involved a review of current literature on job descriptions. Stage two surveyed a sample group of Library Technicians throughout Australia. The aim of this survey was to gain information on job descriptions in Australian libraries including their use, when they are reviewed and the information contained in them. Stage three surveyed a number of organisations from a wide field (for example, banks, hotels, corporate organisations and airlines) in order to gain a wider perspective on the use of job descriptions and the type of information contained in them.

Within the literature, there appears to be some confusion as to what information is contained in a job description. Some authors state that a job description and person specification are separate documents. They (Drummond, 1994; Grant, 1989) argue that the job description focuses on the job, that is, the duties and the responsibilities involved in the job. While the person specification focuses on the human resources or the personal attributes of the person doing the job, that is, their experience, skills and qualifications. While other authors (Plachy and Plachy, 1993; Osborne, 1992; DeLon, 1994) state that both the job and person specifications are included in the job description. For the purposes of this research the term *job description* covers both details about the job and the person. This information may be included in the one document or separate documents.

2. Stage 1 - literature review

2.1 Introduction

The first stage of the research project consisted of a literature review. The review was limited to literature published between 1988 and 1998 as I was interested in examining job descriptions in today's work context rather than from a historical perspective.

LaRoory (1995) describes three main attitudes towards job descriptions. These are:

- the campaigners who believe up to date job descriptions are essential for the effective running of any organisation;

- the neutrals who are probably the largest group and are neither for nor against job descriptions. This group usually does not use job descriptions for managing their area of responsibility; and
- the contras who believe job descriptions are not necessary or desirable. They think that anything written down about a job is likely to be out of date by the next month, if not sooner.

This appears to be an accurate representation as I experienced all three attitudes when discussing job descriptions with staff from various organisations during the research project. People were either very enthusiastic, couldn't care less - 'yes we do have them but they are not used much' - or felt they were a waste of time, energy and money.

2.2 What is a job description?

Sahl, (1994. p.3) states 'well written job descriptions define the work of the organisation and its reasons for existence as an employer of human resources. More, they define and help quantify the relative importance of work, what each position contributes to a process and the organisation as a whole.' This definition illustrates an important point regarding job descriptions, used in today's work environment, by emphasising that they describe not only what the job is about but how the job contributes to the work of the organisation.

A job description must be accurate but not a minutely detailed list of an employees tasks and duties (DeLon, 1994). As Behn (1997, p. 60) states: 'it is impossible to list, in anything smaller than an encyclopedia, the multitude of tasks … that combine to produce the results desired from a particular job.' Job descriptions are meant to be a guide only 'staff must not interpret them rigidly or job descriptions become a barrier to success' (Degner, 1995, p. 17). Grant (1989) describes them as a 'map' that show direction. Job descriptions are not a description of how a job is to be done (Grant, 1989), a contract (DeLon, 1994) or set of rules, regulations or proper practices (Grant, 1989). They describe the nature of the work to be done by stating the purpose and main responsibilities. They may also include information on the type of person who is best suited to perform the job.

Grant (1988) describes job descriptions as a valuable resource. They have the potential to be a useful organisational tool, however, to realise their potential they must be properly prepared. Grant (1988, p. 53) believes many job descriptions do not reach their potential because they 'are too simplistic, they lack detail, they are out of date, they neglect many key structural elements of the job and they are unclearly written'.

There are two main types of job descriptions, the generic or general and the specific or individual. Generic job descriptions are written in broadly stated general terms without identifying specific responsibilities, requirements, purpose and relationships. Some organisations use generic job descriptions for the same level within an organisation. For particular positions an additional duty statement may be developed. Specific job descriptions provide information on all essential responsibilities assigned to the person performing the job, they are usually quite detailed and comprehensive. (How to write job descriptions the easy way, 1993)

2.3 Why are job descriptions important?

Ray and Hawthorne (1993, p i) state 'an accurate and detailed job description is an increasingly crucial component of the effective use of valuable human resources in libraries and other organisations.' The primary function of a job description is as a communication tool. They effectively communicate a great deal of information about a job, especially between the manager and employee (Giles, 1995; Grant, 1989). 'When employees have a road map to success they often perform much better - and that translates into continued business growth for you and your firm' (Consulting Task Force, 1991). Information may include reporting relationships; skill requirements; major responsibilities; where the job fits into the organisation and what is required of the position. This information is presented in a completely objective and impersonal way (How to write job descriptions the easy way, 1993) which allows the job description to be used in relation to many human resource functions such as recruitment, induction, training and performance management.

Well written job descriptions also provide information to prospective employees about organisational expectations of a particular job (Carlopio, 1996). This aids in retaining staff as the more a prospective employee knows about the culture of an organisation and what is expected of them, the quicker they will settle into the organisation. Unclear job descriptions, which do not describe organisational information and expectations, may mislead a new employee. 'A major barrier to the formation of organisational commitment is a large gap between what people expect and what the realities turn out to be' (Carlopio, 1986, p.58).

2.4 What are Job descriptions used for?

Job descriptions have the potential to be used for a number of human resource functions. The main purposes reported in the literature include the following (see appendix 1 for a list of purposes of job descriptions and literature references). Again the emphasis is on well written job descriptions.

- Selection and recruitment. Job descriptions may be used to advertise jobs, screen applicants, develop questions for the job interview and identify essential and desirable criteria.
- Induction and orientation. Job descriptions provide a good introduction and overview of the job which enables the employee to understand what the organisation expects of them.
- Understanding the employee's role in the organisation. Job descriptions allow the employee to see where they fit into the *big picture* of the organisation, and how their job contributes to the organisation. They may also reflect organisational goals and objectives.
- Identifying training requirements. Job descriptions may identify initial training requirements for a new employee. If they are included in a performance management system they may be used as an aid in identifying training to improve performance or additional training needed as a result of changing responsibilities.
- Performance management. Job descriptions are the foundation of an effective performance management system (Meng, 1992) and are used in conducting performance reviews or job evaluations. They may also be used to develop performance measures (Russell, 1996). However, it is important to note that job descriptions are only one component of an effective performance management system. Such a system includes other processes and documentation. For example, an organisation may have induction policies and program, identified roles and responsibilities of various levels of staff, a rewards and recognition program and performance appraisal system.
- Career development. A study of job descriptions can help employees determine what qualifications, experience and skills are needed to apply for different positions within the organisation. This information can then be used in career planning or development.

Other purposes listed in the literature include:

- orienting new supervisors on what their subordinates and bosses do (Grant 1989)
- analysing work flows and methods (Plachy and Plachy, 1993)
- mentoring (DeLon, 1994)
- industrial relations (Drummond, 1994)
- job restructuring (Drummond, 1994)
- determining what kinds of assignments are given to employees (Bust 1990, Lemos, 1994)
- organisational and personal goal setting (Giles, 1995)
- conducting an organisational audit (Drummond, 1994)
- defining or reviewing organisational structure (Plachy and Plachy, 1993)
- measuring accurate salary administration (Russell, 1996)
- preparing and analysing job descriptions help assure jobs are well designed and that all sections work together to achieve the organisational aims (Grant, 1989)
- quickly preparing substitute workers or temporary help (Grant, 1989)

2.5 What is Included in a Job Description?

The content of the job description varies widely from organisation to organisation and the purpose of the job description will influence what is included. The following list outlines the most commonly referred to components of a job description (apart from the job title, identifying code, grade/level, department, name of company, physical location, job status, date and name of incumbent) described in the literature reviewed (see **appendix 2** for a list of literature references):

- job function or purpose which explains the general purpose of the job and why it exists. It also provides the reader with a concise overview of the job.
- duties or tasks includes a precise specific list of what the employee does and is expected to do.
- responsibilities are a summary of the main responsibilities required of the position. Other terms used include Critical Success Factors (Herman and Herman, 1995) or work functions.
- accountabilities outline the major results expected from the job.
- organisational relationships outline how the job fits into the organisation and the structure of the organisation.
- working environment identifies the physical and social contexts in which the job is performed. It may also include working conditions.
- personal contacts refer to the people the employee will interact with while performing the job.
- reporting relationships include whom the employee reports to and what supervision the employee exercises.
- authority identifies what decisions the employee can make and resources they can commit.
- performance standards identify specific standards which can be used to determine whether the job is being performed satisfactorily. Other titles used include outcomes, measures of accomplishment or expected outputs.
- skills including competencies, knowledge and abilities required to perform the job.
- education or qualifications refers to qualifications needed for the job. This may also include training requirements.
- experience refers to the type and nature of experience needed to perform the job.

Other components discussed in the literature include:

- managers expectations (Osbourne, 1992)
- career mobility (DeLapa, 1989)
- position(s) previously held (DeLapa, 1989)
- meetings to attend/reports to be completed (DeLapa, 1989)
- management information required to be passed out from the job (Drummond, 1994)
- time percentages (Grant, 1996)
- scope and impact of the job (Sattler, 1993)

2.6 Format of job descriptions

The layout and format of the job description is very important as a clear format will aid in understanding the document. Before deciding on a format, the organisation firstly needs to consider what the job description will be used for (Grant, 1989). Once a format is decided it needs to be standardised across the organisation (Osborne, 1992; DeLon, 1994). Present tense should be used (Kramer, 1997) as the job description refers to what the person is doing, not what they have done.

The literature varies on the recommended length of job descriptions. DeLapa (1989) suggests 1-3 pages whereas Giles (1995) recommends no longer than two pages.

2.7 Different approaches to job descriptions

Moravec and Tucker (1992) describes how British Petroleum replaced job descriptions with a matrix reflecting skills and behaviours. This matrix focuses on skills and behaviours rather than individual jobs. Each skill matrix describes steps in the career ladder, from the lowest to the highest, along the vertical axis. The horizontal axis describes the skills and competencies that are required for each step. Moravec and Tucker (1992, p. 43) argue that 'skill matrices differ significantly from job descriptions, they specify roles and levels of performance rather than jobs in a box.' Through this system managers know what to expect of their employees and employees know what the organisation expects of them.

La Roory (1995) discusses a different approach to job descriptions by defining jobs in terms of a 'contribution matrix' (p.47). This matrix identifies team outputs and contributions made by each member within a team. Agreed outputs are written along the vertical and team members' names along the horizontal. Under each output the processes and contributions made by each team member are listed. The output is then assigned to the person who has the overall responsibility. La Roory (1995) argues that some of the advantages of this approach is that it focuses on the whole department rather than the individual job, incorporates team involvement, can be used to show use of resources and is a good vehicle to identify improvement opportunities.

2.8 Trends in the Literature

Figure 1 identifies the main developmental trends of job descriptions identified through the literature review. While this project did not aim to identify historical trends it became clear while reviewing the literature, that even though the basic format and style of the job description has not changed greatly, the focus of the job description has changed over the last 10-15 years. Job descriptions that suited the work environment in the 1980's are referred to as traditional job descriptions. It is important to note that many authors and organisations still focus on the traditional job description format in today's work environment.

Figure 1: Traditional job descriptions vs. job descriptions today

Traditional job descriptions	Job descriptions today
Focus on what a person is required to do - that is, a list of duties	Focus on major responsibility areas, results and outputs the person is expected to achieve
Looks at the job from an inside-out approach	Looks at the job from an outside-in approach
Written by the human resource department	Written by affected employee and manager in consultation with the human resource department
Statement included - 'and any other duties assigned by the supervisor'	The job description is seen as a profile that describes major responsibilities rather than covering everything an employee does

Access to job descriptions by affected employee and management	Job descriptions for all positions are available for any staff member to see and are used as a career development tool
Individualistic in nature - appear to focus on the job alone	Job descriptions reflect the interdependence of the job within an organisation
Reviewed when a job becomes vacant or reclassified	Incorporated into the organisation's performance management system and reviewed regularly with the employee to maintain currency, accuracy and relevance
Time, percentages or frequency included	Performance measures or indicators are included

A noticeable shift, outlined in the literature, is that job descriptions today focus on major responsibility areas rather than duties. Duties represent the methods by which the responsibility areas are accomplished. Responsibilities are like mini-jobs that must be done to get the total job successfully completed. In a fast changing work environment, responsibility areas generally remain constant whereas, duties change constantly with advances in technology and improvements to processes (Segall, 1989). Focusing on duties make it difficult to keep a job description current and does not represent the true nature of the job to be performed. When focusing on responsibilities it is important that these relate to meeting organisational objectives (DeLapa,1989).

The following quote illustrates this point:

'The duty statement is an anachronism left over from the days of rigid bureaucracies with pyramid hierarchies. But in these days of multiskilled people working in self managing teams, the traditional job description has all the value of a parachute that opens on the second bounce.' (*Job descriptions? Burn the bloody things*, 1995)

In addition, job descriptions have moved from focusing on what a person is required to do (that is, their duties) to focusing on the results or outputs the person is required to achieve. 'An employee can perform duties endlessly without ever accomplishing anything of value. To be truly effective job descriptions must specify what results are to be achieved.' (Plachy, 1991, p. 8) This perspective of focusing on what the person is required to do implies looking at the job from an inside out approach. However, when focusing on the end results it implies looking at the job from an outside-in approach. (*Job descriptions? Burn the bloody things*, 1995). Focusing on end results helps employees understand why the work is important. Knowing the results also allows employees to discover new ways to accomplish results (Plachy and Plachy, 1993) thus encouraging initiative and creativity.

In the past, the Human Resource department wrote job descriptions with little or no input from the employee actually doing the job. Today's job descriptions are usually written by the affected employee and manager (Langdon, 1996) or by the team that the job is a part of. The Human Resource department now provides a consulting role in the development of job descriptions and their job is to show managers how to define jobs (Langdon, 1996). This approach provides a more accurate job description as it is the employee and manager who have the best insight into the job and are aware of the responsibilities and results expected. Employee involvement also creates ownership (Degner, 1995).

As mentioned, job descriptions are not meant to list every duty an employee performs. However, in the past many job descriptions included statements such as 'and other duties and responsibilities that may be required on either a temporary or permanent basis' (Consulting Task Force, 1991). This allowed managers to change duties or add duties without discussing this with employees. In today's organisation job descriptions are marketed differently in that they are promoted to staff as a job profile outlining the main responsibilities, not all the duties that need to be performed. Changes to these responsibilities are discussed between the manager and employee.

If job descriptions are to be used as a career development tool they need to be available for all staff within an organisation. Some organisations make them available on-line through their intranet. This often was not the case in the past where job descriptions were only available to the person doing the job, their manager and senior management.

Traditional job descriptions were often described in a way that implied complete independence from other positions within the organisation and were very individualistic in nature. When reading this type of job descriptions it is unclear what role the job has in the organisation or how it is related to other positions and processes within the organisation. This type of description encourages independent rather than group action (Dunn, 1993). Job descriptions today need to reflect the interdependence of processes and people within the organisation. If the organisation is based on teams and employees are expected to work together to accomplish objectives and goals, this needs to be reflected in the job description.

Job descriptions were often only reviewed when a job became vacant or new duties were added. In today's work environment job descriptions are incorporated into the organisations performance management system in order to ensure they are reviewed regularly with the employee (Carlopio, 1996). This maintains currency, accuracy, relevance and usefulness of the job description.

Grant (1989, p.5) stated that job descriptions 'are not a work schedule', however, in the past many indicated how much time is spent on different tasks. In today's work environment time percentages or frequency have been replaced with performance measures or indicators which provide a clearer indication of what is expected from the job.

Gilliland (1997, p.42) outlines the traditional components of a job description as:

- job title
- main purpose of the job
- who the individual reports to
- main tasks or areas of responsibility

For a more focussed job description he suggests the following be added:

- a summary of the organisation's goals and targets
- key result areas flowing from the goals and targets
- the basic competencies needed to achieve these goals and targets
- performance criteria

2.9 Criticisms of job descriptions

Throughout the literature there are a number of criticisms of job descriptions. Sullivan (1996, p.1) states that there is no evidence that they 'work', may be loved by HR people, but are seldom loved by anyone else. However, many of the criticisms directed at job descriptions can be overcome if we focus on 'well written' job descriptions that meet the needs of today's work environment as the following examples show.

- 'In a fast changing environment by the time they are written they are out of date' (Sullivan, 1996, p. 1). This is the case with job descriptions that focus on duties. Job descriptions that

focus on responsibilities and key result areas do not change frequently which means that they do remain current for long periods.

- 'They force individuals into job/your job conflicts and inhibits thinking outside the box creativity' (Sullivan, 1996, p. 1). Again this is true of job descriptions that look at the job in terms of duties. Job descriptions that look at the results the person is required to achieve do not prescribe what the person is required to do, they provide direction. As Plachy (1993) points out, focussing on results can encourage initiative and creativity. A quote by General George Patton illustrates this point: *' Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity'*(Sacher and Sacher, 1998)
- 'They are often done by HR people who know little about the technical aspects of the job' (Sullivan, 1996, p. 1). Job descriptions for today's organisations are written by the people involved in the job such as the employee doing their job, their manager and/or members of the team that the job belongs.
- 'They can (and should) be replaced by weekly/monthly measurable (and incented) performance goals drawn up between the employee and the team' (Sullivan, 1996, p.1). It needs to be remembered that job descriptions are only one component of a human resource management system, performance measures may form part of the job description or form a separate document.

3. Stage 2 - Survey of Library Technicians

3.1 Introduction

Stage two of this research project involved the development of a survey based on information obtained in the literature review. Library technicians were chosen as the sample group for the survey. The aim of the survey was to determine how current, accurate and useful job descriptions are in Australian libraries.

3.2 Methodology

Surveys were sent to library technicians in all states within Australia, the Northern Territory and Australian Capitol Territory and represented special, public, academic and school libraries. A total of 303 surveys were distributed. Names of survey participants were identified from the delegates' list of the *9th National Library Technicians Conference* held in 1997. Additional surveys were sent to willing participants identified through the Library Technician Discussion Group, *LibTec.* A maximum of three surveys was sent to each library, in order to gain as broad a representation of libraries as possible.

Participants were asked to complete the survey whether they did or did not have a job description. They were also asked to include a copy of their current job description if possible. A prize of $100 was offered to participants as an incentive to return their survey and to improve the response rate. Participants were given approximately one month to return the surveys.

The first three questions of the survey obtained background information regarding library technician status, experience in libraries and the type of library. Other questions in the survey focussed on the accuracy, updating, reviewing, uses and content of job descriptions. A copy of the survey is in **appendix 3**.

3.3 Results

200 surveys were returned including four surveys that were not completed because the respondents were educators rather than library technicians. This represents a 66 percent response rate. This is an excellent response rate as a statistical consulting firm indicated any response rate over 30 percent was a good result. The winner of the $100 was Bruce Lowth from Palmerston Library. Approximately 67 percent of respondents included a copy of their job descriptions, which provided valuable additional content information that is incorporated into the results.

The majority of respondents (83 percent) had completed a Library Technician qualification. 60 percent had more than ten years experience in libraries; 27 percent had 6-10 years; 12 percent had 2-5 years and 2 percent had 0-1 years.

The type of libraries represented in the survey are shown in Figure 2:

- Academic Libraries- 81 surveys - 41 percent
- Public Libraries- 34 surveys -17 percent
- Special Libraries- 61 surveys - 31 percent
- School Libraries- 15 surveys - 8 percent
- Other libraries - 5 surveys - 3 percent

Surveys were returned from all states within Australia, the Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory.

Figure 2: Type of libraries represented in the survey

An overwhelming majority of respondents (93 percent) had job descriptions for their current position. Of these, 27 percent felt that their job description was very accurate; 46 percent felt they were mostly accurate; 22 percent felt they were somewhat accurate and 5 percent felt they were not accurate at all.

In relation to the updating of job descriptions, 24 percent had been updated in the last six months; 19 percent had been updated in the last 6 to 12 months; 23 percent had been updated in the last one to two years and 34 percent had not been updated for over two years.

Figure 3 illustrates when job descriptions are reviewed or updated. The main reasons for reviewing a job description are when a job becomes vacant (45 percent) or when a job is reclassified (30 percent). Only 15 percent of respondents reviewed jobs annually.

Figure 3: When job descriptions are reviewed

The majority of job descriptions explained where the job fits into the organisation (69 percent) and the purpose of the job (83 percent).

Figure 4 indicates what job descriptions are used for. The main use of job descriptions is for selection and recruitment (74 percent). 55 percent used them in performance appraisals. 18 percent used them to identify training needs and 16 percent used them in the induction process.

For the majority of respondents performance standards (78 percent), time or percentages for each duty (86 percent) and goals, mission, vision or outputs (55 percent) are NOT included in job descriptions.

45 percent of respondents indicated that their library had a separate person/job specification; 32 percent said they did not and 23 percent were unsure.

A summary sheet indicating the number of responses for each question is in appendix 4.

Figure 4: Uses of job Descriptions

Figure 5 illustrates the type of information included in job descriptions returned with the survey. These job descriptions ranged from half a page, which did not describe the purpose of the job or where it fitted into the organisation, to job descriptions that were four and five pages in length which gave a detailed overview of the job, how it fitted into and contributed to the success of the organisation.

Figure 5: Information included in survey respondents job descriptions

Job Description information	Percentage of job descriptions that included information
Organisational relations including reporting relationships	64 percent
Duties/tasks	59 percent
Job function/purpose	53 percent
Education/Qualifications/Knowledge	44 percent
Skills	36 percent
Responsibilities	33 percent
Experience	31 percent
Environment	25 percent
Selection criteria	21 percent
Accountabilities	20 percent
Authority	20 percent
Contacts	12 percent
Performance Standards	9 percent

Challenges	9 percent
Time/percentages/Frequency	9 percent

3.4 Comparison with survey conducted by the Association of Research Libraries

The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) conducted a survey of librarian job descriptions in 1993 (Ray and Hawthorne, 1993). The aim of this survey was to capture background information on the currency, content and use of librarian job descriptions. Figure 6 compares survey questions that were directly comparable between this survey and the library technician survey.

Figure 6: Comparison between ARL Survey and Library Technician Survey

Survey Information	percent Result from ARL (1993) Survey	percent result from Library Technician Survey
Accuracy of job description Very accurate Mostly accurate Somewhat accurate	29 percent 56 percent 15 percent	27 percent 46 percent 22 percent
When job descriptions are reviewed? Annually	35 percent	15 percent
Uses of job descriptions Selection and recruitment Performance Appraisals Identifying Training Needs	85 percent 75 percent 60 percent	74 percent 55 percent 18 percent
Describe the purpose of the job Yes No	89 percent 11 percent	83 percent 17 percent
Are time/percentages used? Yes No	25 percent 75 percent	14 percent 86 percent

Are performance standards included?		
Yes	6 percent	22 percent
No	92 percent	78 percent

Although the ARL survey was conducted five-six years ago it is interesting to note the comparison in results. The ARL survey indicates that respondents found their job descriptions to be more accurate. The reason for this may be due to the larger percentage of libraries reviewing job descriptions annually and using them in performance appraisals. It is also evident from this comparison that Australian libraries are beginning to incorporate performance standards into their job descriptions although this only represents a small percentage.

3.5 Findings

As the response rate from this survey was over 30 percent and represented academic, special, public and school libraries the following findings may be generalised to the library industry.

- Job descriptions are developed and used by the majority of libraries and employees feel that they are *mostly* accurate (46 percent). This is not surprising considering firstly that the majority of job descriptions had not been reviewed for over two years and secondly the constantly changing library environment.
- The greater number of libraries represented do not have a mechanism to regularly review job descriptions as the majority of job descriptions (34 percent) had not been reviewed in the last two years. Job descriptions are most commonly reviewed when a job becomes vacant or is reclassified.
- Selection and recruitment appear to be the main purpose for which job descriptions are used in libraries. 55 percent of respondents indicated that they were used in performance appraisals, however, it is unclear if they are reviewed in this process. Job descriptions are not often used for identifying training needs or in the induction process.
- The majority of library job descriptions do describe the purpose of the job and where the job fits into the organisation, although it is unclear how detailed this is as the majority do not indicate the goals, mission or vision of the organisation. For the question - *Does your job description explain where your job fits into the organisation*, it appears from the sample descriptions that it is mainly described through an organisational chart.
- Time or percentages are rarely included in job descriptions (14 percent). Examples of descriptions that include percentages seem to be those that focus on duties rather than major responsibilities. Performance standards for the majority of libraries are also not included, although many include accountabilities.

Additional comments made by respondents indicate that the question regarding whether libraries have a separate person/job specification caused confusion and many respondents were unsure about what I meant. The aim of this questions was to determine whether details about the person's attributes or qualifications required to do the job were included in the same document as the job description or separately. For this reason it is difficult to generalise findings for this area. From the job descriptions returned with the surveys, some libraries label job specifications and person specifications separately while other libraries include both types of information in their job descriptions but do not label them.

Accountabilities in the literature refers to the results expected, however, when analysing the library job descriptions accountabilities were often a list of responsibilities or who the position was accountable to, very few outlined the results expected. Some libraries are beginning to use job descriptions as a performance management tool as they include performance measures or standards, although this is still only a small percentage (22 percent). Performance measures identified were both qualitative - *'polite, courteous and efficient client service'* and quantitative in nature - *'number of complaints received each quarter'.* Some job descriptions did not identify the

standards but outlined that there was an expectation that they would be developed as part of the job -'*Performance standards will be negotiated between the incumbent and the Manger Library Services as part of the ongoing performance management program.' (Please note: these examples were taken from examples of job descriptions returned with the survey*).

Some job descriptions included the selection criteria for the job in the job description and this is usually split into essential and desirable. This aids the library in using the job description as a tool in selection and recruitment as the criteria are clearly labelled for advertising, culling and interviewing applicants.

4. Stage 3 - survey of organisations

4.1 Introduction

In my initial proposal for the scholarship, the aim of this stage of the research was to survey organisations that were considered best practice in the design and implementation of job descriptions. This proved a difficult task, as the available literature did not specify organisations that excelled in this area. However, the *HR Best Practices in Australasian Companies: 1997 Report* did specify organisations that were considered best practice in human resource management.

The aim of this survey (see **appendix 5** for a copy of the survey) was to determine the following aspects of job descriptions within organisations other than libraries.

- When were job descriptions reviewed?
- What were job descriptions used for within the organisation?
- Were performance standards included in the job description?

4.2 Methodology

Surveys were sent to organisations identified in the *HR Best Practices in Australasian Companies: 1997 Report.* As this resulted in a small number of organisations, additional surveys were sent to organisations that had been awarded the *Australian Quality Award*; *Investors in People* or were recommended to me for their usage and content of job descriptions. A wide range of organisations were included in the survey, for example, banks, councils, hotels, airlines, food production companies and manufacturing industry.

The survey also asked organisations to include a copy of their job description when they returned the survey. A reply paid address envelope was included with the survey.

4.3 Results

A total of 30 surveys were distributed. Seventeen were returned which represents a 57 percent response rate. **appendix 6** outlines a summary of results.

All respondents to the organisation survey used job descriptions within their organisations.

Figure 7 illustrates when job descriptions are reviewed or updated. Results indicate that the main reasons for reviewing a job description are when a job becomes vacant (82 percent) or when a job is reclassified (59 percent). 29 percent of respondents reviewed jobs annually.

Figure 7: When Job Descriptions are reviewed - Organisation Survey

Figure 8 indicates the uses of job descriptions. The main use of job descriptions is for selection and recruitment (100 percent). A large percentage (77 percent) also incorporated job descriptions into their performance appraisal system.

Figure 8: Uses of Job Descriptions - Organisation Survey

47 percent of respondents included performance standards in their job descriptions.

Nine respondents (53 percent) included a copy of their organisation's job description.

Figure 9 illustrates the type of information included in job descriptions returned with the organisation surveys.

Figure 9: Information included in organisation survey respondents job descriptions

Job Description information	Percentage of job descriptions that included information
Purpose of position/Objectives	89 percent
Responsibility Areas/Key Result Areas/Key Accountabilities	78 percent
Knowledge/Qualifications/Experience	66 percent
Working Relationships/Reporting relationships, including organisational relationships	55 percent
Major challenges	22 percent
Performance Indicator/Standard	22 percent
Authority/Decision Making	11 percent
Position Size Dimensions	11 percent
Delegations	11 percent
Corporate goals	11 percent

4.4 Findings

Comparison of the results from the library technician survey and organisation survey is shown in Figure 10. These results indicate that organisations identified for their quality human resource practices make more extensive use of job descriptions within their organisations (especially in the areas of identifying training needs and performance appraisal) and review them more frequently. Results also indicate that more organisations (47 percent) are incorporating performance standards into their job descriptions than libraries (22 percent).

Figure 10 Comparison of results from Library Technician Survey and Organisational Survey

Question	percent result from Library Technician Survey	percent result from survey of other organisations
When are job descriptions reviewed in your organisation? Annually Every two years When jobs are reclassified When new duties are added When a job becomes vacant Not reviewed Other	15 percent 4 percent 30 percent 16 percent 45 percent 5 percent 14 percent	29 percent 12 percent 59 percent 53 percent 82 percent 0 percent 6 percent
What are job descriptions used for in your organisation? Selection and recruitment Induction/Orientation Performance Appraisals/Reviews Identifying Training Needs Other	74 percent 16 percent 55 percent 18 percent 0 percent	100 percent 41 percent 77 percent 53 percent 12 percent
Are performance standards included in the job description? Yes No	22 percent 78 percent	47 percent 53 percent

4.5 Discussion

From the findings of the Library Technician survey and the information contained in job descriptions returned with the survey it appears that many libraries are using outdated job descriptions that do not meet the needs of today's work environment. They focus on what a person is required to do, that is their duties, rather than on what the person is expected to achieve, that is major responsibilities and outcomes. It is interesting to note, in comparison, that the organisation job description examples (returned with the survey) focussed on responsibilities or key result areas rather than duties.

I found it interesting that the vast majority of descriptions (from both the library technician survey and the organisation survey) did not include the mission statement of the organisation, goals or an explanation of how the job fits into the overall objectives of the department, team or organisation. Again this information is important if the job description is to reflect the interdependence of the job within the organisation and how it contributes to the overall success of the organisation. Absence of this information makes the job description very individual in nature and makes it appear that the job is conducted in isolation. This encourages independent rather than team action (Dunn, 1993).

As mentioned in the literature, job descriptions are a useful tool that can be used for many human resource functions. Some libraries are using their job descriptions to serve several purposes. For example: The *Australian Courts and Administration Authority Library* states that their Job and Person Specifications serve the following functions:

- when filling a vacant position, to provide both job applicants and the selection panel with information on the responsibilities and duties of a job, and the skills and knowledge that it requires; and assist in ensuring selection based on merit
- to assist with induction and training
- when reviewing an employee's performance, to provide a basis for discussion
- when considering and refining organisational goals, to provide information on the relationship of the position to others within the organisation, and to the organisation's function
- when considering job classification, to provide base information on the responsibilities and reporting relationships associated with the position

However this library appears to be in the minority, as findings suggest that libraries mainly use job descriptions as a selection and recruitment tool. In comparison, when examining the results of the organisation survey it is clear that many organisations are making extensive use of their job descriptions and using them for a variety of purposes.

The inclusion of performance standards in job descriptions is one area that libraries need to explore in the future. They allow the organisation to communicate expectations to the employee especially if the organisation has identified or articulated performance indicators or service standards. Results from the organisation survey suggest that organisations are moving in this direction and using job descriptions as a performance management tool.

Some organisations have moved to providing generic job descriptions for employees performing similar responsibilities. Jones (1996) argues that generic job descriptions provide flexibility because they address expectations and accountabilities rather than the details of how a task should be performed. While there has been a shift to focus on expectations and end results, I believe that generic job descriptions are not as effective as individual job descriptions as they do not encourage ownership or commitment and fail to demonstrate to the employee that their job, responsibilities and contribution are valued by the organisation. While many jobs are similar there may be one or two different areas of responsibility for a particular job.

5. Where competencies fit?

Competencies are 'all the knowledge, skills and attitudes people use in order to fulfill their mission in the company' (Devisch, 1998). As the *Library Industry Competency Standards* (1995, p.3) 'reflect performance requirements' and adopt an outside-in approach to jobs they are a very useful tool to provide input into the development of job descriptions. Competencies are helpful in identifying the qualities of the person required to perform the job. They can also provide information on responsibility areas and examples of performance indicators or measures, however, it is important to tailor job descriptions to meet the needs of the individual organisation. It is also important to focus on the key competencies required for a position as the job description is meant to provide an overview of the position and identify major responsibilities.

Some organisations have identified core competencies which relate to their organisational values and these are often included or reflected in the job description. In addition some organisations

have developed *Competency Profiles* for each position within their organisation, for example, Murdoch Magazines. These profiles outline key organisational competencies, key management competencies and key functional (technical) competencies. The profiles are incorporated into the organisations performance management system and form the basis for job profiles, recruitment guides, performance assessments and career/development

6. Recommendations

As Ray and Hawthorne, (1993. p.i) state 'maintaining a current job description in today's environment of rapid technological change and increased demand for professional and managerial flexibility represents a challenge for both libraries and librarians'. The following recommendations are based on the research and surveys conducted as part of this project. I believe that if libraries adopted these recommendations their job descriptions would be current, accurate and could be used for a variety of purposes.

1. Before developing job descriptions, the library first needs to determine what they will be used for. This will then provide information on what content is to be included. I believe that if organisations are going to invest the time and effort into developing job descriptions they should be used for more than selection and recruitment. As discussed in this paper their uses extend far beyond this, for example, identifying training needs, induction, performance management and career development. The success in writing and using job descriptions depend on this critical first step (Degner, 1995).
2. Libraries need to focus on specific rather than generic job descriptions. This encourages ownership of the job and helps the library to determine that all responsibilities within the library are performed. It also lets employees know that their contributions to the library are individually valued.
3. When writing a job description it should be kept in mind that the job is described in enough detail so that the reader can understand:
     i. how the job fits into and contributes to the organisation
     ii. the purpose of the job
     iii. major responsibilities of the job
     iv. the work standards which apply to the job
     v. the skills, experience and education required to perform the job.

The main output that the majority of libraries produce is service, service to our clients (whether they be internal or external clients). I found it surprising that many of the job descriptions included with the library technician survey did not reflect the importance of client service. I believe library job descriptions need to be client focussed and service orientated in order to accurately reflect the nature of our work.

The most important recommendation, from this research, is that job descriptions are aligned with an organisation's management framework and are representative of this framework. For example, the job description needs to reflect the organisation's culture by incorporating its mission statement, performance indicators, critical success factors, values or goals. This provides potential employees information on the culture of the organisation and outlines what is expected of them by the organisation.

While the format, writing style, content and details of job descriptions vary tremendously from library to library the following elements (although different headings may be used) are recommended for inclusion in job descriptions in order to improve their accuracy, currency and usefulness.

- *Overview of the organisation* - the job description needs to provide a clear and realistic overview of not only the job but also the organisation. As this research indicates that the majority of libraries use job descriptions in selection and recruitment it is important that the description provides an overview of the organisation.

- *Purpose of the job* -- this statement should explain the reason why the job is necessary and show the way the job contributes to organisational goals. For example - *To fulfill the mission of...* (Cervenka, 1997)
- *How the job fits into the library* -- this needs to be addressed in more detail than the inclusion of an organisational chart. An overview of both the organisation and team/department environment should be included. For example if the job is part of a team then this should be emphasised. This approach will avoid the job description appearing individualistic in nature and illustrate the interdependence of today's work environment.
- *Reporting relationships* - including who the person reports to and who the position supervises.
- *Major responsibilities* -- the job description should focus on responsibilities and outcomes rather than a detailed list of tasks or duties. It is important that the responsibilities relate to organisational goals or objectives. This helps link the job to the organisation rather than viewing it in isolation.
- *Challenges* - this section lists the principal challenges or problems faced by the employee in achieving the results of the position. These may be related to job complexity, economic and environmental aspects or growth potential. Again this communicates to the employee what is expected in the position.
- *Results expected/ performance indicators/expected results/key outcomes* - these should relate to the library's service standards or performance indicators rather than to individual performance, for example, *meet cataloguing service standard* rather than *catalogues ten books per day*. If performance indicators are to be developed as part of a performance management system then this should be stated in the description.
- *Qualifications, Experience and Skills* -- this section includes qualifications and experience required for the position plus all the practical, functional and technical skills. Identification of these as essential or desirable will aid in developing selection criteria for a position.
- *Attributes or Behavioural competencies* -- this section identifies any individual, interpersonal and/or managerial competencies or qualities that an employee needs to possess (eg: flexibility, stress tolerance, teamwork, planning etc.) Where possible these should be related to the organisational culture, values or identified core competencies.

Other recommendations include.

- Job descriptions are written in conjunction with the person currently doing the job as they are in the best position to know what the job involves. Input can also be gained from the manager and team members. Staff input encourages ownership and accountability and motivates the employee's full commitment. When writing the job description we need to focus on the end results and use an outside-in perspective rather than an inside-out perspective, and this needs to be communicated to all staff.
- The format of the job description be clearly set out and easy to read. While some job descriptions include valuable information, they may be hard and time consuming to understand because of their format. The format can be improved through the use of bolding information to make sections stand out or with the use of columns and tables.
- Job descriptions do give some direction to employees, however, it should be remembered that job descriptions are only one aspect of human resource management and are used in conjunction with other systems, tools and documents. Libraries need to avoid trying to include too much information in the job description.
- Employees have access to their own job description. If job descriptions are used for career planning, all employees should have access to the job descriptions for all positions within the library. Some organisations have made this possible by placing all job descriptions for their organisations of their intranet.
- Job descriptions are promoted to employees of the library as a 'overview' of major responsibilities and expectations, not an all-encompassing list of expected tasks and duties. Some libraries have used the word job or position *profile* rather than *description* as this suggests an outline or overview of a job rather than a statement describing the job.

- Job descriptions must be reviewed regularly to ensure they remain consistent with the goals and objectives of the organisation (Cervenka, 1997), this may be incorporated into a performance management system. Regular review also allows employees to have a clear understanding of responsibilities and expectations. As Degner (1995) explains, the job description process is continual, it is not a one off event.
- It is important to have an adequate and comprehensive communication program in place when establishing or revising a job description program (How to write job descriptions the easy way, 1993). Employees need to be kept informed of what the organisation is doing and why.
- Job descriptions need to be standardised across the organisation.

Appendix 7 includes an example of a job description that incorporates many of the above recommendations. The first section of the *Position and Person Profile* provides an overview of the position and the role the position plays within the organisation. This overview also illustrates the interdependent nature of the position by providing a summary of the organisational environment (including organisational culture), organisational structure and team environment (including team goals and key processes). The aim of this overview is also to communicate organisational expectations to an employee or prospective employee. The *Person Profile* outlines the qualifications, experience, skills and personal attributes of the person required to perform the job. The skills are linked to the organisations identified core competencies and the personal attributes are linked the organisations identified Values. The *Position Profile* outlines the major responsibilities of the position which are linked to the organisations identified Critical Success Factors. The performance outcomes highlight the end results expected from the major responsibilities while the performance indicators are measures of accomplishment for each responsibility. These indicators are largely linked to organisation or team service standards and performance indicators rather than individual performance indicators in order to illustrate the team based structure of the organisation.

In conclusion, the following two quotes illustrate the importance of using job descriptions once they are developed:

'Usage will give the job description life, making it a meaningful part of the total management of the organisation' (DeLon, 1994, p. 340).

'Job descriptions that sit on the shelf are worthless. If you take the time to develop them, use them properly as a management tool and make them available to staff.' (Degner, 1995, p.17).

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