Writing an effective Position Description

Best Practice Guide

A Position Description (PD) is a written statement which provides comprehensive details about a position within the University. It provides information relating to a position's:

- Purpose;
- Major responsibilities;
- Supervisory responsibilities and independence in decision making;
- Reporting relationships;
- Work requirements (i.e. knowledge, experience and skills required); and
- Selection criteria.

An effective position description:

- describes the skills and competencies that are needed to perform the position;
- defines where the position fits within the University and its key organisational relationships;
- is used as the basis for the employment contract; and
- forms the baseline for an agreement on what is acceptable minimum performance and sets expectations for performance.

PDs are used for:

- Clearly articulating position and performance requirements;
- Providing applicants with the position's requirements during recruitment; and
- Determining the appropriate classification level for the position.

If well written, the PD gives the reader a sense of the priorities involved. It not only provides a clear picture of the position for potential candidates, but is also a useful tool for measuring performance and, if required, correcting performance.

Responsibility and Contributors

A classified PD is required when a new position of more than six months is created.

PDs should be reviewed and updated annually as part of Performance Review and Planning (PRP) discussions.

All draft PDs are prepared using the [Position Description Template](#).

HR Services records all staff PDs. Any updated versions are reviewed and agreed to by HR Services.

Remaining free from bias

Southern Cross is an equal opportunity employer committed to equity, diversity and social inclusion.

When preparing PDs it is important not to make reference – or show bias - relative to the sex, race, age, sexual preference or other protected attribute of the position holder, unless such an attribute is deemed to be an inherent requirement of the role.

When Writing a Position Description:

- Describe the position, not the person in it.

- The PD must describe what the position is, not what it was, will be next year, might be, or ought to be. The aim is to describe the permanent ongoing duties. Omit any temporary duties or characteristics.

- Emphasize the University's commitment to diversity and inclusion by remaining free from bias and gender-coded wording.

- Describe the activities in plain English free from jargon, acronyms and Southern Cross specific language or references.

POSITION TITLE

The first fundamental element of the PD is the position title. A good position title will have the following qualities:

- It accurately reflects the nature of the position and the duties being performed
- It reflects its relativity with other positions in the University
- It does not exaggerate the importance of the position
- It is free of gender or age implications
- It is generic enough that it can be compared to similar positions in the industry for the purposes of equity in pay and conditions
- It is self-explanatory for recruitment purposes (in most online position searches, the position title is the main keyword searched).

ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

In addition to the prescribed University content, this section provides a brief description of the broad context within which the position operates, describing the core activity of the work unit, and if relevant the portfolio.

This section can include challenges and constraints. If possible this statement should be uniform for all roles in the work unit.

POSITION PURPOSE

The position purpose provides a snapshot of the main purpose of the position, consisting of no more than three to five sentences. The position purpose should provide enough information to differentiate the major function and activities of the position from other positions.

When writing a Position Purpose:

- Assume the person reading the position description has no knowledge of the University.
- General overview of position and its aim, avoid abbreviations / jargon.
- A concise statement that makes clear the overall and broad objective of the position. The main purpose of the position and which functions the position is responsible for.
- Adds value to the document – not simply repeats the Key Accountabilities.

ORGANISATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Defines where the position fits within the University, reporting lines and its key organisational relationships.

Reporting lines clarify the responsibilities of the position by showing who the employee reports to and who reports to them. This is important, not only in relation to compliance issues, but also to give the candidate an insight into the hierarchical structure of the organisation and how their position fits into it.

This ensures positions of similar scope and responsibility are treated equitably.

KEY ACCOUNTABILITIES

The Key Accountabilities is a list of the duties and responsibilities associated with the position. List up to 10 major responsibilities in order of importance and only include duties

that account for 10% of more of the person's time. Duties that are less significant can be incorporated into broader statements where possible.

Descriptions of duties should be no more than two or three sentences in length and should be outcome-based, containing an action, an object and a purpose (e.g. 'compiles monthly reports to allow monitoring of the work unit's budget').

The list of duties and responsibilities will vary in length, but as a rule, should be as short as possible, otherwise the document becomes an operational manual rather than a position description.

Format of writing a key accountability:

- Start with action word, describe the task.

- How is this achieved?

- What is the outcome?

- Provide a clear example where this adds value to its understanding

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Action Words:

Administration	Supervision / Management
Administers	Advises
Analyses	Assigns
Compiles	Authorizes
Consults	Budgets
Contributes	Delegates
Coordinates	Determines
Generates	Develops
Recommends	Manages
Documents	Negotiates
Collaborates	Oversees
Reports	Supervises
Researches	Guides

For academic staff, the applicable Minimum Standards for Academic Staff should form part of the Key Accountabilities, and additional specific responsibilities should also be added.

SPECIAL WORK REQUIREMENTS

Special work requirements are specific requirements that are inherent to the position. For example holding mandatory registrations or licences. The Position Description Template provides a list of frequently used requirements, to be edited and amended.

SELECTION CRITERIA

Selection criteria are the critical skills, knowledge, qualifications and experience that are vital to a person's ability to perform the duties of the position.

Consider the level of education and experience required as well as what knowledge, skills and abilities are needed to be successful in the position. This should be set as a minimum "ideal" not higher or greater than actually required.

The position description should have no more than eight selection criteria, and the following three criteria are mandatory:

- Demonstrated capacity to operate effectively across multi-disciplinary teams and adapt your approach to changes in environment or circumstances.
- Commitment to the University's values of collegiality and integrity.
- Demonstrated commitment to cultural diversity and a working knowledge of equity and WHS principles in the workplace.

RESOURCES

- Position Description template
- Leadership Capability Framework
- Professional Staff Secondary Classification Descriptor
- Minimum Standards for Academic Staff
- Position Analysis