How To Write More Inclusive Job Descriptions

By Kat Boogaard
Let’s talk about your process for writing job descriptions—specifically, inclusive job descriptions.

Maybe you start with a standardized template or dig up an old description that was posted when you were hiring for a previous role. You make a few updates, type out your laundry list of qualifications and key duties, paste in a legal disclaimer about being an equal opportunity employer, and then call it a day.

Not so bad, right? After all, it’s only the job description—how much does it really matter?

Spoiler alert: It matters a lot.

While it’s easy to think that writing the job description is just another formality you need to cover in the recruiting process, these blurbs actually carry a surprising amount of weight for talent.

According to our own 2018 Muse User Survey, 55% of candidates consider job descriptions to be among the most helpful things when deciding if a company is a good fit for them. This was the third-most popular answer, just behind descriptions of values, culture, programs, and perks, and then testimonials from verified employees.

This means that prospective candidates aren’t just skimming these descriptions. They’re looking at them with a discerning eye, so the last thing you want to do is turn them off—or worse, make them feel excluded from applying altogether.
6 Tips for Writing More Inclusive Job Descriptions

Writing effective and inclusive job descriptions requires more thought and attention than simply knocking the cobwebs off an outdated template.

Let’s dig into six actionable steps you can take right now to ensure your own descriptions are attracting the talent you really want.

- **Tip #1** Take a magnifying glass to your job requirements
- **Tip #2** Better yet, go beyond requirements and focus on impact
- **Tip #3** Watch your language
- **Tip #4** Skip the corporate jargon
- **Tip #5** Highlight your commitment to inclusivity
- **Tip #6** Call in some reinforcements
1A. Take a magnifying glass to your job requirements

You want to find the very best talent for your team—and that makes it all too easy to think big. Arguably too big.

As you’re writing the description for one of your open roles, you unconsciously begin designing your dream candidate, rattling off every single quality you’d like them to possess.

“They should have a bachelor’s degree and three to five years of experience. They should already be experts in all the software your team uses. Bonus points if they know how to stand on their head and fix the printer whenever it’s on the fritz.”

Here’s the thing: It’s pretty much impossible for one person to live up to these kinds of idealized expectations. And, by creating a list of nearly-unattainable attributes a candidate “must have” in order to be considered qualified, you’re automatically excluding a lot of amazing talent.

Take the above chart as proof. It’s from a survey conducted by Harvard Business Review and demonstrates the reasons why candidates don’t apply for roles. Look closely—all of the reasons relate to feeling unqualified because of what the description was asking for.
1B. Take a magnifying glass to your job requirements

So, here’s what you need to do next. Analyze the requirements you currently have listed in your descriptions, and narrow them down to only the skills and qualities someone needs to be successful in that role.

Does that computer programmer really need a formal degree, or are the 10 years they’ve spent coding more than enough to make them a viable candidate? Does someone really need that many years of experience to succeed in that role, or will less suffice? Are all of those skills essential to have right off the bat, or will some of them be learned on the job? While you’re making a concerted effort to make sure candidates don’t automatically disqualify themselves based on your job description requirements, it’s also important to be aware of not making anyone feel overqualified either—particularly older workers.

For example, when mentioning years of experience, you can indicate a minimum but should skip including a cap on those years. “An upper limit does more to turn away older applicants than filter for those who could do the job well,” says Muse writer Stav Ziv in her piece about ageism in hiring.
2. Better yet, go beyond requirements and focus on impact

One way to avoid the trap of having too many prerequisites or requirements that are too restrictive is to focus less on what you want candidates to have, and more on what you want them to achieve.

More and more companies—Lever is a great example—are ditching the traditional job description and opting for something that’s often referred to as an "impact description" instead. Lever even goes so far as to outline a clear growth path for each of their open roles (check out some examples here). They break down key milestones that they expect someone to achieve throughout their first year at the company, like this:

- Within one month, you’ll...
- Within three months, you’ll...
- Within six months, you’ll...
- Within twelve months, you’ll...

These types of job descriptions are far more inclusive because they place the bulk of the emphasis on the impact your ideal candidate will have on the organization—rather than a list of boxes they need to check.

Ask yourself: If they land this role, what will they be working on? What challenges will they be overcoming? What goals will they be contributing to?

Doing this empowers talent to better picture themselves in that position (and, more importantly, get excited about it!), versus becoming intimidated by frivolous requirements and responsibilities.
3. Watch your language

While job descriptions usually don’t explicitly mention race or gender, there are things that can unintentionally creep into your job descriptions that can actually deter minorities, women, and older job seekers from applying.

Research has shown that even seemingly-innocent words and phrases in job descriptions skew toward male stereotypes, including (but certainly not limited to):

“Ninja”
“Assertive”
“Dominate”
“Best of the Best”

Gender aside, age is another factor to consider when analyzing your messaging.

“If you’re advertising for ‘digital natives,’ that’s language that explicitly leaves people out just because they happened to be born at a certain time,” writes Ziv in that same piece about ageism. “If what you’re after is proficiency in certain digital skills or a proven track record adopting and mastering new tools, talk about that instead.”

Keep an eye out for language like the above that might be turning off prospective candidates.

A good rule of thumb: When in doubt about a certain word, just change it.
4. Skip the corporate jargon

“We’re seeking a candidate who can analyze our P&L and leverage those metrics to achieve our KPIs.”

It’s easy to default to using certain buzzwords and acronyms when you’re writing a job description. But, while we’re on the subject of language, things like corporate jargon and technical terms have been proven to dissuade younger talent from applying to roles.

Why? Put simply, that unfamiliar language makes them feel intimidated, unworthy of applying, and confused about the expectations of what a role actually entails.

So, in short, cut all of the jargon out of your job descriptions—it’s only serving as a major barrier.
5. Highlight your commitment to inclusivity

Remember how we said that talent is using your job descriptions to evaluate your company and figure out whether or not it’s the right fit for them?

Rather than focusing only on the role itself, writing a new job description is a great opportunity to demonstrate your commitment to diversity and inclusion, and communicate that all candidates are welcome to apply.

Does your company have a Diversity and Inclusion Group (DIG) that meets regularly? What about other Employee Resource Groups (ERG)? Or, important benefits like paid parental leave for all types of parents or recognition of other religious holidays? Make sure to mention those things in the blurb about your organization as a whole.

And, of course, make sure to showcase a diverse group of employees on your careers page and throughout your recruitment materials. Seeing people of different ethnicities, races, genders, ages, abilities, and beyond helps candidates envision themselves working for your company—and being included.
6. Call in some reinforcements

You know by now how easily unconscious bias can slip into your hiring process. Fortunately, there’s power in numbers.

Once you’ve created a first draft of a job description, pass it along for other people in your company to review and provide feedback before you actually post it. Who should you ask?

- The direct manager, or person who will oversee the role you’re hiring for
- The person who holds that role currently, or people who work in similar/adjacent positions
- A diverse group of other colleagues who might not be intimately familiar with the position, but can help identify any exclusive language

Sometimes two (or more!) brains really are better than one—so don’t be afraid to ask for some extra eyes on your job descriptions to spot any potential problems that might otherwise go unnoticed.
Remember: **Practice Makes Perfect**

Writing truly inclusive job descriptions isn’t quite as obvious as it might seem. Getting it right takes time—and it’s a process that requires careful thought and diligent practice. (Keep that in mind if your first attempt doesn’t go according to plan!)

The good news is that the six steps we’ve shared with you here are a great place to start. Put them to work, and you’ll be able to check your own biases and make sure you aren’t unintentionally excluding awesome talent.
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