

Competency-Based Hiring: The Key to Recruiting and Retaining Successful Employees

AVOIDING “FAKE IT UNTIL they make it” new hires in today’s competitive job market means hiring managers are eschewing the more traditional job description and interview structure in favor of the competency-based hiring model. According to the Centre for Professional Learning and Development at Nottingham Trent University, competency-based hiring prevents recruiters from “making hasty decisions or from assessing interviewees on the basis of characteristics that are not relevant to the job.”¹ Hiring the wrong employee can have devastating effects on the organization’s morale and stress levels, not to mention the financial burdens associated with these errors. Ineffective hires can cost an employer \$25,000 or more, according to findings published by the National Business Research Institute, while the US Department of Labor estimates the cost of a bad hire to be 30% of the employee’s annual salary.²

Competency-based job descriptions tether work responsibilities specifically to the competencies necessary to successfully perform them. Competency-based hiring not only improves recruitment efforts, according to industry experts, it enhances the retention of knowledgeable employees and guides performance management, talent review, and professional development for staff throughout the organization.

TRADITIONAL VS COMPETENCY-BASED JOB DESCRIPTIONS

From a hiring perspective, it is important to consider whether your job descriptions are adding value to the organization. Traditional job descriptions

function primarily as a tool for outlining the responsibilities of a position, typically with a list of duties to be performed by the employee. A competency-based job description, on the other hand, emphasizes the experience and skills the staff member will need to successfully thrive in the position.³

According to the Guidelines for Writing a Competency Based Job Description, published by Northwestern University, Chicago, IL, “Competencies are ...‘worker-based’ factors that help differentiate superior performance from average performance under specified circumstances.”⁴ There are three types of competencies that can be included in a job description according to these guidelines: skills, knowledge, and the behavior necessary to perform the job.⁴ Many other organizations that employ a competency-based hiring model—including Duke University and the foodservice company Sodexo in Gaithersburg, MD—also define job description competencies as a combination of knowledge, skills, abilities.^{5,6} The guidelines published by Northwestern University offer expanded definitions of each competency group:

- **Skills:** Abilities needed to execute job duties, such as software and computer proficiency, interpersonal skills, accounting skills, or specific laboratory techniques.
- **Knowledge:** Areas of specialty or expertise; for example, nursing, finance, employment law, or history.
- **Behavior:** Characteristics an employee must display in the job; for instance, initiative, collegiality, resourcefulness, or professionalism.⁴

Another way to think about competency-based job postings vs a more traditional model is to remember that competencies typically refer to the “attitudes and behavior patterns that underpin how people do their jobs.”¹

In other words, competencies reveal how well individuals apply their skills and professional knowledge.

“I think every dietitian comes in with a pretty good skill level,” said Kathleen McClusky, MS, RD, FADA, consultant for patient services with Morrison Management Specialists in Atlanta, GA, a company that provides food, nutrition, and dining services to the health care and senior living markets. “Most [RDNs] can generally do the basic things, such as give dietary recommendations, or even perform duties at a more advanced level. But it is the way they organize their work and set priorities, and it is their attitude towards their role and towards other team members—the way they do their job, in other words—that is important,” explained McClusky. Morrison has a sophisticated competency-based hiring model, according to McClusky, particularly when it comes to behavioral-based interviewing of potential new hires.

According to GuideStar USA, Inc, an information service specializing in reporting on not-for-profit organizations, there are two different kinds of core competencies: position-specific and organizational.⁷

Position-specific competencies refer to the abilities and behavioral characteristics required for success in a specific role or job. Developing these competencies, particularly for a new position, often requires collaboration with team members and other stakeholders and input from the human resources (HR) department or recruiter.⁷

Organizational competencies refer to the qualities and attributes that characterize success across an entire organization. Organizational competencies could include values established by a company or association’s mission statement.⁷

Chris Biesemeier, MS, RD, LDN, FADA, a former Academy Board member and director of Clinical Nutrition Services at Vanderbilt University Medical Center

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in Nashville, TN, said strong job descriptions include both position-specific and organizational competencies. “We have general competencies that every employee is expected to possess—for example, how we treat our customers—and that is 25% of their reviews. And then we have other competencies that are linked to specific jobs and roles,” explained Biesemeier. Vanderbilt University uses a Targeted Selection Training program that teaches managers how to develop competency-based hiring techniques over the course of a 2-day workshop.

“We’ve been using the competency-based assessment as part of the accreditation process, so the idea of competency in job descriptions should not be all that different,” said Susan H. Laramée, MS, RDN, FAND, past-president of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and former clinical recruiting manager for Sodexo Talent Acquisition Group.

CREATING THE COMPETENCY-BASED JOB DESCRIPTION

In *Job Descriptions: Models for the Dietetics Profession*, a job description, in its most basic form, is defined as a “written narrative of responsibilities and expectations for a specific position that serves as a communications and management tool for employers and employees.”⁸ A job description also provides various stakeholders with a “view of how a job fits within the organizational structure of a department and the entire organization.”⁹ Similar to a traditional job posting, a competency-based job description will include key elements such as the position title, responsibilities, and where the role fits within the organization or department’s hierarchy; however, these descriptions will also outline “desired behavioral competencies of the job candidates.”⁹ These could include teamwork, multicultural sensitivity, and interpersonal communication competencies, among others.⁹ Two examples of competency-based job descriptions are provided in the [Figure](#).

“The traditional job description is very task-oriented, with a focus on technical skills,” added Laramée. “However, communication competencies are every bit as important as how to design a tube-feeding regimen. Look at the resumes [RDNs] typically

present—frequently they are very task-oriented, because we typically think of ourselves in terms of tasks that we can complete. On a resume, an [RDN] might state that he or she ‘*completes* patient education with patients’ instead of ‘*communicates* with patients to develop a plan.’”

“One of the key differences [between traditional and competency-based job descriptions] is length—a competency-based job description generally includes a great deal of detail,” observed McClusky. “Start by separating responsibilities into categories. Identify those that are essential and those that are more basic or general. As the hiring manager, you need to ask ‘What is the real function of this job?’”

Northwestern University’s competency-based job descriptions follow a standard format including the following categories:

- **Job Information:** Position title, department name, title of supervisor, and titles of those supervised, if applicable.
- **Scope:** The job’s financial, supervisory, and faculty and student responsibilities.
- **Job Summary** consisting of one or two concise sentences summarizing the main purpose of the job.
- **Principal Accountabilities** comprising a list of the primary tasks and responsibilities this job is expected to perform, as well as the end results that are to be achieved.
- **Minimum Qualifications** containing a list of experience, education, and certification required of the employee performing the job.
- **Minimum Competencies** consisting of a list of the skills, knowledge, and behaviors that are required for the employee performing the job.
- **Preferred Qualifications** containing a list of experience, education, and certification preferred for the employee performing the job.

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