A Suggestion for Creating Effective Organizations: Get Rid of Job Descriptions

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Job descriptions are a cornerstone feature of traditional bureaucratic organizations. They facilitate selection and placement by providing clear skill requirements, enable equitable pay systems by allowing organizations to compare their jobs with those in other companies and determine a market value, provide a basis for measuring individual performance and making pay increase decisions, and tell individuals what they are supposed to do so that managers can perform more value added tasks.

Despite their widespread uses, job descriptions frequently are more dysfunctional than helpful, even in traditional bureaucratic organizations. They are costly to develop and keep current. In an attempt to be clear about telling individuals what they need to do, they can be faulted for implying what they don't need to do and providing a convenient excuse for not doing things. When baggage handlers and flight attendants won't help the cleaning crew clean a late arriving plane so that it can leave on schedule because it's "not their job," that's a real cost.

In addition, job descriptions slow change and make it more difficult. This is not a serious problem in stable businesses because change simply doesn't occur very often. But, in today's dynamic world, change is a constant. As a result, more and more organizations face situations where job descriptions become quickly outdated and need to be regularly updated; this takes time, energy, delays change, and can be quite expensive. The alternative is to simply abandon them. They are an obsolete management practice that no longer fits today's rapidly changing human capital centric world of work.

Of course, it's not quite that simple. Given all their uses, organizations cannot just abandon job descriptions; they need to fill the void left by their absence. Let's start with the most basic use: letting people know what work to do.

Job descriptions tell people what to do and can be used as a basis for motivating them to do it. The evidence is clear however; a combination of effective leadership and an effective goal setting process is much more effective at motivating and guiding behavior. When managers are aware of their organization's strategic agenda, skilled in collaborative goal setting, able to give feedback to employees, and ensure their employees have the right skills, they can create a much more effective and adaptable organization.

Organizations, such as Gore, a technology-driven global company; sportswear and equipment supplier giant Nike; and DaVita, a Fortune 500 healthcare services company, have adopted a goal setting approach and altered their performance appraisal system. Often, this means a quarterly or semi-annual performance management process in which individuals and their supervisors develop goals and identify projects that will support strategic objectives. In many cases, this process needs to be done with teams of employees. Often, work, particularly knowledge work, requires multiple contributors and as a result, is best managed by having team goals rather than individual goals.

Without job descriptions, how can the organizations set pay rates? The answer is simple, straightforward, and logical; it is to pay individuals based on the skills and competencies they have (and the organization needs) and to let them share in the value they create. Compensating somebody based on a job description is a misleading way to determine pay. An individual's skills and competencies have market value, not jobs. Therefore, a better way to determine what an individual is worth is to focus on skills and to use them as a basis for developing the market

value of individuals. This is already done in a number of professions and with recent graduates who are clearly hired for their skills rather than for the jobs they are taking.

Focusing on an individual's skills and competencies enables an organization to abandon pay based on job descriptions. It also enables the organization to improve its selection and placement processes. Organizations need to know what work needs to get done and the skills and knowledge necessary to do it. Just as the organization's strategy informs the goal setting process for the present and the future, it also establishes the competencies, capabilities, and skills required to reach the goals and get the work done. This in turn should form the basis for establishing the skills and competencies used to select who works in a particular area and, as mentioned earlier, what the individuals should be paid.

Abandoning job descriptions may sound like a radical approach to many but it is, in fact, the way many professional service firms and knowledge work firms have been managed for decades. It is also the way an increasingly large number of global technology organizations from Google to Netflix are managed. Simply stated, it fits a management approach that highlights agility, by emphasizing adaptability and focusing on human capital as a source of competitive advantage. For organizations, it is a step toward achieving sustainable effectiveness.

About the Authors
Co-authors of "*Management Reset: Organizing for Sustainable Effectiveness*" (Jossey-Bass, March 2011), Edward E. Lawler III and Christopher G. Worley are major contributors to theory, research and practice in the fields of organization development and design, human resources management and organization effectiveness. A distinguished professor of business at the University of Southern California (USC) Marshall School of Business, Lawler is the founder and director of the University's Center for Effective Organizations (CEO). Worley holds a joint appointment as a research scientist for CEO and as a professor of management at Pepperdine University.