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When was the last time you updated job descriptions?

There is a chance that what your employees actually do in the day-to-day performance of their jobs isn't what's written in their job descriptions. This may not appear to be a problem if the work is getting done, but inaccurate or incomplete job descriptions can and do create problems for employers, especially if the EEOC or the Department of Labor comes calling. Employers are wise to include routine review and updating of job descriptions on their list of spring cleaning priorities. In addition to being part of a good defense against some claims of unfair or unlawful treatment, accurate job descriptions are also part of a good offense, helping employers recruit the right employees for positions and manage performance and expectations.

Employers should start by asking how the people in a given position really spend their time, and should take the time to get specifics. Find out what the good performers do and what skills they bring to the table. You may find that the job description emphasizes duties that are less important, or that the important tasks barely receive a mention. You may find that as a job has evolved or as it has been changed by technology, certain skills are more or less important than they once were.

Once you have done your homework, you can draft a job description that more accurately reflects reality. If you have identified the right responsibilities and needed skills and experience, you can hire for the right skills. In addition to helping avoid performance problems, an accurate job description can help you navigate other, sometimes dangerous, waters, such as helping to avoid disability discrimination claims by clearly and accurately defining the essential functions of a position. Accurate and complete job descriptions can also assist in classifying, and avoid misclassifying, employees as exempt from wage and hour laws. If an employee is treated as exempt, the job duties must meet a test for exemption. Misstating the job duties will not offer protection from lack of compliance. Better to have a clear and accurate sense of what employees do, reflect it in the job description, and classify from there.

Really, the process of analyzing job descriptions is as important as the end product itself. The process offers the opportunity to make sure you're finding the right people for the right jobs, and to correct when you get off track. The process also provides a self-check to avoid trouble areas like discrimination claims and wage and hour problems. The best recipe is to engage in the process routinely and treat job descriptions as works in progress.