A PORTRANE HOUSE TOOL

# The Real Job Description

A one-page instrument for putting the right person in the right seat — and knowing what good looks like before they arrive.

**Not nice. Effective.**

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THE PROBLEM

# Most job descriptions describe a job nobody does

They're a list of activities, written by committee, copied forward from whoever held the seat last, padded with "other duties as assigned" and a degree nobody checks. Read one and you learn what the person will be busy with. You learn nothing about what they have to achieve.

The failures aren't random:

**They list activities, not outcomes.** Verbs of motion — manage, coordinate, oversee — and never a number. You could do every bullet and still fail, and the document would have no way of noticing.

**They screen for credentials, not capability.** Ten years, a degree, "proficient in." That tells you where someone has been, not whether they can do the thing you need done.

**They're written to protect the company, not to attract a person.** A defensive document. A fence, not an invitation. None of it makes a good person want the job.

**And they never define good.** No picture of excellence, no gap between a 3 and a 5. So the document can't help you hire, coach, or reward. It measures presence, not performance — then gets filed and never opened again.

> **A typical job description tells you what someone will be busy with. It never tells you what they must achieve, what good looks like, or why anyone good would want it.**

**The catch:** you can't wordsmith your way to a good one. A real job description is hard to write because it forces the decisions the bad one let you skip. The blank where the mission should go is a strategy problem. The empty "what good looks like" box is an alignment problem — the top team has never actually agreed on the standard, out loud, in plain words.

So the distance between a useless job description and a useful one is not the distance between bad writing and good writing. It's the distance between *"we have a headcount to fill"* and *"we know what we're trying to win."* The document is a byproduct. The clarity is the point.

THE INSTRUMENT

# Seven questions a real job description answers

Write these and you've done the org work. Skip one, and you've found exactly where the fog is. One page. True. Used every week — in the interview, in the coaching, in the review.

### 1 Why this seat exists

One sentence. The reason this box is on the chart. If you can't write it, you don't have a role — you have a headcount.

### 2 The number it owns

What this seat produces, how much, by when. One to three outputs you can look at when the quarter closes and say yes or no.

### 3 What good looks like

The four to six things that actually decide success — not twenty. For each, in plain language, what a 5 does and what a 2 does. (Use the matrix on the next page.)

### 4 What this person decides

The authority that rides with the seat — what they can decide without asking. A great person won't take a job where they own the number but not the levers.

### 5 What it depends on

The few people and inputs this role needs to win, and what it owes them back. Name the interfaces so success isn't hostage to a fight nobody scheduled.

### 6 What they get

The reward, in the same document — money, and the thing that matters as much: scope, mastery, the next seat, the shot at building. Where the job description and the comp plan finally agree.

### 7 Why a great person would want this

The role's value proposition, answered honestly. What's the win here? What will they build, learn, become? If the honest answer is "not much," you've found the real reason you can't hire.

**The tone under all seven: it's true.** It never hides how hard the job is. A good person isn't scared off by "this is hard, and here's exactly how you win." They're scared off by fog.

THE INSTRUMENT, CONTINUED

# The 1–5 performance matrix

Question 3 deserves its own tool. Pick the four to six components that actually decide the role. For each, define one through five in plain language. Not "exceeds expectations." Specifically: what does a 5 *do* that a 2 doesn't?

Do that and three things get honest at once. **Hiring:** you match people to a written bar, not a feeling. **Coaching:** the gap between a 3 and a 4 *is* the development plan. **Reward:** you pay for a 5, on purpose.

Blank template — name the components that decide the role, then write each level.

| Component | 1 — Unacceptable | 3 — Solid | 5 — Exceptional |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |

Write levels 1, 3, and 5 first — the anchors. Two and four fall out from the space between them. Keep every cell to plain, observable behavior: what the person actually does, not how they make you feel.

WORKED EXAMPLE

# VP of Sales — a PE-backed industrial distributor

Same seat most companies fill with a list of activities and a ten-year requirement. Here it is done right. Numbers illustrative.

1 **Why the seat exists.** We sell good products at prices we too often give away. This seat exists to build a sales organization that wins on value instead of discount — so revenue and margin finally move together.

2 **The number it owns (12 mo).** Revenue $150M→$175M without buying it with price. Discount leakage 28%→24%. Retain 95% of the top twenty accounts *by margin*.

3 **What good looks like.** See matrix below.

4 **What this person decides.** Pricing to a set floor. Who's on the team, hire and exit. Territory and account assignment. The sales comp plan, with Finance — because the comp plan is the real strategy.

5 **What it depends on.** Finance, for clean pocket-price data weekly. Ops, for lead times that make the value real. The CEO, for air cover the first time they walk from a big, unprofitable account.

6 **What they get.** Variable tied to margin and pocket-price realization, not revenue booked. Equity in the value-creation plan. The scope to rebuild an engine, not babysit one.

7 **Why a great person would want this.** A build, not a maintenance job. The upside is real and visible. You own the number and the levers, and a CEO who wants the hard version done.

What good looks like — the four components that decide this seat.

| Component | A 2 looks like | A 5 looks like |
|---|---|---|
| **Pricing discipline** | Closes on price because it's the only lever they know. Discounts go out unexamined. Nobody can tell you the pocket price. | Holds price because the team can say why we're worth more. Discounts are rare, deliberate, approved. Pocket price is on the table in every deal review. |
| **The team** | Hires on résumé and gut. Protects the coasting veteran. Runs the team they inherited. | Hires to a written bar, coaches the gap, moves the wrong person out inside two quarters. The bench is stronger than last year. |
| **Account focus** | Chases whatever's in the pipeline. Treats the biggest account as the best, even when it's the least profitable. | Knows the ten accounts we must win or keep, by name and economic buyer, and spends the team's hours there. Reprices or walks from money-losers. |
| **Forecasting** | The forecast is a wish. Deals slip the last week. Surprises are normal. | The forecast is boring and right. Bad news comes early. Leadership trusts the number. |