

Describing Work...The Job vs. the Result

by Harold S. Williams

The job description is at bedrock in organizational life. Clear and unambiguous task requirements published for all roles, functions, and people are considered essential for a clear-thinking, logical, and structurally correct enterprise. Nowhere is this seen as more critical than in the selection of individuals who occupy the niches we define. Our words anchor the sequence; we are looking for a person to “fill the position.”

Job descriptions are used to establish responsibilities, reporting lines, and expectations for effort. They do so in a way that allows organizations to forecast what people will do. They are the template. Is that my responsibility? Do I have the authority to do that? Which of these matters should receive my highest priority? To answer, check the job description.

Innovators interested in breaking organizational molds would do well to start here. Job descriptions are a form of management by inputs, not by outcomes. They speak exclusively to what goes into work, allowing fulfillment to come from conformance with requirements. All that may be missing is achievement.

We note that when people use a job description to answer such questions as whether to take responsibility or to give something priority, they are relying on very constricted sources of information. Job descriptions were written well in advance of the rich situational sources of data that should certainly influence current action. In behavioral as well as psychological terms, they draw people back. They do not push them forward.

In outcome terms the needed shift is readily defined: a transition from the Job Description to the Results Description. Just as high performing organizations tend to define themselves by what they achieve rather than by who they are or what they do, so too do high performing individuals.

Here's the contrast:

Job Description	Results Description
Defines what goes in	Defines what comes out
Sets boundaries	Lifts boundaries
Encourages exclusion	Encourages inclusion
Defined before person	Defined after person
A structural factor	A personal and structural factor

What's the Difference?

Here's a job description:

Responsible for training programs for the 450 persons in the department. Supervises staff of five persons and reports to Senior Vice President (Deputy Commissioner) for Human Development.

Duties:

- *Design and provide courses on a variety of supervisory and management topics, to include effective writing, negotiating skills, and dealing with difficult people;*
- *Provide technical training at points of introduction of new computer hardware and software;*
- *Evaluate all training programs through timely questionnaires and other means;*
- *Responsible for maintenance of all training records and expense reports, including conformance with all budget documents.*

If the job description is to be used to advertise a position, lines will be added. "Person must have a masters degree in education or related field and five years experience in corporate training."

How might a Results Description contrast with this? As drafted by the organization, it might begin:

Responsible for ensuring that all staff have the capability at all times to use our technology, and for enabling those who report to them to perform to the limits of their ability.

Once a person is in place, that individual might continue:

In the next 12 months I will ensure that at least 300 of our staff of 450 can not only specify new management skills they have learned but can show evidence of how they have improved the ability of those reporting to them to perform at a higher level. In the next two years, this target will rise to 425 out of 450 staff.

At any point that new hardware or software is introduced in the next 12 months which directly affects 15 or more persons, I will ensure that persons so affected acquire basic operating skills in the new technology within 20 days of its availability.

The result focus spends virtually no time on inputs. Indeed, it gives the occupier of the job great latitude in deciding what to do. In the above example, the person might choose to hold no training workshops and to work with managers and staff totally "on the job." Or start a mentoring program whereby the best managers work with those not yet that high performing. The results description lets you hold the outcome constant and vary the means. The job description does just the reverse.

Writing the Results Description

Defining results is not easy, especially in organizations that have long stressed inputs. The methods may vary, but will typically work through this kind of sequence of questions:

1. *What does the organization want to achieve through the expression of each function or task it*

undertakes? The above example defines a “well trained” workforce, not the tasks or the person who will bring it about. Surprisingly, most organizations find it hard to think in these terms. We are so used to thinking of personnel departments, program units, data processing, etc. in activity terms that we find it hard to go beyond functional analysis to outcome analysis. In forecasting terms, outcome analysis involves positing a preferred future state and then backcasting to the steps to achieve it.

2. *What is the baseline of current practice in that area to be affected or improved by the results description?* Without a starting point, there is no way to know if a target is meaningful, let alone ambitious. If an organization already has 400 of 450 persons performing ideally, the results specified in the example above are not impressive. On the other hand, if virtually no one is performing at high capability, they may be unrealistic.

In a sense, the results description reminds us that creative and effective work may be seen as intervention rather than as the continuation and preservation inherent in job descriptions. In such cases as management roles that provide controls and oversight, the results description is a good way to raise important questions. If two persons, for example, each say that their outcome is to ensure that the same set of decisions are correct, then questions will get raised about the value of the second person, let alone a third. The concept of intervention suggests that all work should improve things, not simply maintain them.

3. *What are the specific and verifiable result targets set by persons occupying roles?* The results description is squarely within the outcome frameworks now emerging for budgeting and grant-making throughout the U.S., and the same kinds of techniques apply. It is a matter of moving from stating targets for time-bound projects to stating targets for on-going organizational roles. One way to do this is to think of the job as a project. “If someone were to give me a grant to do this work for one year in this organization, what would I tell them I could achieve and how would I verify that I did it?”
4. *How does the organization know that targets set are net improvements to the organization and in harmony with all other targets set?* Without a good answer to this question, targets become dispersed and unconnected. In the state of Minnesota, one statewide indicator of environmental health is the loss of no song birds to the citizenry. The question is how a given job (whether secretary or associate commissioner in an environmental agency) contributes to that outcome. In this sense, the results description is an important tool in showing how everyone’s work contributes to a goal.

Strategic Implications

The results description is an excellent tool for dealing with a number of perennial sticky wickets within organizations. Here are a few.

1. *The problem of who to hire.* The use of a results description can be of great help in giving you a clear sense of who is comfortable with an outcome framework and who is not. If a person is highly resistant to this approach, preferring definition by input, watch out. Another and more powerful use of the tool is knowing who to keep. Ask the person to refine or to finalize their results description three months into their work, when much more is known to them about constraints and opportunities for achievement. Make this a critical test during the early probationary period of most new hires. It lets you base your decision on behavior in the arena that matters most—the outcome domain.

2. *The problem of breaking down turfs.* Traditionally, managers are encouraged to cooperate across departmental and even agency lines. Very few do so, in that rewards and incentives always seem to favor insularity. Try a results description along these lines:

“My result for the next six months is that I will create at least two examples of interdepartmental cooperation in which both I and a counterpart will be able to clearly demonstrate how we have worked together for mutual gain and improvement.”

Or, take it further,

“Over the next year, I will cause or prompt at least three examples of collaboration, in which my office and at least two other offices work together to create a new product such that none of us believe we could have created it on our own. We will also report that we had fun doing things together.”

3. *The problem of procedural supremacy.* Most organizations talk about empowering their staff, but they reward compliance with operations manuals. The problem is that perfect implementation of corporate procedures rarely equates to perfect service to customers or perfect results at the bottom line. The results description offers a fresh starting point. It moves away from such terms as jobs, function, compliance, and responsibility as a delegated or even finite commodity. It moves toward a future in which responsibility is not something that people are delegated, but rather, something they willingly take anytime this helps advance their realizing the result.

More broadly, nothing compresses cycle time of process more than an outcome framework. In very few organizations is it truly the process that counts. Put differently, the results description ensures that processes are tied to outcomes.

Putting It Together

What happens if 100 persons are energetically engaged in achieving their results in an organization without high regard for lines of authority or preestablished territories? Will not chaos, if not anarchy, reign as everyone looks to optimize their own results? This is a common voiced fear of moving into an outcome focus. Part of it is a concern with loss of control; part is a sense that fragmentation will replace coherence.

Neither fear need be justified. In terms of control, the results description simply shifts control from a focus on inputs (i.e., Is the person living up to their job description?) to a focus on outcomes (i.e., Is the person achieving the results they said they could pull off?). In terms of coherence, the key is to take steps to group persons such that they define and use critical masses as needed. In many cases, targets overlap in interesting ways. Indeed, allegiances formed by shared outcomes are far more productive than those formed by shared interests, authorities, or responsibilities. Pluralistic results are far less likely to prove redundant than pluralistic procedures!