STATE OF ALASKA

POSITION DESCRIPTION WRITING GUIDE

STATE OF ALASKA
DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATION
DIVISION OF PERSONNEL & LABOR RELATIONS
CLASSIFICATION SECTION

MARCH 2007

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WHY USE POSITION DESCRIPTIONS?

At some time in your career with the State of Alaska, you will be called upon to write or assist in writing a Position Description (PD). This guide is designed to inform the reader why PDs are used in State of Alaska employment; when to make changes to PDs; and how best to capture duties, functions, and tasks and optimize use of the PD as a management tool.

There are both legal and practical reasons that support the use of PDs. The legal reasons begin with the constitutional requirements for "…a system under which the merit principle will govern the employment of persons by the State." The definition of the merit principle and how it will be implemented is described in the Personnel Act (AS 39.25), which explains:

> "… (b) The merit principle of employment includes the following:
> (1) recruiting, selecting, and advancing employees on the basis of their relative ability, knowledge, and skills, including open consideration of qualified applicants for initial appointment;
> (2) regular integrated salary programs based on the nature of the work performed;
> (3) retention of employees with permanent status on the basis of the adequacy of their performance, reasonable efforts of temporary duration for correction in inadequate performance, and separation for cause;
> (4) equal treatment of applicants and employees with regard only to consideration within the merit principles of employment; and
> (5) selection and retention of an employee's position secure from political influences."

It is important to notice the first four items require an accurate description of the work to be performed and the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to perform it.

Further reinforcing the Personnel Act are the Personnel Rules, which require PDs for each position in the classified and partially exempt service. The Personnel Rules state that PDs "shall describe the essential functions of a position and the actual skills and abilities required to perform the tasks assigned." The Personnel Rules further charge the Commissioner of each department with ensuring a position description exists for each classified and partially exempt position in the agency and that PDs are updated whenever there is a change in the duties and responsibilities that could affect the allocation.

Statutory and regulatory requirements are also reinforced by bargaining unit contracts which require abiding by the merit principles in classification.

THE PD AS A MANAGEMENT TOOL

The PD is a fundamental management tool for human resource functions. PDs contain the data used to create class specifications, they provide the basis for the assignment of job classes to salary ranges, they are the foundation for legally defensible hiring practices, and they create the performance expectations of incumbents. There has long been a belief that the PD is an employee document and the supervisor just signs it. In reality, the PD is a management document, and the supervisor is responsible for making sure it is accurate, it is updated when appropriate, and it reflects the work that has been assigned. PDs outline the role of a particular position in terms of how it fits into the organizational unit; what the functions are; what the tasks are; what the reporting relationships are; what physical and mental abilities are required to perform the essential functions; the supervisory tasks, if any; and the degree of responsibility assigned to the position. An accurate, up-to-date, well-written PD ensures appropriate allocation to a job class, facilitates successful recruitment and selection, and can assist supervisors and incumbents in clearly communicating and understanding performance expectations.

At its best, PD writing is a collaborative effort between the supervisor and the incumbent of the position. It is based on discussions about assigned duties and responsibilities. A PD form may be completed by the incumbent or the supervisor. Typically, when incumbents write a PD, they complete all fields in the form based on the discussions mentioned earlier. The supervisor then reviews and edits the form. Some agencies specify that PDs must pass through the division's administrative manager or other designee for a final review, and then the document is routed for division approval (typically the division director). Next, the PD is forwarded for department review and approval (typically the Administrative Services Director), then submitted to the Division of Personnel and Labor Relations for processing.

So there is significance, both legal and practical, to the preparation of PDs. For supervisors the PD is the single most important document they utilize in their relationship with employees. If the work is described clearly and accurately then the right people will be attracted to a recruitment bulletin, employees will be classified and paid correctly, and supervisors will be able to evaluate performance based on duties defined in the PD. In fact, the PD is an integral part of the State of Alaska Performance Management Model.

WHEN TO UPDATE

The Division of Personnel & Labor Relations requires updated PDs on an as-needed basis. PDs do not have to be updated in any set interval. When updating a PD conduct a comparison of the assigned duties with the class specification for the job class. Also, consider the relationship of the position in question with others of the immediate organization. Each PD in the section should support the others. Update a PD when one or more of the following has occurred:

- The supervisory authority assigned to the position is changed or modified (e.g., direct report positions added, changed, deleted, etc.).
- A new primary duty (the main duty for which the position exists to perform) has been assigned.
- The position's focus has shifted (e.g., responsibility shifts from reviewing a form for completeness to approving the action requested on the form, OR the position supports Program B while the PD indicates it supports Program A).
- The mission, goals, or objectives of the position, or the program the position supports is changed or modified (e.g., new statutory mandates alter the program function; department executive team establishes new goals or mission that impacts the work performed by the position in question).
- Essential duties have been added, deleted, or modified.
- The work demands section has been modified. This information is necessary to ensure compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) bloodborne pathogens standards.

Sometimes, updating a PD can result in the reclassification of the position to another job class. Reclassification of a position to another class may be needed when:

1. A new assignment is made to a position requiring <u>different</u> skills. For example: work in a section is being automated and a position originally assigned general clerical duties is being reassigned to perform full time data entry tasks instead.

2. Another possibility is when responsibilities increase. For example: A position initially assigned to perform research tasks independently is given supervisory responsibility for a research staff of clerical, technical and professional employees.

Reclassification of a position is <u>not</u> supported when:

1. An employee's workload or production rate has increased. (An additional full or part-time position may be needed.)

2. An employee is hired who has very high qualifications. (Classification focuses on duties assigned to a position, not the abilities of the incumbent.)

3. An employee has been in the position a long time and is not eligible for additional merit increases.

4. An employee is performing his or her tasks in a consistently outstanding manner. (Quality of work is rewarded through merit increases, performance evaluations and other forms of recognition.)

DEFINING THE DUTIES

Now that you are clear about the legal and practical reasons supporting the use of PDs, and when and why PDs are updated, here are basic principles that will assist you in defining the duties of a position:

PDs need to be clear and specific as to the work being performed. PDs must include sufficient detail so the users of the document may visualize the work being performed. Users include the supervisor, applicants, the employee, classifiers, and legal staff who may rely on the PD to provide supplementary information during job-related disputes. A common problem with PDs is that people want to write them quickly, so there is a tendency to do things like cut and paste, either from the class specifications or from other PDs without making sure that the description of duties accurately reflects the work assigned to the position. Nothing will raise a red flag faster for a classifier than to see language taken directly out of a class specification.

Start by creating an outline of the major functional areas of the position; order them from most important to least important.

Example Job Class: Supply Technician II
- Purchasing
- Issue Supplies and Equipment
- Coordinate Property Accounting
- Lead Warehouse Staff

Go back and "fill in" the outline by itemizing the specific tasks performed within each functional area. Add enough detail to each functional area for the description to be clear and meaningful. Eliminate anything that does not add to the clarity of the description or that sounds more like a procedures manual than a description of work. Use a narrative or bullet format to separate each major duty into a statement or paragraph.

Once you have completed the duty descriptions, read the instructions on page 2 of the OPD form (https://dop.state.ak.us/opd). Review Section 2.2 and designate each major functional area as Essential (E) or Marginal (M) in the far left column. You have already arranged the functional areas by importance. Next, estimate the percentage of time you spend on each area, and check to ensure your percentages total 100%.

Although PDs must be complete and accurate, be aware that neither the length of the document nor word choice bears a relationship to the job class or range assigned. To assist those who read and carry out what is written in the PD, be straightforward and direct. Strive to apply the 4-S formula to PD writing: Shortness, Simplicity, Strength and Sincerity:

1) Shortness

a) Try to limit the duty section (2.2) to 2 or 3 pages
b) Avoid repetition

c) Avoid the use of statistics and other program information that are not duties and could apply to others working within in the unit. If you want to give information about the organization and work environment, place this at the beginning of section 2.2 as an introductory statement without a percentage.
d) Describe fully the essential duties and responsibilities of the position. Marginal duties may be covered in a sentence or two.

2) Simplicity

a) Use plain, everyday words, for example, “Issue” instead of “promulgate”, or “after” instead of “subsequent.”
b) Avoid acronyms and office jargon not readily understandable by others outside the work unit. If you must use an acronym, provide its definition upon its first use.

3) Strength

a) Use concrete, specific action words that say what you mean without further explanation. To illustrate: “types” instead of “prepares”, “composes correspondence” instead of “handles correspondence.”
b) Use the action verb-object sentence format: “assembles applicants’ licensure packets”, “repairs V-8 engines”, or “serves meals and snacks.”

4) Sincerity

a) Avoid meaningless (qualitative, intangible) words and phrases such as “performs with the widest latitude for independent judgment” or “fullest extent possible”.
b) Do not draw conclusions by giving your opinion about the difficulty of importance of duties. Such phrases as “most difficult,” “highly complex,” or “initiative of a high order,” adds little if anything to the description of the work. If you find you must use these phrases, then you must explain them in a relational context: “what is less and what is more,” “what is low and what is high.”

In addition to the 4-S formula, another useful approach is to communicate the duties, functions, and tasks of a position by stating the 5 Ws and an H. That is **who, what, when, where, why** and **how**. Remember that you are describing the work to others who may not be familiar with the work environment and its operations.

Note that each of the following statements includes the tools used to perform the work, the product and its purpose.

1. Using health statistics, behavior characteristics of target population groups, and drug research data (how), develop a health plan that is targeted at alleviating drug abuse in adolescents (what).

2. Using client data entered onto an Excel spreadsheet (how), prepare statistical reports in support of planning activities in the Section of Nursing (what).

3. Provides stenographic services (what) for the director’s office (for whom) by taking and transcribing shorthand dictation, typing and maintaining records (how) to assist in providing timely and accurate information to the public and to staff (why).

4. In the State Maintenance Shop in Tok during the summer season and in the State Maintenance Shop in Anchorage during the winter season (where), operates an engine lathe (what) by making setups and manipulating controls (how) to cut and shape external and internal surfaces of valve castings for the repair of engines on state owned road or snow removal equipment (why).

5. Designs database system requirements (what) for use by the department, Division of Motor Vehicles, and the municipalities of Anchorage and Fairbanks (for whom) in implementing the Vehicle Inspection and Maintenance Program to control/reduce carbon monoxide (CO) emissions in Alaska (why).

6. Provide recording services (what) for the director’s office (for whom) by recording, distributing, and maintaining (how) minutes of weekly staff meetings to assist in providing accurate information to affected staff (why).

7. In consultation with the Section Manager (who) determines the allocation of staff resources within the Operations Section (what) to meet the needs of the statewide Operations function (why). Assess current methods and procedures (how) and approve or effectively recommend changes (what) to improve efficiency (why). Work collaboratively (how) with other division section managers and staff (who) to provide efficient and effective services (why).

8. Takes action regarding appointing, promoting and transferring staff (why) and act independently on minor disciplinary issues, (how) for example, writing letters of instruction, verbal reprimand of staff for being tardy (how). In consultation with supervisor (who), effectively recommends (how) major disciplinary actions against staff, up to and including discharge and settling grievances (why).

At the very least, every essential duty statement should express what the incumbent does, as well as how and why the work is performed.

It is also important to make sure PDs are internally consistent. Ensure each section of the PD supports the other sections. For example, it is not uncommon that the Work Demands area (section 4) of the PD will reflect the requirement to drive, or lift and carry 50 pounds, but in the description of duties nothing exists to support these requirements, such as “Drives state vehicles to pickup mail and deliver payroll checks,” or “Stocks copier room with boxes of printer paper.” Though these duties may be limited in terms of frequency, classifiers consider the physical requirements and must ensure that all elements of the PD support each other and provide an accurate description for applicants and other users of the PD. Another common occurrence is inconsistent statements between the main purpose of the job (section 2.1), which makes the position sound important, and the level of authority and independence exercised (section 3.4) which describes only the authority to prioritize that position’s workload. Strive for consistency throughout the PD. These minor inconsistencies may prompt classifiers to contact the supervisor to clarify the duties defined.

In addition to forming the basis for management decisions, also remember the PD is a matter of public record and that a historical record is retained for each PD. For these reasons, it is important that PDs be complete. All information for consideration, with respect to classification, must be included.

TERMINOLOGY: WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T

Frequently, the "how" of the job is obscured by the use of departmental terminology, broad functional terms, and failure to reduce duties to common denominators. For example:

> "Docketing and indexing rate proceedings"
> "Recording architects' certifications"
> "Making out notices for the collection of interest and rental on stocks and bonds"

The three duties suggested here are, most likely, made up of the same basic tasks involved in the clerical work of other departments. In these departments, the duties are stated in their special terminology. These statements, in terms of departmental procedures, may confuse those reviewing the PD.

Clear concise duty statements are easily developed by asking questions similar to the following:

> In what form does the employee's work come to them?
> What has been done with the work previously?
> What does the employee do with the work?
> Exactly how is the work performed?
> What form does the work take when the employee is done with it?
> What happens to the work after that?

Avoid the use of ambiguous terminology such as assist, prepare, handle, edit, examine, research, supervise, and review, etc., without providing explanation of the processes, tasks, or operations constituting the assistance, handling, or preparation. This almost always indicates inadequate information. While such terms may be satisfactory for purposes of general or approximate description, they always require supporting details before they may serve reliably as the basis for classification.

The word "assist", when used alone, is capable of such wide interpretation as to make it almost meaningless for classification purposes. An employee who assists in a given task may perform such simple duties as searching files and assembling material for use by a supervisor, or may perform other duties ranging from the least complex to the point where the employee performs exactly the same duties as the individual being assisted, the only difference being the higher responsibility for the work inherent in the senior position. Wherever the element of assistance is concerned, a detailed description of the duties and tasks involved in the assistance is required, so that it may be clearly understood at what point they fall along the scale ranging from tasks of a routing and repetitive nature to those that are equivalent to the superior's duties minus the final responsibility.

Much, or very little, may be contained within the meaning of the word "prepare." For example, "to prepare statistical tables (of a certain sort)" might mean that employees on their own initiative seek out or develop sources of basic information, plan the schedules or outline other means of collecting the information required, design the tables, and write interpretative text as well, or it might mean that they copy numbers from given places on a schedule, post them to a given column and line on a tabulation sheet, add columns, and compute averages and percentages. It is not possible to accurately evaluate the task of "preparing statistical tables" until it is known what work is included in the operation.

The statement that an employee "handles" certain work has no precise meaning. The significance to be assigned in an individual case depends upon the essential features of the work, the difficulty and responsibility inherent in the duties, the flow of work, the form in which it reaches the employee, the action the employee takes in regards to it, how final is their responsibility, where in the organization structure the work goes after it leaves them, and what further is done with it.

"Editing" has a wide range of significance. It might mean editing a statistical schedule to see that all questions have been answered, all blanks filled in, and that various items of information are consistent with one another; or editing a proposed publication in order to correct spelling, faulty phrasing, imperfect punctuation, and the like; or editing publications forms and in addition marking the manuscript so that the printer will be able to understand the desires of the office; or editing publications with the authority to review the document critically from a subject-matter standpoint, checking and verifying the product of the original writer, condensing over-elaborated topics, making additions where a topic is inadequately explained, rearranging material when not effectively presented, and correcting information, inferences, or conclusions which are not technically accurate – these tasks being representative of the responsibility for maintaining a high standard of technical excellence as well as proper literary and printing form.

The word "examine" is another term that frequently blurs a description of duties rather than clarifying the duties. Different positions may involve "examining" the same thing – a document, for example – from different viewpoints, for dissimilar purposes, by means of unlike procedures, and taking different types of actions as the result of the "examinations." Considerable analysis is required to determine just what "examine" consists of in a given case.

The word "research" is often used for the word "search" because it sounds more complex. For example, the item, "to do research work in connection with sources of material for reports, papers, pamphlets and memoranda prepared by the chief statistician," has been used to mean that the employee, by reference to specific reports, looks up the number of adults in a particular age group or similar information readily available in printed form. "To do research in the archives of the office" has been used to describe the task of attempting to find a document that has a regular place in the files but is temporarily missing.

The following list includes action verbs that can be helpful in crafting duty statements.

Accept	Compile	Enter	Operate
Accompany	Complete	Estimate	Order
Account	Compose	Evaluate	Organize
Acknowledge	Conduct	Fabricate	Overhaul
Address	Consolidate	Facilitate	Oversee
Adjust	Construct	File	Plan
Administer	Consult	Formulate	Prescribe
Admit	Control	Gather	Present
Adopt	Coordinate	Identify	Process
Advise	Correspond	Implement	Produce
Allot	Counsel	Increase	Promote
Amend	Create	Input	Provide
Analyze	Decide	Inspect	Purchase
Appraise	Define	Install	Record
Approve	Deliver	Institute	Reduce
Assemble	Design	Instruct	Repair
Assign	Detect	Interpret	Represent
Audit	Determine	Interview	Review
Authenticate	Develop	Investigate	Route
Authorize	Devise	Load	Schedule
Balance	Diagnose	Log	Select
Bill	Direct	Maintain	Supervise
Buy	Dispatch	Manage	Supply
Calculate	Dispense	Modify	Train
Calibrate	Distribute	Monitor	Translate
Certify	Drive	Move	Transport
Charge	Eliminate	Negotiate	Wash
Chart	Enforce	Obtain	Withdraw

THE POSITION DESCRIPTION FORM

The position description form is located in the Online Position Description (OPD) system. Access the PD form by logging into OPD at https://dop.state.ak.us/opd

Where do I describe the position's duties?

Section 2.2 is the heart of the OPD form and comprises a concise description of the position's assigned duties.

What is the purpose of the Classification Questionnaire?

In the event a PD submission includes a reclassification request, you will need to complete the Classification Questionnaire. This form is listed as "Questionnaire" under Quick Data on the Submission Management page. The questionnaire is designed to alert the classifier to what changes are taking place that support reclassification. This is the opportunity to provide a snapshot of departmental, division, or section-specific issues, which classifiers may not be familiar with, and how they impact the position in question. Provide as much detail as possible in the questionnaire so the classifier will be able to better understand the nature of the changes and the effect the request may have on other positions in the section or other sections.

What are some of the sections in the PD that are traditionally more challenging to complete?

Section 3.4 requires a description of the level of authority and independence the incumbent of the position exercises. A thorough explanation of the actions the incumbent takes or the decisions made on a regular basis without higher level approval reduces the need for follow up calls from the classifier. Explain what authority the position has, for instance, to commit the organization to a course of action, or what types of decisions the incumbent can make alone. This will greatly assist classifiers in identifying the level of independence assigned to a position.

Section 3.5 asks for a description of the nature of the contacts the incumbent has with others to perform the work of the position. Solid examples here can also avoid delays in the classification process. By describing who is contacted, the reason, and how often, classifiers are able to more quickly identify several of the classification factors that are critical to making a final allocation decision.

Section 3.6 of the PD requires a description of the consequence of an error made in the performance of the essential functions of the position. Examples include errors that could be made by individuals responsible for determining applicant eligibility for state services. If an error is made in this field of work, clients may be denied critical life support needs. Errors made at the managerial level may have legal ramifications or result in loss of funding for programs. As mentioned earlier in the guide, this section should support and build on statements made elsewhere in the PD.

What else does Human Resources want to know about the work being performed?

1. What knowledge and skills are needed to do the job.
2. The number of individuals you lead or supervise and what your lead or supervisory responsibilities are.
3. The working conditions that include physical effort and job hazards or discomfort.
4. The kind of equipment needed to do the work.

The above information is covered in Sections 3 through 5 in the PD.

How do PDs travel through the Online Position Description system?

All PDs must pass through four "steps" (Originator, Supervisor, Division, and Department) before arriving in the Classification Section. Once a PD is sent forward in the process a user involved with the preparation, review, or approval of the PD can track the progress of the submission by using the "Track Submissions" tool on the OPD homepage. For more information on the use of OPD go to the login page (http://dop.state.ak.us/index.php?id=1059) and review the training aids.

CONCLUSION

Successful and effective supervisors understand the legal reasons for using PDs and acknowledge the fact that well written PDs support allocating positions accurately; appointing well-qualified applicants; and fostering productive supervisor-employee communications. Knowing when and why PDs need to be updated enables supervisors to meet changing demands and promotes flexibility in meeting organizational objectives. By applying the tools outlined in this guide, supervisors will ensure those who read a PD are getting a clear, concise description of duties and are able to understand the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the work being performed.

For assistance in PD writing, contact Division of Personnel Management Services staff; a complete list of staff is available on-line at the Division of Personnel website at: http://dop.state.ak.us/

For technical help using OPD call the OPD Hotline at 465-3009.

For questions or comments about this guide, or for more information about classification in general, please visit the Classification website at: http://dop.state.ak.us/index.php?id=3