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# What Job Description Jargon is Actually Saying

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Summary. A job description (JD) is more than just a summary of a role. Qualifications are usually listed in order of importance, and while skills listed as “required” may be non-negotiable, “desired” skills are not a deal breaker. Look for clues in the JD about company culture. It will likely include information about what the organization values. Required “years of experience” are flexible. Employers are more interested in your maturity and proven ability. Job titles differ company to company, so don’t make assumptions based on the title. Remote work has become much more ubiquitous, so don’t rule out opportunities that don’t immediately seem to fit your lifestyle or location. close

When you first look at a job description — or JD, if you want to sound like an expert — it seems precisely that: a description of a job. Indeed.com agrees, defining a job description as a document that “summarizes the essential responsibilities, activities, qualifications, and skills for a role.”

But a JD may hold more clues than first meets the eye, including hints about corporate culture, the true prioritization of their needs, and what might be secretly negotiable. Knowing how to find these clues may give you a distinct advantage over other applicants.

I’ve interviewed hundreds of people throughout my professional career, and, indeed, the most successful among them seemed to know more about the role than what we included in the formal job description.

See below five ways to decode a JD to understand not only what your targeted organization needs but who they want.

## Know what’s “required” and what’s simply “desired.”

Pay close attention to the phrases “required” and “must have.” They mean it — these qualifications are typically non-negotiable.

But far less mandatory are skills labeled “desired,” “preferred,” and “a plus.” These are nice-to-haves, but you may compensate for lacking them by conveying your own valuable extras, like editing skills, technical savvy, passion for the mission, fluency in another language, or public speaking ability.

Know also that qualifications and skills are often listed in order of importance to the employer, so focus on matches at the top of the list, and don’t sweat mismatches at the bottom. Sometimes, items at the bottom are automatically added as obligatory boilerplate by the Human Resources department.

Finally, don’t dismiss broad asks that could apply to anyone, like “thrives in a collaborative environment,” “is a team player,” and “has strong interpersonal skills.” They may not help you feel more qualified, but they provide hints about the work culture that you can strategically reference in your cover letter and interview.

## Get hints about the company culture.

Even the tone of a JD can provide clues of work culture. If you’re hoping to have fun at work, look for conversational language, exclamation marks, and descriptions of team-building events to confirm that they take office morale seriously. If it includes a lot of information about their commitment to diversity and inclusion, you can be sure they take those issues very seriously.

Just don’t assume too much from a straight-forward, no-nonsense JD. Sometimes, organizations use a rigid template, whether it matches the workplace culture or not.

## Don’t read “years of experience” too literally.

A typical JD will indicate how many years of professional experience the company is looking for in your background, but don’t consider it an absolute must. Requiring a “minimum 2-3 years of experience” doesn’t mean they’ll reject a candidate with one year of experience if that experience is impressive.

A good rule of thumb is to subtract the low end by one (by two if it’s more than five years) and add one or two years to the high end the same way. If you fall into the new range (2 – 3 years, for example, becomes 1 – 4 years), proceed fearlessly.

What employers most want is a sense of your maturity and proven ability, and job history is only one of the ways to filter candidates for those qualities. If you offer examples of your work that showcase maturity and ability, your “years of experience” may become moot.

Employers may also want to know your work history to get a sense of how much they’ll need to train or teach you. But you can also address that directly by talking about what you’ve personally accomplished, learned, and overcome.

## Don’t read too much into titles.

The first thing you may look for in a job description is the job title. Just realize that one company’s “coordinator” is another company’s “manager,” depending on the nature and size of their workforces, so don’t focus too much on a title-to-title match or mismatch.

Remember that the company ultimately doesn’t need a “marketing manager” as much as they need someone who can successfully handle the responsibilities of the role. So don’t make assumptions based on the title, but do learn all you can about the position.

## Assume the job can be remote.

Modern technology — and the pandemic — have made remote working feasible, if not preferable, for more workers and companies than ever before, so unless the JD indicates your physical presence is required, you can assume there’s at least a chance for remote working.

Statistics bear this out. According to the 2019 report by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 24% of employed Americans work from home at least part of the time, and research from FlexJobs & Global Workplace Analytics from 2019 indicates that remote work has increased 44% in the last five years and 91% over the last 10 years.

Even if the job is first established as an office role, employers may make exceptions for the right candidate, so never pass on an opportunity because it may not immediately match your lifestyle or location. Discuss it with your prospective employers as you simultaneously amaze them with your skill and talent.

## The bottom line

All career experts agree that thorough preparation is critical to getting the job you want. Decoding a job description is only one part of that preparation, but it could be the one tactic that gives you a decisive edge.

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