

JOB DESCRIPTION DECODER

What Employers Are Really Looking For

Created by Lavonia, Director of Talent Acquisition with 25+ years of experience writing and reviewing thousands of job descriptions

INTRODUCTION

As someone who creates and reviews job descriptions daily, I'm sharing insider knowledge on what employers are really saying in their job postings. Understanding how to read between the lines will help you tailor your application and prepare effectively for interviews.

COMMON CORPORATE BUZZWORDS TRANSLATED

What They Say	What It Actually Means
"Fast-paced environment"	Expect high workload and quick turnarounds
"Self-starter"	Limited training; figure things out independently
"Wear multiple hats"	Role isn't clearly defined; expect to do work outside your job description
"Competitive salary"	We pay market rate (or slightly below)
"Culture fit"	Personality and work style as important as skills
"Team player"	Will need to collaborate frequently and effectively
"Detail-oriented"	Mistakes will be noticed and have consequences
"Flexible"	May involve schedule changes, adaptability to shifting priorities
"Growth opportunity"	May start with lower compensation with potential to advance
"Proven track record"	Need specific examples of success in similar roles

DECODING REQUIREMENTS VS. PREFERENCES

Must-Have Requirements (Generally Non-Negotiable)

- Listed first in the job description
- Contain words like "required," "must have," "essential"
- Specific technical skills or certifications
- Minimum years of experience when stated explicitly

Nice-to-Have Preferences (Potential Flexibility)

- Listed later in the job description
- Contain words like "preferred," "ideal," "desired"
- Broader soft skills
- Some educational requirements (when equivalent experience is mentioned)

Insider Tip: Apply if you meet 70-80% of requirements. Many candidates, especially women, only apply when they meet 100% of criteria, putting them at a disadvantage.

HOW TO MAP YOUR EXPERIENCE TO JOB REQUIREMENTS

1. Create a two-column document:
 - Left column: List key requirements from the job description
 - Right column: Your matching experience, skills, or accomplishments
2. Use the employer's exact terminology where possible
3. Quantify your experience when relevant:
 - Years of experience
 - Size of teams/projects
 - Budget amounts
 - Performance metrics
4. Address potential gaps honestly with transferable skills

Example Mapping:

Job Requirement: *"Experience managing cross-functional projects with multiple stakeholders"*

Your Match: *"Led 5 cross-departmental initiatives involving Marketing, IT, and Finance teams, delivering all projects on time and under budget over a 3-year period."*

READING BETWEEN THE LINES: RED FLAGS

As a Talent Acquisition Director, I recommend watching for these potential warning signs:

- Extremely long lists of responsibilities with very low years of experience required
- Vague job descriptions that could apply to multiple different roles
- Multiple repostings of the same position within short timeframes
- No salary range when legally required to provide one
- Emphasis on company perks over actual role responsibilities
- Unrealistic combination of technical skills across different disciplines

UNDERSTANDING LEVEL INDICATORS

Job Description Terminology	What It Indicates
"Junior" or "Associate"	Entry-level, 0-2 years experience, expects supervision
"Mid-level" or no qualifier	3-5 years experience, some autonomy expected
"Senior"	6+ years experience, high autonomy, may mentor others
"Lead"	Technical leadership without direct reports
"Manager"	People management responsibilities
"Director"	Strategic responsibility, multiple teams/functions

JOB DESCRIPTION ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

For each job posting you're seriously considering, complete this analysis:

1. **Core Requirements:** List the 5-7 most essential requirements
2. **My Qualifications:** Rate your match for each requirement (Strong/Medium/Developing)
3. **Gap Analysis:** For any "Medium" or "Developing" areas, note how you'll address them
4. **Company Research:** List 3 facts about the company relevant to this role
5. **Questions to Ask:** Develop 3-5 specific questions based on the job description
6. **Tailoring Strategy:** Note specific experiences to emphasize in your resume and interview

Remember: As a hiring manager, I'm looking for candidates who understand our needs and can clearly communicate how they align with our requirements. Taking time to decode job descriptions helps you position yourself effectively and stand out from other applicants.

Need more personalized guidance on a specific job description? Check out my professional services!