



**Strategic Job Descriptions:**  
Keys to an Integrated Talent Management Infrastructure



## Introduction

Most organizations operate in an antiquated, siloed, compliance-focused framework when working with job descriptions. This approach puts its primary focus on human resources compliance (EEOC, ADA, etc.), industry compliance (E.g. Joint Commission for Healthcare) and fundamental and basic human resources operational needs – compensation (job analysis, benchmarking), recruitment and selection (job postings), and in some cases setting job expectations for newly onboarded employees.

Recruiters and line managers define the hiring criteria, HR market prices benchmark jobs, and hiring managers select their new hires usually based on loosely defined criteria outlined in the job posting, which more often than not, doesn't really match the job description, if there is even an up-to-date copy on file! And if there is a job description on file, it's usually in a document format, in a shared drive folder, and will likely never be used again until Compensation decides to redesign the compensation structure. To put it simply, compliance-focused job descriptions become irrelevant as a talent management tool; they are not designed to support employee engagement or to orient employees to standards for exceptional performance.

Organizations with an integrated talent management (ITM) vision are seeing beyond this limited, siloed, document approach to job descriptions with the advent of fully integrated talent management platforms that allow organizations to scale and sustain truly integrated talent management processes. They realize that job descriptions serve a much more strategic function as tools to set hiring threshold requirements, job performance expectations, and provide the infrastructure for workforce planning, succession planning, leadership and career development. To realize this ITM vision requires a paradigm shift within organizations of how job descriptions are written, how they are managed, and how they interface with these key talent management functions and related technology platforms. Understanding this emerging trend beyond a compliance-focused framework, to an ITM-focused job description management framework is the central topic of this white paper.

Given the obvious relevance of job-specific performance criteria for managing and

evaluating employee performance, deployment, development, succession and workforce planning, the question naturally arises: why are job descriptions not being used as management tools for the wide variety of ITM functions? There are several factors, relating to how performance management has been viewed, the limitations of ITM technology platforms, and the relative maturity levels of organizations in the evolution of their ITM strategies.

## Industry Trends in Job Description Management

### Performance Management & Job Descriptions

Many organizations have chosen to not use job descriptions as the basis for performance management solutions. They have chosen to manage individual or team performance by focusing either on goal achievement or the demonstration of competencies associated with organization-wide values.<sup>1</sup> The goals-focus ideally establishes alignment of individual performance with the organization's strategic goals, and the competency-focus ensures that behaviors are encouraged that support the organizational culture, mission, and values. The exception to this seems to be the healthcare industry where job descriptions often serve as the basis for performance evaluations for clinical roles – though the driver for that is often Joint Commission compliance rather than an ITM strategy.

This goals-and-competencies approach to performance management is effective to an extent but it leaves out an important component: setting expectations regarding the job-specific performance outcomes that are tied to core business processes. If well written, these outcomes are defined within the job responsibilities in the



job description. And when the job descriptions are well designed, they reflect the organization's talent requirements as they relate to the key work processes that are essential to the organization's competitive success and how it differentiates itself in the marketplace. In other words, well designed job descriptions are important pieces of the organization's intellectual property. To ignore this important component of performance management is to leave out what is arguably the heart of the strategy behind job design –defining the talent requirements to support optimal process execution and organizational performance.

Recent studies of trends in performance management have either ignored the role of job descriptions<sup>i</sup> or dismissed them as not well designed to support performance management. Edward Lawler, founder and director of the Center for Effective Organizations (CEO), points out the shortcomings of traditional job descriptions in his article, A Strategic Suggestion for Effective Organizations: Get Rid of Job Descriptions. He points out that traditional job descriptions are often not up-to-date, too static, costly to maintain, and often used by employees as excuses for failing to do work that is not outlined in the job description. This is especially true in union environments. He recommends a focus on effective goal setting as key to performance management, rather than looking to more effective Job Description Management (JDM) solutions to address the concerns he identifies.

In a separate CEO study<sup>iii</sup>, more than 58% of HR executives graded their own performance management systems as C or below. Most of those performance management practices were annual reviews based on goal evaluation and calibration, manager-driven evaluations, and were ultimately cumbersome and unsatisfying. One of the main issues identified in this study was

the frequent disconnect between the annual performance evaluation process and the ongoing performance coaching focused on improving daily job performance and results.

One way to ensure a closer connection between day-to-day performance coaching and performance evaluation is to ensure that the discussion focuses on job-specific expected outcomes and the competencies required to achieve those outcomes. When job responsibilities are written to focus on performance outcomes rather than just listing tasks, the job description becomes a dynamic tool to support effective performance coaching and evaluation. And with evolving technology making it easier to manage job description content, the possibility of a dynamic JDM solution becomes an emerging possibility for more effective performance management.

## Healthcare as a Leader in Leveraging Job Descriptions for ITM

The healthcare industry is a leader in recognizing the importance of JDM for effective performance and talent management. Hospitals and other care facilities are required by the Joint Commission, an industry driven regulatory agency, to ensure that performance evaluations reflect the actual job responsibilities as specified in the job description<sup>iv</sup>. This requirement is to ensure that employees understand both the competency and performance expectations of their jobs, as patients' lives depend on consistent quality and excellence in job performance.

Job descriptions are being re-written in healthcare with the help of subject-matter-experts and consulting firms such as HRIZONS to ensure that job-specific performance outcomes, and functional and technical competencies, are clearly defined. These job descriptions are used as the basis for ongoing

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performance management and evaluation, to ensure that employee performance is focused on the established expectations for role-based work processes associated with patient care and safety.

Rigorous testing of competencies associated with specific jobs is part of the on-boarding process for all clinical staff. Donna Wright, expert in competency assessments for healthcare, recommends that competency assessments be regularly updated to reflect changes in work processes, introduction of new technology, and the inclusion of new competencies related to safety and patient care initiatives.<sup>v</sup> This review process also may require changes in the job description to ensure alignment of performance measures with new technology innovations and patient care initiatives. Saint Anthony's Medical Center in St. Louis, MO is among the leading healthcare organizations that are working to integrate ongoing job description and competency management as the foundation of their performance management and improvement processes.<sup>vi</sup>

## Job Descriptions as Foundations for ITM

An emerging trend, within and outside of the healthcare industry, is to identify jobs and roles that are strategically important to the organization's sustained success and to clearly define the talent requirements related to those jobs and roles.<sup>vii</sup> This trend is bringing greater attention to the job description as foundational for defining talent requirements and defining the assessment and performance criteria for strategic talent management. Progressive organizations are seeing the importance of effectively written and well designed job description content and related job description management (JDM) systems to manage this important strategic asset – integrating job-specific hiring criteria with effective performance management, employee development, succession and workforce planning.

The driver for this innovation is the need to define the organization's talent requirements based on key jobs, roles, and related business processes. Leading organizations are defining pivotal jobs/roles that are key to the organization's competitive success.<sup>viii</sup> This approach requires well designed job descriptions that specify not only the hiring criteria but also the success criteria for optimal performance. These "success

profiles" include well defined outcome statements and related competencies that are required to optimally perform on the job.

Boudreau and Ramstad point out that this focus on focal jobs & roles requires a new way of thinking about job descriptions.<sup>ix</sup> Instead of thinking in terms of traditional task lists, job descriptions need to focus on the specific outcomes and competencies that are essential to their competitive success. In the example of Disney's re-definition of the role of street sweepers in their theme parks, job analysts realized that the key outcomes and competencies had to do with being customer ambassadors who sweep, rather than traditional street sweepers. New, dynamic job descriptions for pivotal roles need to link directly to the strategic objectives of the organization, and need to be flexible enough to change with changing strategy.

## Technology Platforms for Managing Job Descriptions

Job description management (JDM) software designed to support ITM is a relatively new innovation.<sup>x</sup> Prior to 2000, there were very few Internet-based JDM solutions available to human resource professionals. HR departments stored their printed job descriptions either in filing cabinets or Word-based job descriptions on their company's network.

From 2000 to 2008, JDM became an incidental feature of larger software applications used primarily for recruiting and compensation management. Recruiting systems used scaled down job descriptions to populate job requisition templates and job postings on Internet sites. Compensation platforms were developed to manage compensation plans and benchmark jobs. These platforms were focused on the management of either recruitment or compensation, but were not designed to support an overall ITM strategy.

From 2008 to the present we have seen the introduction of new JDM systems that are moving beyond the siloed, compliance-focused framework to include a more sophisticated and strategic ITM framework. Several of the leading ITM technology vendors have introduced JDM modules, with functionality to support employee acknowledgement of job descriptions and the integration of job-specific content with performance management

processes. These technology platforms are enabling organizations to manage job description creation and updates, ensuring that consistent and accurate details are shared across the enterprise and that all key stakeholders are included in the process – employees, managers, HR, recruiting, legal, performance management, career development, organizational development, and compensation.

The evolution of JDM technology is making it possible to create more flexible and dynamic outcome-based based job profiles using competencies, skills and job responsibilities, to support key talent management processes. As these systems are oriented more so toward supporting the full suite of ITM functions, rather than focused on point solutions for specific use-cases, we expect to see JDM become a central feature in defining talent demand requirements and evaluation criteria for all the workforce planning and talent management functions.

HRIZONS developed a solutions model in 2008 for managing job description content as the foundation for truly integrated talent management.

The HRIZONS solution enables edits and approvals of job description content and integration with the various use cases supported by leading edge ITM technology platforms. This model helps clients fully appreciate and understand how performance-based job descriptions significantly increase the ROI of their technology investments in support of strategic human resource management.

### Achieving Strategic JDM

The emerging trend to utilize ITM-focused job descriptions requires a multi-faceted approach. First, it requires the design of the companies job structure to ensure the structure is well designed for the enabling technology platforms while thinking through end-user experiences, and system administrator maintenance considerations. Second is the re-write of key sections of the job description, including the job summary, experience requirements, job responsibilities, and related competencies. These constitute the primary sections used to support ITM functions.

Third, it requires a project management methodology to handle the scope of revising an organization's entire job description library to improve quality of content, realize efficiencies and harmonize and streamline job descriptions where possible. And fourth, it requires the technology to standardize the job description layout(s) and ultimately import the content into the client's HR technology platforms. All four components are essential for an effective ITM job description upgrade project.



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## Re-Writing Key Sections of the Job Description

### Job Structure

The design of the job structure is the first step in redefining job descriptions. This includes specification of job titles, job codes, job families, exempt status, job levels, job grades, and effective date of the most recent version of the job description. The grouping of jobs based on a job family and job level structure is a key component of performance-oriented job descriptions. The job family structure identifies which jobs are similar enough to share common experience requirements, competencies and job responsibilities. These become frameworks for defining career progressions for incumbents within a given job family. They also provide the basis for defining talent pools and assessing talent within a specific job family.

Job levels are important for distinguishing competencies by level – typically executive-, managerial/supervisory-, and staff-level jobs. Managers, for example, typically share a common set of competencies and job responsibilities, making it easier to compare incumbents across roles and jobs when performing talent reviews for development and succession planning purposes.

Compensation related data is often not displayed explicitly on the job description, though it is usually linked to the job profile in the JDM technology platform or job description management system. The reason for this is that identical jobs can have different salary grades, based on different regions and markets. From a performance perspective, the salary grade is not a significant differentiator of the jobs. Progressions within job families and levels, however, are useful differentiators and are typically displayed either in the naming conventions for jobs or in the job family or job level fields.

### Job Summaries

Job Summaries, experience requirements, job responsibilities, and related competencies are the key components that need to be considered in writing job descriptions for ITM purposes. The job summary is used to populate the requisition



Other considerations when creating your job summaries include:

- *Level of autonomy and scope of decision making and accountability, particularly for management positions. (Often used in evaluating the job grade level of a position.)*
- *Reference levels of competency and problem-solving skills, where relevant. (Also used for evaluation job grade level, as well as for defining selection criteria.)*
- *Reference to career ladders and matrices relevant to the position, including potential feeder jobs to the position and jobs to which the position can lead. (Optional, depending on maturity level of job infrastructure solution design and related career management processes.)*

## Experience Requirements

It is important to specify the threshold experience requirements necessary to qualify for the job. This helps in designing career ladders and defining what experiences would be important to include for an internal candidate to prepare them for the

### Example Job Summary:

The Senior Solution Center Analyst is responsible to advocate for users needs and coordinate support requests within IT. Working independently, the Senior Solution Center Analyst will provide second level support to a team of Analysts that provide first level support for all calls coming into the IT Solution Center.

Individuals in this role are responsible for the training, coaching and mentoring of team members. They also will monitor one or more multi-platform operating systems, utilities and related software to meet organizational needs with the expected outcome of winning business.

job. Too often the experience requirements are written primarily with the external candidate in mind, not considering how it fits within the matrix of jobs within the organization that are feeder jobs into the designated position.

Experience requirements are typically referenced based on years of experience with designated fields or areas. When used for internal employee development planning, it is also helpful to include more specific experience requirements that relate to preparing employees for the position. These would be unique to the organization, and may not be included in the version of the job description used for recruiting external candidates.

## Job Responsibilities

Job responsibilities in standard compliance-oriented job descriptions are typically written in a task format, following the task analysis methodology used for defining jobs and building job descriptions.<sup>xi</sup> This format was designed primarily for compliance and compensation purposes to grade jobs and to establish threshold requirements for performing in the job. What is needed is a new methodology that focuses on performance outcomes rather than tasks, and that still specifies the criteria for successful task achievement.

This new ITM-focused job responsibility format includes a brief title for the job responsibility, followed by a high-level description of the "what" and the "so-what" of the job responsibility – what needs to be done and the intended outcome or contribution to the client and/or organization. The third portion of the job responsibility statement is a set of bulleted statements of the tasks to be performed and the results expected. These outcome-focused task statements provide the specific evaluation criteria for successful performance of the responsibility.

Typically the challenge of updating standard task lists into this new ITM-focused, outcome-oriented format involves the grouping of related tasks under an appropriate high level outcome statement. In the above example, the bullet pointed tasks are all items that are related to the higher level responsibility of Patient Care Planning and Implementation. Once the tasks are re-grouped, they can then be edited into clear outcome statements that can then be used to support assessment and evaluation processes for recruitment, onboarding, performance management, employee development, etc.

A core HR team specializing in job description management can work with the organization's current job descriptions to re-group and reformat the statements to support these larger ITM processes. The challenge of converting all the task statements into outcome statements may be considered too labor intensive in some cases. If this is the case, having one high level outcome-oriented description with supporting task statements has been found to be sufficient for supporting key ITM processes.

Another consideration in working with job responsibilities is to identify commonalities across similar jobs. Defining a set of job responsibilities that characterize a specific job family or area of work helps to clarify points of continuity among similar jobs. This can be helpful in defining career ladders and matrices to support career management and succession planning.<sup>xii</sup>

## Competencies & Success Profiles

Competencies and skills are also typically associated with each job or role. They can be either behavioral or functional/technical, and they reference the behaviors or skills that characterize superior performance on the job. Because these competencies define the behaviors and skills for successful performance on the job, they are often referred to as the Success Profile<sup>xiii</sup> for the job.

## Example Experience Requirements

- *Masters Degree in Finance or Business administration required.*
- *4-5 years management experience required.*
- *7+ years experience in Financial Analysis and Planning.*
- *4-5 years experience in budgeting and strategic planning for healthcare organizations preferred.*
- *Expert level knowledge of Excel, Access and Enterprise Financial applications required.*
- *CPA Certification preferred.*

The Success Profile can include organization-wide competencies that reflect the organizational values, as well as competencies distinguished by job level (E.g. staff, managerial and executive). Additional competencies may be associated with divisional areas or job families. The competency modeling strategy is to identify behaviors and skills that are common across a defined job grouping. These competencies can then be used to define talent pools for groups of jobs, and to clarify the requirements for successful performance, career advancement, and succession planning within the organization. Including a Success Profile within the job description makes the job description more dynamic and flexible, emphasizing the interactions among jobs and roles that lead to optimal team and organizational performance.

## Other Sections of Job Descriptions

Other sections of the job description can typically be standardized using pre-defined selection libraries. This streamlines the job description data and avoids unnecessary duplications or redundancies in the ways that items are stated. Sections for general requirements, threshold required knowledge and skills, physical requirements, as well as certifications and education can all be pre-defined in selection lists, expediting the job description re-write process. This helps with talent management reporting when looking at such factors education levels and certification updates.

These sections are extremely important from a compliance perspective and need to be developed with care. They are not addressed in-

## Example Job Responsibility

**Patient Care Planning and Implementation:** Develops, documents, implements and evaluates the patient's individualized plan of care based upon identified needs; modifies plan to meet mutually agreed-upon clinical outcomes.

Develops care plan, including medical and/or nursing diagnosis, patient/family education, discharge planning, and multidisciplinary plan if appropriate.

- *Provides for continuity through a plan of care that directs activities of all members of the team.*
- *Implements the plan in a safe and timely manner.*
- *Adjusts plan of care according to changes in patient needs and medical status.*
- *Documents implementation and includes changes or omissions of the identified plan.*
- *Consults with healthcare providers and makes referrals as appropriate; utilizes appropriate community resources and systems to implement the plan.*

depth here because they are less directly related to the ITM functions that are the focus of this white paper. For more information on the compliance-focused sections of job descriptions, please see the HRIZONS website at [www.hrizons.com/jobdescriptions/compliance](http://www.hrizons.com/jobdescriptions/compliance).

## Project Management Methodology

Re-writing job descriptions across a large organization is a daunting task. Concerns about the scope and resources required often prevent organizations from undertaking this important step in developing their ITM infrastructure. Having an effective project management methodology and the tools to support the re-write and import of content into the designated ITM technology platform are key to the success of these initiatives.

The most important considerations have to do with executive sponsorship and project management leadership, including the resources, tools, and technology for managing content, skill sets within the core team, and JDM project experience to achieve the desired results.



## Project Sponsorship

It is essential that executive leadership be educated to the strategic importance and positive organization impact of initiatives to upgrade job description content. Human Resources usually takes the lead as the change agent with the organization and is an audible champion for the change. If the organization continues to operate from a compliance mindset, JDM will never rise to the level of strategic importance. Once executive leadership grasps how JDM becomes a strategic foundation element for all the ITM processes, it becomes a strategic priority. This is especially the case if the organization has already invested in an ITM technology platform. The old adage of “garbage in, garbage out” is especially true with job description content. If the content is not developed to a high quality level and not designed to support ITM processes across the organization, then the full ROI of the technology investment will never be realized and process automation is the proverbial glass ceiling. Nor will the critical talent decisions that depend on that data be as sound or effective as they could be with better assessment data.

## Project Management Leadership

Successful planning and execution of a JDM upgrade project involves a number of moving parts. Having the right resources and talent is important, including a skilled project lead and core team with the knowledge of jobs across the organization and the ability to draft, edit, and manage approvals with line managers and other subject matter experts (SMEs). Additionally having an overall project manager with experience managing complex Human Resources or JDM projects and vast amounts of data is helpful in structuring the project, identifying key tasks, resources and identifying potential risks and mitigation strategies.

## Tools and Technology

Having the right tools and technology to manage the project is equally important. Online JDM technology platforms can be configured to expedite the re-write and approval processes, providing standardized content and the ability to manage extensive content libraries for competencies and job responsibilities. The HRIZONS team has developed a job description management solutions called HRZJDM<sup>SM</sup> to facilitate the import of current state job descriptions, the re-

write of job descriptions using best practices content, the validation and approval processes and the management of all the data related to larger JDM projects. In addition, having robust databases helps to aggregate, analyze and manipulate the data and perform quality control checks on the content and data to ensure it is compliant with the HR technology platforms being utilized by the organization. This type of enabling project technology has been found to be essential for the successful execution of these projects. It is also important that these tools facilitate ongoing maintenance of job descriptions and interface with the client's HRIS, compensation, and other related applications for ongoing ITM.

Prior experience in managing these types of JDM projects is especially important for project success, as it requires the coordination of a wide range of stakeholders, and the coordination of both process and technology teams to ensure that all the process and system requirements are met. The job description content is used to populate recruitment job templates, compensation systems, support performance management processes, competency and skill assessments, to support career planning, and position profiles for succession and workforce planning – all of which requires close coordination with the organization's HRIS and other applications. This project affects virtually every employee and every talent management process in the organization, so getting it right the first time is a top priority.

## Business Benefits

Clients who have upgraded the job description content to support their ITM functions report a wide range of benefits. One of the most important is improved quality of hire, based on the ability to validate hiring criteria against follow up performance data<sup>xiv</sup>. Competency-based assessment practices at point of hire with follow-up performance evaluations based on well defined job descriptions and success profiles have long been shown to be key to improved talent acquisition and organizational performance<sup>xv</sup>. A recent study of nursing turnover found that higher levels of role ambiguity were associated with higher rates of nursing turnover and increased likelihood of medical error. The study concludes that clearly defined role responsibilities that are well understood by all members of the caregiver team will promote nurse retention and contribute to high quality patient care.<sup>xvi</sup>

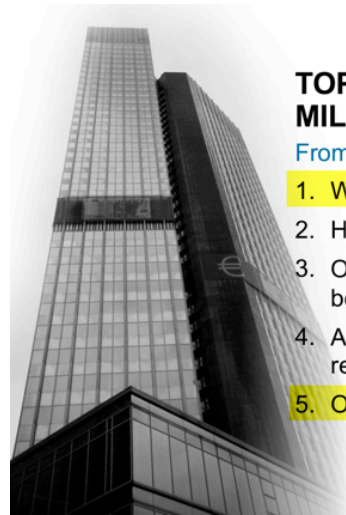
Defining career ladders and matrices within the job infrastructure of the organization also leads to improved employee motivation and retention, as employees see growth opportunities within the organization to sustain their long term career development. A recent Harvard Business Review indicates that what Millennials want most from their bosses and organizations is support in navigating their career paths and developing skills for the future.<sup>xvii</sup>

Well designed job progressions and related competency models provide the infrastructure to support this important area for developing new leaders.

Leveraging performance criteria from your job descriptions in your performance reviews increases the relevance of the review process for both employees and managers, leading to higher levels of engagement in the evaluation process and in overall job performance.

Creating role-specific success profiles for talent pools and succession planning have been shown to be key factors for effectively identifying talent and implementing an impactful ITM and workforce development strategy. Without a well-defined job description infrastructure and the technology to manage it, it becomes very challenging and resource-intensive to support these talent review processes, if not impossible.

One of the chief challenges in realizing these business benefits is the design of processes and systems for quickly updating job descriptions and success profiles in response to changing work processes and business strategies. As mentioned earlier in this paper, this requires the support of executive leadership in realizing the strategic value of JDM, as well as improvements in JDM technology and processes to ensure that the organization remains agile and competitive.



## TOP 5 THINGS MILLENNIALS WANT ...

From their next organization:

1. Will develop my skills for the future
2. Has strong values
3. Offers customizable options in my benefits and reward package
4. Allows me to blend work with the rest of my life
5. Offers a clear career path

Meister & Willyerd, Harvard Business Review, May 2010

## Summary

This white paper has traced the evolution of job description management (JDM) solutions from a compliance focused, siloed framework to a performance-focused, strategic, integrated talent management (ITM) framework. It has identified an emerging trend toward this new ITM focus, including the development of new JDM technology platforms to support the data intensive process creating, developing, and managing job description content and integrating it with a full range of talent management functions and HR technology platforms.

The paper emphasized the need for new standards for writing job descriptions to fulfill their new ITM purposes. Attention was given to the re-writing of job summaries, experience statements, job responsibilities, and competencies to define the criteria for successful staff selection, deployment, development, and performance.

The challenges of effective project management were then discussed, describing how to turn the vision of improved JDM solutions into an organizational reality. The importance of executive sponsorship and project management leadership were discussed, including the need for the right core team skills and effective tools and methodologies manage all the phases of a JDM upgrade project. Selection of a strong consulting partner with a proven solution and methodology with experience in successfully managing these projects was also seen to be important for project success.

Finally, the business benefits of a fully integrated JDM system were reviewed, including the ability to make key talent decisions relating to quality of new hires; increasing employee motivation and retention; making performance evaluation processes more relevant; better management of mission critical talent pools; and continuous improvement of workflow processes and defining talent requirements across the organization.

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## About the author:

With extensive experience in the fields of clinical and organizational psychology, Gordon Medlock designs and implements talent management solutions to help individuals, teams, and organizations realize their full potential. He has implemented over 60 talent management solutions over the past 12 years across a wide variety of industries, leveraging experience with best of breed technology platforms. He has also developed and taught programs in human capital management at the Graham School at the University of Chicago, and has presented articles and papers on competency modeling, job description design, and performance management at numerous conferences. His recent work at HRIZONS focuses on demonstrating the strategic importance of job descriptions as foundational for integrated talent management processes and systems.

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