

DEVELOPING EMPLOYEES

# Why You Should Let Employees Personalize Their Job Descriptions

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We live in an increasingly personalized society. We choose individualized playlists instead of radio stations. We self-select our news sources and our TV shows. Our cars have infinitely adjustable seats and telescopic steering. Everything is geared, just for us.

Then we have job descriptions.

In most corporate structures, today, recruitment for a position generally means starting with a formal list of tasks — the standardized job description — and hiring someone who can make a convincing case that they would perform each one.

As time goes on, people get stuck in these pre-defined roles, and, if growth opportunities aren't available, they disengage. Although concerned leaders try to address this problem in many ways — teamwork exercises, mentorship, perks, innovative office spaces, and incentive programs — their solutions miss a simple but pivotal point: [Employees are engaged by engaging jobs.](#)

In my experience leading and managing teams over two decades, I've found that job personalization — that is, fitting jobs to employees rather than fitting employees to jobs — is one of the best ways to maximize engagement.

Job personalization is best applied when there are clear inflection points: when career trajectories are stalled, during corporate restructuring, or in recruiting for open positions. I've also found that it works best with individuals who bring new and growth-minded perspectives.

If you think one of your direct reports is prime for job personalization, I suggest beginning the process with a true-north conversation. Ask the person to describe themselves and their career, and listen closely. What are they especially good at? What gets them excited about their career successes? What kinds of responsibilities have they not sought? Which ones did they seem to talk around or emphasize less? What you're looking for is how their skills (professional), their passions (personal), and their value (as perceived by the organization) intersect.

For these conversations to work, you need to have a growth mindset as well. What is my colleague really passionate about and good at? And, more importantly, is it possible to create a role for them that accelerates their personal progression while also benefiting the organization? These conversations aren't easy and require significant self-reflection and coaching.

I've found that when creating new jobs around individuals, it is necessary to approach each situation based on the personality of the person you're trying to help. In my experience, job creation typically is best applied to three types of personas: the altruistic, the big thinkers, and the creatives. Each persona requires a different approach.

### **Make Helping Others a Core Responsibility for the Altruistic**

In every organization, you will find a few employees who display a sense of unselfish service towards others. For example, my colleague Silvia, who works in public relations, often goes out of her way to welcome and mentor new colleagues.

Altruistic individuals like Sylvia may not hold formal power, but they are well-respected by their colleagues and have a lot of influence as a result.

Leaders can help these employees by making their “fringe” activities a core part of their job responsibilities. After I had a true-north discussion with Sylvia, for example, it was clear that her innate skills in networking, presenting, facilitating, and mentoring could provide a lot of value for the company, which had just initiated a new leadership development program. In this case, Sylvia’s passion aligned with the goals of the organization, so we jointly crafted a roadmap for Sylvia to learn more about leadership development while gaining career counseling skills — all while pursuing her current role in PR.

### **Establish Clear Goals for the Big Thinkers**

While every organization wants big thinkers on their teams, it’s no secret that big thinkers struggle with the traditional organizational constructs that can stifle their ideas. Big thinkers are dreamers and might typically struggle with details, trivial conversations, organizational politics, processes and decision flows. While they are natural candidates for job personalization, leaders should design clear goals – as well as a safety net that allows for failures.

This was the story with Amanda. After her position was lost in a reshuffling, I invited Amanda to join my team. Having worked with her on other projects, I knew that she was passionate about bold ideas. Unfortunately, because she had found herself in tactical, traditional roles, many others found her ideas to be too far-fetched, impractical, or politically incorrect. After having a true-north discussion, Amanda and I realized that her passion and skills aligned best with the topic of corporate purpose.

This was a big area to explore, so the key was establish clear goals. Since Amanda was flying solo, in a sense, we created an outreach program to identify like-minded individuals with a similar passion across different parts of the company — from sales, to product development, to services. We ideated constantly.

We had several pushbacks and failures. But, over time, the ideas resonated with many employees, people began contributing to the initiative going above and beyond their day jobs. Over time, the team created an informal purpose-driven network to keep the collaboration growing. All these actions were finally amplified and recognized, when the company decided to make purpose a central theme of their brand strategy. Amanda is now a recognized and sought after leader in her own right.

### **Create New Positions for the Creatives**

Creativity is the heartbeat of progress. Yet, as organizations develop over time, even the jobs that require the most creative thinking tend to become fixed and rigid. When recruiting for these areas, leaders can create new opportunities for individuals by exercising flexibility in co-defining roles for creatives that are synched with their creative vision of the future.

Recently a member of my team left to take on a different position in the company. As we interviewed for a replacement, we found many candidates who looked to be perfect matched for what the position as described, but very few had a clear-eyed view about what the position could be.

Joe wasn't a perfect fit on paper, but during the interview process he painted a new creative vision, different from one we had before. Ultimately, we created a new position that was custom designed for that vision, and also harmonized with where the team was going.

Of course, molding jobs to people can't result in everyone taking on plum tasks and rejecting the others, or disengaging entirely and rejecting them all like [Bartleby the scrivener](#), in the famous short story by Herman Melville, whose response to every request is, "I would prefer not to." That's where management skill comes in: across the team we create a blend of responsibilities that gets everything done. We customize without catering to prima donnas.

And some jobs clearly do not lend themselves to molding around the person. A position operating a particular piece of equipment or exercising a particular skill does not allow for much latitude . . . which is perhaps why those jobs are the ones most rapidly lost to advanced AI and robotics.

Millions of jobs, though, are not fixed — we just treat them like they are. Rather than simply handing an employee the same set of tasks his or her predecessor had done, managers at every level need to fine-tune. As the Wharton professor Peter Cappelli has recognized about [retention](#), the new art of management is built around personalization.

Workplace customization has its challenges. It's a lot easier to draw an org chart and expect every hire to fill a box. It can be especially uncomfortable if adding a new team member, especially if tasks and responsibilities ripple to other team members. And even as you customize, you need to see the big picture — the most engaging job for some people may simply not help meet the larger goal; there's a fundamental mismatch.

Over time, however, job personalization will create more effective teams. It will allow managers to place a premium on hiring for talent and intelligence despite some possible gaps in experience. And, I believe, the [Gallup pollsters](#) will find that it will change the direction of employee engagement.

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