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**STEVE JOHNSON
AND DUSTY WHITE:
JOBS VS. PEOPLE**
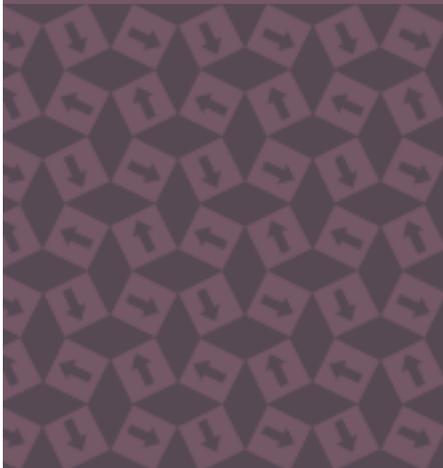
USENIX & SAGE

**The Advanced Computing Systems Association &
The System Administrators Guild**

jobs vs. people

In this column, we put forth a heretical point of view, at least in management circles: We don't like job descriptions.

Many managers, particularly in bigger companies, are awash in job descriptions. Frequently they must provide a job description before anyone can be hired. Salary and performance evaluations depend on these job descriptions. If an employee is in trouble, their performance is measured against the job description. So what's not to like?

First off, there are circumstances where job descriptions are appropriate – for "commodity" jobs, where you expect that any one of a reasonably large pool of workers could do the job, for example. Job descriptions in this case protect the workers and may also be required for anti-discrimination reasons.

For the kind of high-tech programming and systems administration jobs that USENIX managers are likely to have, however, job descriptions have a lot of problems.

For starters, they are static. So you write a description for a job. On a new hire's first day they probably can't do the job at all, and for a period of many weeks, or even months, they probably can't do all of the job, or can't do it very well. Then one day, they can do the job described in the job description. Bravo! Now what?

Do you want them to stop growing?

If they don't continue to grow in the job, how can you justify the large raise I'm sure they would like to get at the next salary adjustment?

And how about the rapid change in technology – if you write a job description for a C++ programmer, does this mean you can't ask them to write Perl or Java? If your company begins to roll out a wireless network, does this mean that you need to rewrite the job descriptions of all your systems administrators?

And then there is the hiring problem. You write the description for the ideal candidate – a master's in computer science, five years' experience, two years of Perl, and familiarity with Windows NT. So somebody comes in with a PhD in history, a recent master's in computer engineering, knowing Java but not Perl, and experience with Millennium but not NT. Do you refuse to look at them? Not in today's job market you don't! You weigh the time and cost of training against the skills needed, throw in a large dash of uncertainty about future plans, and sign them up in a heartbeat.

Do you really need to revise the job description? Maybe the job can be done as well or better in Java than in Perl. The bottom line here is that it is much easier to change a job than to change a person. If you get a smart, motivated person in your sights, you are probably better off hiring them and hammering the job description into something they can do and that meets the company's needs.

Now, many of us live in bureaucracies where job descriptions rule. In this case, you may be able to use a simple strategy to fill your position and end up with a stronger organization, too.

Rather than hiring somebody from outside to get the neat new job, find someone inside the company who wants to do something new. Then write a job description for their existing job and recruit for that. Since the job is currently being done, it is easy to write the job description and easy to assess a candidate against the current demands of the job. When the new person arrives, the current job holder trains the newcomer and then goes off to do the new project. You get cross training, the current employee gets some experience managing and mentoring a new employee, and you keep your current staff happier and the bureaucracy off your back. Just don't tell anybody we told you.

by Steve Johnson

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