

The best leaders don't just do the job. They deliver the results that matter most.

I've reviewed thousands of executive job descriptions over the course of my career.

Most are perfectly competent.

They describe reporting relationships, responsibilities, required experience, education, competencies, years in the industry and leadership expectations.

And very often they fail to answer the most important question of all:

What does this executive actually have to accomplish?

That omission seems small.

It isn't.

If you cannot define what success looks like before you begin evaluating candidates, you have no objective standard for determining which candidate is most likely to succeed.

You are left evaluating résumés, pedigree, chemistry, executive presence, prior titles and interview performance.

The hiring team may be highly experienced, but without an agreed-upon definition of the required outcomes, everyone is effectively using a different measuring stick.

That is one reason sophisticated organizations still make expensive leadership mistakes.

They start by describing the job.

They should start by defining the results.

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Responsibilities Are Not Results

Consider the language found in a typical Chief Commercial Officer job description:

- Lead the commercial organization
- Develop and execute the growth strategy
- Build strong customer relationships
- Drive revenue and market-share growth
- Develop talent
- Partner cross-functionally

Those are all reasonable responsibilities.

They are also inadequate as a performance specification.

How much growth?

From where?

Which customers?

Which channels?

At what margin?

What capabilities need to be built?

What is broken today?

What must be materially different two years from now?

The difference between a responsibility and an outcome is the difference between **activity and results**.

“Lead the sales organization” is an activity.

“Build a national retail capability that materially increases revenue, expands distribution and improves profitability” is an outcome.

“Improve operations” is an activity.

“Increase capacity, improve service levels and reduce conversion cost without creating excess inventory” is an outcome.

“Strengthen finance” is an activity.

“Build reliable reporting, improve forecasting, strengthen cash management and create the financial infrastructure necessary to support growth and acquisitions” is an outcome.

Now you can actually evaluate someone.

Results First. Architect Backward.

The principle is straightforward:

> **Results first. Architect backward.**

Begin with what the business must achieve.

Then determine the Work required to produce those Results.

Then define the leadership role necessary to perform that Work.

Only then should you begin evaluating candidates.

That ordering matters because organizations routinely reverse it.

A compelling candidate appears.

Someone says:

“She’s exceptional. We should figure out how to use her.”

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Or:

"He's run a much larger company. He can certainly handle this."

Or:

"She comes from the best company in the industry."

Suddenly the role begins bending around the candidate.

Responsibilities change. Expectations become vague. Concerns get rationalized.

The organization hires talent and hopes the talent will define the job.

Sometimes it works.

In consequential leadership hiring, hope is a poor decision architecture.

The person should not define the role. The Work should define the talent.

Ask What Must Be Different

When I begin defining an executive role, I am less interested in what the incumbent does today than in what the company needs tomorrow.

Imagine a private equity-backed company that has grown rapidly and now needs to reach its next stage of scale.

The founder remains highly involved.

The company has outgrown several systems.

Customer complexity has increased.

Margins are under pressure.

Supply-chain complexity has grown.

Acquisitions may be part of the plan.

A traditional job description might say:

"Seeking an experienced COO to oversee operations, supply chain, manufacturing and continuous improvement."

That tells us very little.

A better discussion asks:

What must this COO accomplish?

Perhaps the answer includes:

- Build an operating model capable of supporting the next stage of revenue growth
- Increase manufacturing capacity
- Improve service levels while reducing inventory
- Build the next layer of operations leadership
- Integrate acquired operations
- Install a disciplined S&OP process
- Reduce dependence on the founder for daily operating decisions

Now we know something meaningful about the executive we need.

More importantly, we know what evidence to look for.

The Résumé Changes Meaning Once the Outcomes Are Clear

Without defined outcomes, a résumé tells a seductive story.

Prestigious company.

Big title.

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Large P&L.

Recognizable brands.

Twenty years of experience.

But once the required outcomes are explicit, the résumé becomes a set of hypotheses to test.

Has this person actually built capacity at comparable scale?

Did they personally lead an integration—or simply work in a company that acquired businesses?

Did they create the commercial capability, or inherit it?

Did margins improve because of their actions or because market conditions improved?

Have they worked effectively with a founder?

Did they build the team?

Did they operate with similar resources and constraints?

Did they produce the relevant results in a context that resembles this one?

Suddenly "impressive experience" is no longer enough.

You need **evidence of relevant performance**.

That is a much higher standard.

Context Belongs in the Role Definition

Two jobs with the same title can be completely different jobs.

A CFO in a founder-led middle-market business preparing for institutional investment is not doing the same job as the CFO of a professionally managed multibillion-dollar public company.

A Chief Commercial Officer building a retail capability from scratch is not doing the same Work as one optimizing a mature commercial organization.

A COO repairing service and capacity in a constrained manufacturing network is not doing the same job as a COO managing a stable system.

Same title.

Different Work.

Different context.

Different success profile.

That is why generic competency models only take you so far.

Strategic.

Collaborative.

Results-oriented.

Strong communicator.

Of course.

But strategic about what?

Collaborative with whom?

Results under what constraints?

Communication in what stakeholder environment?

Performance is contextual.

The role definition has to be contextual too.

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Define Failure Before You Hire

There is another question most job descriptions never ask:

How could this executive fail?

That may be one of the most valuable discussions a hiring team can have.

Not generic failure such as “doesn’t meet expectations.”

Specific failure.

Perhaps the new commercial leader comes from a highly resourced public company and cannot operate without infrastructure.

Perhaps the COO is technically excellent but cannot influence the founder.

Perhaps the CFO can run finance but has never built it.

Perhaps the executive is a brilliant operator who cannot develop a team.

Perhaps the candidate has scaled a business successfully—but only after someone else built the platform.

These are not automatic reasons to reject someone.

They are hypotheses to investigate.

When the likely Failure Modes are known before interviews begin, the team knows what evidence it needs to seek.

Without that discipline, warning signs often become visible only after the hire.

A Better Executive Specification

I would replace the traditional job-description mindset with a much more rigorous executive specification.

At minimum, define:

Why the role exists

What business problem or opportunity justifies the position?

The Results to Be Delivered

What measurable outcomes define success?

The Work to Be Done

What must the executive actually do to produce those Results?

The context

Ownership model, culture, scale, resources, stakeholders, pace and complexity.

The capabilities required

Not generic virtues, but the leadership capabilities specifically demanded by the Work.

The likely Failure Modes

What could prevent a talented executive from succeeding here?

That specification becomes far more useful than a list of responsibilities.

It gives the hiring team a common standard.

It gives candidates a realistic understanding of the mandate.

It gives interviewers something concrete to test.

It gives references meaningful questions to validate.

And after the executive is hired, it creates a foundation for onboarding, coaching and performance management.

Before You Interview Anyone

Before the first candidate walks through the door, the hiring team should be able to answer:

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- What must this person accomplish?
- What Work must they personally lead?
- What will make the environment difficult?
- What evidence would convince us they can succeed?
- What could cause them to fail despite being talented?

If the team cannot answer those questions, it is not ready to interview.

It may be ready to meet interesting people.

That is not the same thing.

Define Success Before Preference Forms

Executive interviews inevitably create preference.

Someone is charismatic.

Someone feels familiar.

Someone has the right pedigree.

Someone reminds the CEO of a leader who succeeded before.

That is human.

The answer is not to eliminate judgment.

The answer is to establish the standard **before preference forms**.

Define the Results first.

Architect the Work backward.

Then evaluate people against the Work.

Because the objective of executive selection is not to hire the person with the best résumé.

It is not even to hire the "best executive" in some abstract sense.

It is to identify the leader with the strongest evidence that they can produce **these Results, doing this Work, in this context, at this moment in the company's evolution.**

That is a far more demanding question.

It is also the one that matters.

Stop writing job descriptions. Start defining outcomes.

Results precede roles. Roles precede candidates.

That is where better executive decisions begin.

ABOUT JOE HUNT



Joe Hunt is Managing Partner of Hunt Executive Search and a human capital advisor to CEOs, boards of directors and private equity partners. Over more than three decades, Joe has conducted more than 750 senior-level executive searches across C-suite, general management and functional leadership roles. His work focuses on connecting leadership decisions to enterprise value.

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