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Every now and then, I'll hear a leader describe a role they're planning to add, and on paper it sounds perfect. It checks every box. The person will lead key projects, improve processes, support product development, strengthen the quality system, help prepare for inspections, work cross-functionally, mentor the team, and somehow still have time to tackle everything that's been sitting on the "when we get a chance" list.

It's an impressive job description. It's also a role that probably doesn't exist in the real world.

This usually isn't about leaders having unrealistic expectations. Most of the time, a company is running lean and can only justify hiring one person when the work really calls for two or three. So instead of stepping back and deciding what the role actually needs to accomplish over the next year, everything gets combined into a single description.

It also tends to backfire before anyone even gets hired. A role written that broadly is a good way to overwhelm a strong prospective candidate. They read through the list, see the two or three things they're genuinely not strong in, and self-select out before ever applying. The company loses good candidates without ever realizing why.

Beyond the hiring funnel, not all of those priorities naturally fit together anyway. The person who's exceptional at building long-term systems may not be the same person who thrives in a fast-moving execution role. Someone who enjoys coaching and developing a team may not be the best fit for spending months buried in documentation to meet a critical deadline.

Neither approach is better. They’re just different.

I’ve seen organizations spend months trying to define the “perfect” role, when what they really needed was clarity about the business problem they were trying to solve.

Was the biggest priority getting a submission out the door?

Preparing the company for commercialization?

Improving a quality system that has grown faster than the business?

Each of those requires a different focus. When everything gets bundled into one position, priorities become blurred. Then something predictable happens. The person joins the company and immediately has to choose what gets attention first. Before long, people start asking why other areas aren’t moving as quickly as expected.

More often, one role was simply expected to accomplish the work of several. Performance rarely has much to do with it.

The strongest leaders I’ve worked with tend to ask a different question before defining a position.

Instead of asking, “What would our ideal person look like?”

They ask, “What’s the most important outcome we need over the next year?”

That changes the conversation. The role becomes focused. Expectations become clearer. Decisions become easier because everyone understands what success actually looks like.

Can one person still contribute in other areas? Of course. But they aren’t measured against a list that was never realistic in the first place.

As companies grow, it’s natural for responsibilities to evolve. The important part is recognizing that growth doesn’t happen by creating bigger job descriptions. It happens by making sure every role has a clear purpose and enough room for someone to do it well.

The better move is usually deciding what matters most over the next year, and building the role around that, rather than asking one person to do everything.

This topic comes up often in growing medical device and life sciences companies. Most role-related challenges aren’t caused by the people in the roles, they start much earlier, when expectations become broader than what any one person can realistically deliver.