



About Employee Handbooks

Does your company have an Employee Handbook? No? Well, do you really need one?

Nothing requires you to have an Employee Handbook, but if you have one, you've got to follow it. If you're small and have everybody in one place, you may well not want one, and having one may limit your flexibility. When you get to 15 or 20 employees, having a handbook saves time otherwise spent answering multiple phone calls to answer repeated questions about whether employees can trade the paid holiday on Columbus Day for the day after Thanksgiving. When you have multiple managers, a handbook helps ensure that each manager follows the same set of rules, and administers his employees as you would want it to.

If you have a handbook, you can cover as little or as much content and you want to—make it functional for your needs. Some of the subjects you may want to cover are outlined below.

If you're an at-will employer and want to retain that status, you'll want to include an appropriate disclaimer of any notion that the handbook is an employment contract.

Your employees may know what their job is, but not very much about the rest of the company. Your handbook can become part of a campaign to make every employee a business developer, so that when potential customers approach the employee with their needs, he at least knows enough to recognize them s things the company does.

You may wish to couple the description of the company with a "welcome aboard" message. You may also wish to use this section to express some core values that are important to your company—technical excellence, customer service, ethical standards or whatever is important to you.

You can save a lot of phone calls if you articulate certain aspects of your expectations, such as work hours, paid time off and holidays.

If you have employees at corporate headquarters and elsewhere, it's important not to get myopic and talk about the policies as they apply to headquarters and ignore people at other sites. For example, if you have employees at customer sites, you probably want to conform their work hours to those of the customer. The same applies to paid holidays; you'll want to conform them to the ones that the customer observes, even if you do something different at headquarters. If you have frequent after-work social events for the employees at headquarters but not at remote sites, don't make generalized statements about them. For items like this, your policy is "site specific," not company-wide.



Don't try to include too much detail on fringe benefit programs that change occasionally or that you also provide in other formats, such as details of your health insurance plan. Just reference the plan handbook or web site and tell employees to look there for up-to-date information.

You probably offer time off for events that don't occur very often, like death in the family, jury duty and military reserve duty. This can be a good place to spell these policies out, but be aware on the military reserve issue—some states have specific requirements, so this might be another issue where your policy is “site specific—call for details.”

If you have behavioral expectations on such issues as equal opportunity; use of alcohol; where and when employees may smoke; acceptance of gifts from suppliers and subcontractors; and sexual and other forms of harassment, the handbook is a good place to articulate them.

If you have a formal, written employee evaluation program, the handbook is a good place to explain how it works. Remember, though, if you say it here, you've got to do it.

Another issue that is becoming increasingly important is employee use of Information Technology resources such as telephones and email. You'll want to tell them that you retain the right to monitor, even if you don't exercise the right. You'll want to you're your policies realistic: if you totally ban personal use, it means that an employee can't call to check on a sick child or accept a call from a spouse asking for a milk and bread run on the way home. On the other hand, you'll certainly want to exclude an employee running his separate personal business from your (or your customer's) office.

On the subject of discipline, remember that you have to do what your handbook says you do, so avoid saying something that you may not want to live with later. For example, if you include a list of offenses that employees may be fired for, you're implying that the discipline for everything else is something less than firing. Keep the details generalized to give yourself flexibility in execution.

The content of employee handbooks changes over time. As recently as two years ago, you wouldn't have thought of including a policy on blogging. Now, it's probably a good idea to lay out what is permissible and what isn't.

Keep the tone of the handbook positive (meaning especially, don't dwell on all the bad stuff that employees could do, the punishments for them) and don't even talk about the processes for out-processing when an employee leaves the company. Don't suggest that employees are going to leave when they're still starting their new job (which is when they'll read the handbook most closely).

Unless you have a forms repository that is readily available to employees, you



may want to include copies of all necessary forms so that they can be readily copied from the handbook.

Make sure every employee gets a copy, and include a tear-out signature receipt page that you can stuff in the employee's personnel record so that when a dispute comes up, you can show that you provided him with your guidance.

Unless of course, you keep your handbook in a corporate intranet site, but that's a subject for another issue.