


10 Essentials to Include in an Employee Handbook



From your company mission to termination policies, learn some of the important components.

By Angie Avard Turner



As a business owner, rules can be a difficult thing to implement. At the beginning, it may just be you running your garden center or website. However, as you grow, and that is the goal, rules need to be put in place.

There are a few reasons to consider having a handbook in place, but the most important one is clarity of communication with your employees. They need to understand what the business goals are and how you expect them to be achieved or maintained.

Additionally, employees need to understand what the boundaries are and what the consequences are for stepping outside of those boundaries.

Following are some of the main components a handbook should include. This list is not exhaustive. However, it does include many of the key components and is a good starting point.

1. Company Mission

The employee handbook should define the company's goals and mission at the outset. By doing this, you create a sense of common purpose. This component sets the tone for employees coming into your establishment and gives them a clear, concise glimpse of your overall vision for your store.

2. Handbook Purpose

The handbook should clearly state its purpose. This seems fairly simple and straightforward, however, you will want to communicate that the purpose of the handbook is to concisely state the policies and procedures of the store.

Furthermore, you will want to put each employee on notice that the handbook is a living document. That means you reserve the right to update, revise or do away with the handbook; this right is at your sole discretion.

Finally, you will want to state that the handbook overrides, supersedes and replaces all other previously published policies, manuals or handbooks.

3. Disclaimer

Disclaimers, legally speaking, are a refusal to take responsibility. Every handbook should make a statement that preserves and maintains the at-will employment status.

What is the purpose of the disclaimer? The purpose of the disclaimer is it provides a defense for the employer should the employee try to file a suit claiming that they are a contractual employee rather than an at-will employee.

The difference between at-will and contractual employees is at-will employees are those who can be dismissed by an employer for any reason (that is, without having to establish "just cause" for termination), and without warning. A contractual employee, as you may suspect, is one who agrees to specific terms and cannot be fired without cause.

4. Employment Policies

Employee policies should be stated clearly and in compliance with federal, state and local laws and regulations that govern the business. Make sure, where appropriate, to include policies on Equal Opportunity Employment, Non-Harassment, Non-Discrimination, and Employee Eligibility.

These items are areas where business owners are challenged and have suits filed against them.

5. General Policies and Information

This is the backbone of your handbook. The information specified in this section is what creates the company culture, so to speak.

Some of the items included in this section are standards of conduct, work schedule, payment schedule, overtime, promotions, bonuses, dress code, social media policies, conduct while on the sales floor, and a myriad of other items that you may want to communicate to anyone you employ.

6. Leave Policies

Employees will always want or need to take time off. It is imperative to clearly communicate what your leave policy is. Make sure that your leave policies are in compliance with federal and state laws.

Leave policies include the various types of situations such as being sick, vacation, maternity/paternity, military, grief, caregiving and jury duty.

This policy also spells out who is eligible, what duration is acceptable, whether it is paid or unpaid, and whether leave approval is required and, if so, the procedure to get approval.

While spelling out the leave policy, it is crucial to put employees on notice that abuse of the leave policy will not be tolerated and that you reserve the right to terminate the employee for excessive leave.

MANAGEMENT

7. Health and Safety

It is important to include tenets regarding safety and security. Be aware of whether OSHA regulations apply in your business.

Additionally, you should have in place how employees should handle accidents, injuries and any other safety

issue. Another consideration is how your business will handle weather safety issues.

8. Employee Benefits

You should detail all benefits available to your employees and when they will become eligible for those

benefits. One area where being clear is necessary is healthcare. Make sure you explain how you provide healthcare coverage if you are required to do so.

9. Discipline and Termination Policies

This is an area you must address. It is not popular to be the disciplinarian, but you are the boss, so you must lead!

Be sure to explain what the procedure for discipline is, the procedure for an employee to leave, and procedure for an employee to be terminated. Make sure that when you determine this section of your handbook that the policies are something you can abide by because you will be expected to do so.

10. Acknowledgement

You must require an acknowledgement. What does the acknowledgement accomplish? It ensures that your employee has received, understands and agrees to abide by what is set forth in the handbook.

Moreover, you should keep a signed acknowledgement from each employee in his or her employee file. Even if the employee leaves or is terminated, the acknowledgement should be kept on file for at least five years.

Again, this list of areas to be covered may not include everything, but it is a good start for your business.

If there are areas you are unsure of, don't try to go it alone. Seek the advice of an experienced attorney. They will be able to guide you through working out your handbook. It may be money spent on legal fees, but better to invest in protecting your business than having to spend double that to defend what is left vulnerable. **LGR**

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