

## How to Write an Employee Handbook . . . The Great American Novel, or Just a Short Story?

---

September 16, 2011 Steve Palazzolo

It's funny how things seem to go in cycles. For example, as the first half of this year came to a close I found that I was spending a lot of time reviewing employee handbooks. Now that could be because a lot of clients have let their handbooks sit. After all, times have been tight and employee handbooks are not exactly a priority in hard economic times. Or it could be because things are picking up in the merger-and-acquisition area and new companies mean new employee handbooks. Or it could just be that it is time for a new handbook for some of my clients. Kind of like spring cleaning — HR Policy cleaning.

One of the advantages of reviewing and helping to revise or rewrite a lot of handbooks all at once is that I get the opportunity to compare them. Almost side by side. You probably are not surprised to learn that there are as many different kinds of employee handbooks as there are different kinds of employers. Some run 70 or 80 pages and have a rule for everything. And then there are the bare-bones handbooks that only have what the law require . . . well, a bit more than that, but not much.

So what is the right way to go, you ask? There is no right way and no wrong way. There are some policies that you have to have, either because some specific law requires you to have them or because it is just a good idea under the law. But the simple fact is that there is no law that requires you to have an employee handbook at all.

Why then, you ask, am I writing this post?

Two reasons: One, while the law may not require an employee handbook I think every employer should have one; even small employers. It is just a good idea and might even help you if you get into legal trouble. And the second reason? Because I had a client say something intriguing while I was talking to her about revising her company's handbook. She said, "Write it like it was the handbook for your company." My company? I never actually thought about writing a handbook that way. Until now.

Over the next couple of posts I am going to do just that: Write an employee handbook like I was doing it for my company. We will call the company "Zo's" because that is what people at good old WNJ call me. So now that we have created Zo's, let's write a handbook. And here we go:

### **ZO'S EMPLOYEE HANDBOOK**

#### **HELLO**

This employee handbook was provided to you to say hello and help answer some simple questions you might have about your employment with Zo's. It is not supposed to cover every question you might have or every situation you might encounter at work. That's not possible. And even if we tried to do that, the thing would be hundreds of pages long. And let's face it; you are not going to read a handbook that long.

So we are going to try to keep it simple, and we want to start by telling you one thing this handbook is not. It is not a contract of employment. Your employment with Zo's is at-will. That means you can leave whenever you want and for whatever reason you want. Of course, it also means that we can ask you to leave whenever we want for whatever reason we want.

Some of the provisions in this handbook are required to comply with the law. You will be able to tell which ones because they will sound a lot more lawyerly. Others are just things we want you to know. Please take a second to read this handbook. It won't take you long. And welcome to Zo's.

And that would be page one of my handbook. Why an introduction, you might ask? True, you don't need one; you can dive right in to the substance. But an intro gives you a chance to sort of set the stage, give a tone to the company culture. It may be light, like mine, or more formal if that is your corporate culture. Another thing it does is give us a chance, right up front to introduce the at-will concept. To tell people, in a way we hope is not threatening, that we can fire them whenever we want. Over the next couple of weeks, we will talk about what I would put in the rest of "my" handbook.