

Top 10 Essentials to Include in an Employee Handbook

February 15, 2012 by [R. Joseph Stennis](#)

One of the most important attributes of any successful business is a relationship built on trust between the employer and the employee. One very important tool to communicate and establish this relationship is through an employee handbook. It is the employee handbook that creates company policies, procedures and expectations that serve to avoid potential conflicts and misunderstandings. Additionally, a well written handbook establishes a structured work environment that builds company loyalty.

Alternatively, an employee handbook not drafted properly can be disastrous for a company. Poorly written policies and procedures can cause problems such as creating a hostile environment, to legally binding an organization to commitments it was not aware it made. Whether your first draft, or making revisions to an existing one, the following are 10 essential policies and procedures employers should consider including in their employee handbook:

1. **The Disclaimer.** The disclaimer is what defines the nature of the employee handbook. It should clearly state that the handbook is not a contract of employment and expressly state the at-will nature of employment. Such a provision is essential to preventing terminated employees from suing an employer for a breach of contract claim, (i.e. that the employee handbook was a contract of employment).
2. **Company Goals and Mission Statement.** Every employee's understanding and "buy-in" of a company's goals and mission is vital to a successful business. The employee handbook is the vehicle for employers to use to communicate clearly and effectively what those goals and missions actually are. Also, it is important to lay out the company goals and mission statements in the handbook so employees feel a sense of purpose and duty.
3. **Sexual Harassment and Anti-discrimination Policies.** It is vital that the handbook expressly states that your company has zero tolerance for harassment or discrimination of any kind. It is critical to define the various types of harassment and how employees may identify harassment. Additionally, disclose to employees the ways in which they can report complaints of harassment/discrimination, as well as identify who in the company they can talk to address their concerns.
4. **Leave Policies.** Taking leave of absences is an area that is best dealt with early in the employer/employee relationship. Include in the handbook policies on all types of leave that are permissible, such as vacations, sick days, jury duty, maternity leave, etc. If only

some employees are eligible for a certain type of leave, disclose that in the handbook. Include restrictions to leaves of absence, such as when employment can be terminated for excessive time off or when employee benefits could be affected. Also, require in the handbook that employees must get approval for vacations within in a reasonable timeframe. All leave policies should address FMLA leave (if available) and reiterate a nondiscrimination policy with regard to individuals with disabilities.

5. **Disciplinary Policies.** A disciplinary process must be in place to deter inappropriate and unproductive employee behavior. In the handbook, define what employee misconduct is and explain the consequences of such actions. However, be sure to make the policy flexible. Reserve the right in the handbook to judge events on a case-by-case basis to determine inappropriate behavior. Be selective with the language so employees are not in constant fear of being disproportionately punished. Also, do not limit misconduct to only what is included in the handbook. Rather, include a disclaimer or be sure to add a statement such as “or any other behavior proven to be detrimental and harmful to the company” to the policy.
6. **Problem-Resolution Procedure.** Describe in detail the formal process and procedure that an employee may or must follow to file an internal grievance, complaint or otherwise informally raise workplace issues. This can resolve issues in a structured and efficient manner. It also conveys a positive message to employees that the company cares about their well-being and job satisfaction and will take seriously any issues employees would like to address.
7. **Workplace Violence and Conflict Resolution.** Workplace violence is a major concern for many employers. Though handbook policies cannot necessarily prevent workplace violence, they do serve the important purpose of providing avenues for employees to report such incidents, and can provide guidance on how to respond when violence is suspected or someone feels threatened.
8. **Workplace Bullying.** Workplace bullying involves repeated unreasonable acts toward an employee, either by a peer or supervisor, intended to humiliate or undermine the employee, and creating a risk to his or her health. Workplace bullying is not yet illegal, but employers have significant incentives to prevent it. The costs of bullying to an employer include training new employees to replace employees who leave as a result of bullying; decreased productivity as employees cope with bullying incidents; and harm to an employer’s reputation. Employers should include in their employee handbooks a zero tolerance, anti-bullying policy as part of their commitment to a safe and healthy work environment. Such policies should include a process for reporting bullying, as well as responding to and investigating complaints of bullying.

9. **Social Networking and Blogging.** As Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter accounts become more prevalent, employers should consider handbook policies that address employment issues that may arise from these social media. Such policies should address what communications are prohibited and the consequences of “misuse” of social networking related to the workplace. Employers should place limits on posting confidential or proprietary company information, as well as photos taken at the workplace. In addition, handbook policies should address the use of social media to disparage or harass other employees or the company. It is imperative, however, that any such policy, both as written and in practice, does not violate any rights afforded to employees under the National Labor Relations Act or subject the company to liability for claims of invasion of privacy.

10. **Sexual Orientation Discrimination.** Nearly half the states in the country and the District of Columbia maintain laws prohibiting discrimination in employment on the basis of sexual orientation. Many of these states also specifically prohibit discrimination based on gender identity. As a result, employers should be mindful of this issue in drafting their EEO policies.