



## **Planning your Employee Handbook**

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Like every other management project you undertake, sound advance planning for your employee handbook will help ensure efficient use of the time and resources needed to complete the project. The five topics listed below should be considered before we create the handbook:

- A. Goals
- B. Writing Style
- C. Format
- D. Design
- E. Distribution

These topics are discussed in this hand-out. Once you have made your decisions on these topics, we will be ready to prepare the suggested table of contents and develop the text for your handbook.

### **Goals**

The first step in designing a handbook is to decide on the publication's goals. Exactly what purposes are to be served by the handbook? The answers to this question will dictate the organization, tone, overall length, and design of the handbook. Six common goals are:

1. The handbook can serve as a source of information for both new and existing employees about the company, its organization structure, and overall philosophy. A handbook can also give employees information about the employer's history, which could add to their sense of belonging and pride as an employee.
2. The handbook can document work rules and corporate policies and procedures to serve as a behavior guide for employees and to clarify the company's position on related matters. In this way, the handbook can serve as a clear, concise blueprint of your expectations of employees.
3. The handbook can provide employees with their own up-to-date, easy-to-understand reference guide on the company's various benefits programs.

4. The handbook has potential for use in avoiding liability. Federal, state, and local laws require employers to develop certain policies or provide certain notices to their employees (ie. equal employment opportunity, sexual harassment, family and medical leave, ADA). Companies can satisfy some of their legal obligations, in whole or in part, by addressing these issues in the employee handbook.
5. Employee handbooks can save employers money. A survey by the American Management Association found that those employers who use employee handbooks feel that their operations and decision-making processes are smoother and more efficient as a result of the handbook. A handbook can reduce the non-productive hours of supervisors and employees, which can reduce the cost of doing business.
6. We recommend separate supervisory guidelines. However, if the company does not have them, the employee handbook can provide basic guidelines for appropriate supervisory action. A handbook can aid management by:
  - providing guidelines for continuity and fair treatment
  - reducing the fear of decision making
  - easing the decision-making process
  - reducing the time it takes a supervisor to make a decision

## **Writing Styles**

The main purpose of any employee handbook is communication. A good handbook is comprehensive, precise, and easy to read.

What is the proper tone for your handbook? How would you describe your company's "culture"? Are your employees more likely to respond to an informal style, one that sets out policies and procedures in a direct, no-nonsense manner, or perhaps even a formal, legalistic approach? Whatever style is chosen, be careful to not condescend to or patronize the employees in the handbook.

## **Format**

Your choice of format for your handbook will involve questions of production costs and anticipated need for updates and changes. Each type of format has advantages and disadvantages that you must weigh for your organization. Many companies are posting their handbook to their intranet site if it is easily accessible to all employees.

For written handbooks:

The typical written employee handbook is published as a complete booklet with a stapled or stitched binding. This makes a nice professional presentation when it is initially distributed to the employees. However, when you need to update or add to the handbook, this could create a problem. You have the choice of either incurring the cost of reprinting the entire handbook or issuing additional pages which the employees may or may not keep with the handbook. Eventually, these addendum pages could make it difficult for the employees to find current information.

Another choice may be to use a folder with inside pockets containing loose pages or individual booklets. Advantages here may include a lower initial production cost and ease of issuing updates or changes through changing single pages or booklets. On the other hand, this type of format lends itself to easier loss of single pages or booklets and will impose definite limits on the number of pages or booklets that can be comfortably accommodated in the folder.

A third choice is to use loose leaf binders. Here, the initial production expense may be higher, but this type of handbook can be easily updated or changed without replacing the entire handbook. Of course, this can be a mixed blessing if the new pages are never inserted or are lost. Whatever your choice of format, when you issue updates to your handbook, you should require written acknowledgement from the employees that they have received the supplementary pages.

## **Design**

The design of the handbook is a significant factor in creating a positive impression of your company. Your handbook makes a statement about your company, and by implication, a statement about how your company values its employees. Consider other publications issued by your company and the impression they create.

For example, if your company publishes elaborate, multi-color marketing materials but issues a photocopied, stapled employee handbook, consider the impression this leaves regarding how the company comparatively values its customers and its employees. You don't necessarily need an elaborately designed employee handbook, but consider what the impression will be from the employees' (especially a new employee's) point of view.

Items to consider when designing your handbook are listed below:

- Will the primary format be electronic or print (or both)?
- Will the handbook be presented in colors or black and white?
- To what extent will you use graphics - photos, drawings, charts, graphs, etc.?

- What look do you want - eye-catching layouts with photos or an understated, all-text look?
- Do you want to use graphics for only limited purposes, such as to illustrate the company's organizational structure, or to highlight individual sections or important points in the handbook?
- What is your available budget?

## **Distribution**

Ensuring proper distribution of your company's employee handbook is an essential part of making the handbook an effective management tool. The usual process involves distribution to all current employees when the handbook is initially issued, distribution to all new employees when they start their employment with the company, and distribution of updates and changes to all employees as they are issued.

Depending on the size and number of your facilities, you can distribute the handbooks personally, via departmental or work group meetings, through your inter-office mail process, or through the mail to the employees' homes. Whatever method is used, ensure that all employees actually receive the handbook and significant updates by including a form that acknowledges receipt of the handbook or revision that the employee must sign and return.

If you are posting the employee handbook to your intranet site, notify employees when there are updates. All employees must have easy access to this site in order for this to be effective. It is still important to have employees sign an acknowledgement form.