

10 Musts for Writing Effective Employee Handbooks

1. **Use welcoming language that encourages employee feedback.** Many handbooks contain overly legalistic and negative language, and can develop into a long list of “don’ts” that set the wrong tone for employees. The first several paragraphs of the handbook should be written in positive easy-to-read language.
2. **Use simple, reader-friendly sentences.** A handbook serves as a guide for employees at all levels and shouldn’t be written by lawyers for lawyers. Have someone in public relations look over and offer suggestions on the tone and style.
3. **Include appropriate disclaimers.** You don’t want your handbook converted into a contract with your employees. Make sure it is clear that nothing in the handbook can be construed to change the at-will status of the employment, but do not put that disclaimer right up front. Also reserve the right to change any policy without advanced notice.
4. **Be sure the handbook is provided to every employee.** New employees should receive a copy of the handbook during orientation and sign an acknowledgement that they have done so. When introducing a new or revised handbook to current employees, likewise have employees acknowledge in writing or electronically that they have received it.
5. **Keep discipline procedures flexible.** Allow enough flexibility so that unusual, disciplinary situations can be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. For example, the employer should have the discretion to terminate an employee prior to completing all steps in a process when the conduct warrants immediate termination.
6. **Use permissive language like “may” instead of “will” or “must.”** Closely

aligned with flexibility mentioned above, don’t make promises or establish policies you can’t carry out. For example, the handbook should say the employer “intends” to evaluate employees every six months; not every employee “will be” evaluated every six months.

7. **Include clear procedures for reporting harassment or discrimination.** The handbook must include a policy against harassment (sexual, racial, religious, etc.), a procedure for reporting harassment (including out of the chain of command), and the anti-harassment policy must be enforced. Such policies and procedures may help eliminate or reduce employer liability if harassment occurs.
8. **Keep it general vs. employee specific.** Specific agreements between employee and employer, such as an agreement to arbitrate disputes, maintain company secrets, and so forth, should not be incorporated into the handbook. Any agreement incidental to the employment relationship should be included in a separate document signed by the employee with full knowledge of the agreement’s contents.
9. **Be sure to periodically update the handbook.** Due to the constant change in employment laws, a handbook can get out of date quickly. An annual review by HR in collaboration with a lawyer skilled in employment law is recommended. It is best to rewrite and redistribute the handbook periodically, after substantial changes in the law vs. continually adding

supplements as this can lead to confusion and misunderstanding.

10. **Tailor your handbook to your enterprise.** If you purchase an off-the-shelf handbook, you will need to revise it so that it actually covers what your employees do or where you do business. For example a manufacturing company engaged in hazardous operations will need special provisions to cover that situation; whereas a retail business will want provisions focusing on customer relations. Likewise, you may grow to a size that makes certain laws applicable to your employees that were not applicable before. **HR**

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