Documents

And

Pain Points

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Documents and Pain Points

Some people seem to think that generating paper is a goal in itself, but the only reason to write documents is to help you manage your business better. If it doesn't help, you won't use it and it will gather dust. Don't waste your time.

How can documents help? Any time you find yourself doing the same thing over and over as a manager, saying the same things, explaining the same things, making the same decisions, following the same process – procedures can help. Any time your employees need structure or training, especially for things that happen repeatedly. One-off events seldom need documents, although you may have a policy that says "bring all odd occurrences to the manager for a decision." The other exception is catastrophic events. Say you work with children – then you should have a procedure for how to deal with a missing child, even if you have never had a child go missing while in your care. It is easier to think through who will stay in touch with the parents and law enforcement and who will lead the search and how, without the urgency of a missing child.

Documents can't solve all your managerial problems, but they are good for resolving managerial or procedural pain points, whether niggling repetitions or potential catastrophes.

If you think you should draft a document, start with questions: "What is my pain point here? What is my goal? What am I trying to fix?" Writing the document will be much easier if you honestly know why you are doing it, rather than responding to someone saying you "should".

Then think through what kind of information is needed to solve the problem. How much and what kind? For instance, work instructions or training manuals have a much greater level of detail than an operating procedure. The level of detail you need will indicate what kind of document to draft as well as what goes in it.

Once you know exactly what you want to accomplish, then is the time to look for a template or example that will help you get there. Don't start with a random internet template and follow it blindly – it may not be designed for the problem you are trying to fix and it will probably be designed for a much larger organization. Think about what you need and how your company works, and make changes to make it fit.

Then, finally, write your document. Keep it as short as you can while including all the information you need. And plan on reviewing or updating it regularly, so it continues to fit your organization.

Employee policies
Pain points:
- You keep making the same decision about maternity leave or how to handle complaints.

- Employees keep asking the same questions.
- High turnover makes consistent training hard.
- Employees respond with "I didn't know" when disciplined.

Goal: Write down the decisions that you have made, and any others that are likely to come up. Create a handbook so your employees know what to expect and a reference that they can check before asking you questions (yes, this may take some training.) Take the time to think through questions and have all the answers in one place.

Don't copy someone else's policies, change the name, and call it good: that is a recipe for trouble. Your manual should reflect your company and how you want to run it, or it won't do you much good. It also needs to reflect the appropriate laws for your state and company size: Montana is not an at-will state but most are; if you have 10 employees you don't need a policy on FMLA. You can modify a template rather than start from scratch, but do it carefully.

Be careful to give yourself flexibility for unforeseen events. If your discipline policy is to give verbal warnings and then a written warning before firing someone, write that down – but make sure you state that you will fire someone immediately if the violation is bad enough. If you find an employee angrily waving a gun at a customer, you don't want to have to give them verbal and written warnings; you need to fire them on the spot. Don't write policies just for the everyday events, write them to accommodate extreme events too: use "may be terminated" and "usually will occur" to give yourself flexibility in the unusual situations.

It is good to have a lawyer or HR professional review your employee manual when you are done, so you don't run afoul of wage and hour laws.

A similar document for nonprofits is a set of board policies, including conflict of interest, code of conduct, whistleblower, and executive compensation.

Job descriptions
Pain points:
- Tasks keep falling through the crack or being duplicated.
- You hear "It's not my job" more than you like.
- You need to hire and have to be able to explain the job to candidates.
- You have a disabled employee and need to figure out if you can accommodate them.

Goal: Think through what you expect for each position, both tasks to be done and employee qualifications. Allocate all tasks, eliminating gaps and overlaps. Clearly articulate expectations to employees.

Don't write a job description for a person, write it for the position. If you had to hire someone for the position, what would you reasonably look for? Ignore special

quirks that have developed because Helen is really good with numbers or Joe likes talking on the phone. If you have allocated new tasks as the work has grown, you may need to think carefully about how they can be grouped logically, so that you can hire the right people.

Some employees have a wide variety of tasks; if those tasks will always be grouped together, write it down as one job description; if half of them will logically be split off in the future or transferred to someone else, write more than one description. For instance, if one person currently handles all HR duties and AR/AP and will for the foreseeable future, write a description for an office admin or something similar that includes all the tasks; if your company is growing and you will need a dedicated bookkeeper in the near future, write two difference job descriptions and specify that the current position handles both jobs.

Sections:
- Overview of position responsibilities, one or two sentences.
- Who supervises this position, who reports to this position
- Tasks – major groupings not detailed lists; this is not a training manual
- Physical requirements (e.g. lifting, environmental, PPE)
- Practical requirements (travel required, driver's license, overtime)
- Skills, education, and training (schooling, knowledge of software, good visual acuity)
- Characteristics (attention to detail, team player)

Job descriptions for nonprofit boards and board members can also usefully clarify what is expected of them, by the IRS and by the organization. Officer job descriptions are usually in the by-laws.

Training materials
Pain points:
- High turnover makes consistent training hard.
- You keep demonstrating the same skill.
- You want everyone to do things the same way.
- You want to minimize time spent on training by your skilled employees who act as mentors.

Goal: Figure out how you want tasks done once and know that everyone will do them the same way. Train employees efficiently, effectively, and consistently. Set a baseline for future improvement.

Don't automatically reach for paper (or PowerPoint) when it comes to training. Sometimes that is a good method, but often videos work better for demonstrating the hands-on details. Think about what you need to convey and who you are teaching it to, and choose the best method for both.

Don't assume that training will always take. Test people on what they have learned, ideally on the job rather than with a paper test. Check them every so often until you are positive that they are doing it right. Watch long-term employees occasionally to make sure they are doing it the way you want it done, not the way they have decided is better (and if their way is better, update your training materials).

Nonprofits should engage in board training as well, especially with orientation, but they seldom do much testing.

Operating Procedures
Pain points:
- You keep explaining the same process over and over.
- A certain process occurs so seldom that everyone forgets how to do it.
- You want everyone to do things the same way.
- You want to set a baseline so you can improve the process.

Goal: Write down all the steps for a process so that everyone does it the same way, consistently, and provide a baseline for improvements.

Think through the process logically; sometime it helps to explain it to someone who has never seen it and let them write it down, asking questions until they have all the steps.

Follow the product, not the people or the machines. Include why, when, who, what, where, and how. List:
- Each step, in order
- Who is responsible for each step and who is responsible for approvals
- Criteria for approvals
- Where input comes from and where output goes
- What paperwork goes where

List the steps but not how to do them. Do not include all the steps required to enter something into software, or similar level of details. These details come in training or in work instructions. (Usually work instructions are more flexible documents that are easier to update any time the software is updated or the bolt size changes.)

One special set of procedures are internal or financial controls, which ensure that no one person controls an entire cash stream. It is frequently referred to as segregation of duties. For instance, you don't want to have one person who opens the envelopes, records the checks, endorses the checks, prepares the deposits, makes the deposits, and reconciles the bank statements. (And, for nonprofit donations, sends the acknowledgements.) Not only does having one person do all of it make it easy for them to commit fraud, it also makes it easy for someone to accuse them of fraud; segregation of duties protects both the organization and the individuals.

Safety plans

Pain points:
- You want to keep your employees safe (especially if you don't have a standard office environment).
- You need to get employees and contractors on the same page about site behavior.
- Clients or regulators expect it.
- You want to lower your insurance premiums.

Goal: collect all safety information in one place so that it can be accessed quickly in an emergency. Make sure responses to accidents have been thought through.

The State of Montana requires safety plans for all employers but small offices seldom create them. However, having one (that you implement, not ignore) can lower your workers comp premiums and possibly your business insurance premiums. If you work in an office, this may be pretty low on your priorities; if your employees work in hazardous environments or with things like chainsaws, children, or horses, this should be high on your list.

Risk assessments
Pain points:
- You have people depending on your business for their livelihood.
- You have clients or customers who depend on your product or service.
- You really don't like unpleasant surprises.

Goal: Know where your unpleasant surprises are likely to come from and prepare for them. (This is similar to a SWOT analysis.)

There are three parts to risk assessment: What can go wrong? How likely is it? How damaging is it? (Some assessments add "How likely is it to be detected before it causes a problem?") High-likelihood/high impact events should be addressed first, while low risks can wait. Possible responses include mitigation, acceptance, insurance, transfer of risk (say, to a supplier), or avoid it (by not doing the thing that would set it off).

Revisit the assessments regularly, usually annually or if conditions change substantially.

Emergency response plans
Pain points:
- You really don't like unpleasant surprises.
- Emergencies could put you out of business or seriously harm your business.
- Emergencies are foreseeable and potentially catastrophic (like a missing child that isn't found promptly).

Goal: Be prepared for emergencies. Know how you will respond if they happen, and who will be responsible for what. Have emergency supplies in the right place before they are needed.

These will take some time to develop, so start with the most likely problems for your business. For a water and sewer district, it is pollution or major loss of service. For a food producer, it is an outbreak of food poisoning. It might be a power outage that could lead to loss of massive amounts of inventory, or a key person retiring abruptly with too much knowledge in their head.

For some problems, insurance is part of the response. For others, it might include writing down institutional knowledge, buying a generator, or having a list of people to call if a child goes missing. Emergency Response Plans also cover plans for responding to things like earthquakes and terrorist attacks, and the federal government has a lot of good information on them.