

Using Your Employee Manual

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So you have decided to develop an employee manual, or maybe you even have one already. Now what? Can't you just stick it on a shelf somewhere in case you end up in a lawsuit someday?

Well, you can. But it is a waste of money to do that, and legally you might be better off not having it at all. If your company doesn't follow its own policies, that can be grounds for losing wrongful discharge law suits even if you have done nothing else wrong. If you really won't use it, then your employee manuals should be the bare minimum legal boilerplate that you have to follow anyway, such as equal opportunity employment.

An employee manual can be so much more than a dusty binder on a shelf. It can:

- record decisions you have made so that you don't have to re-make them every time the issue comes up
- provide consistency in employee management
- make disciplinary procedures easier
- ease training
- make your company a better place to work

A well-thought-out manual can act as a management tool rather than just CYA material.

Say your best employee comes to you and says she is pregnant. What do you do for maternity leave? Now a week later, your worst employee, the one you've contemplated letting go but haven't done anything about, tells you she is pregnant too. Now what do you do for maternity leave? If you have thought this through ahead of time and written down what you want to do for maternity leave, you will have a consistent answer to give both employees; it's both fair and safe.

Making good decisions is easier when you have time to think about the options and contemplate a variety of scenarios. It also gives you time to consult an employment attorney to make sure you aren't stirring up trouble for your company. Once you have made the decisions, you can record them in your employee manual so that you don't have to make them in the heat of the moment. Plus your employees know what the decisions (aka policies) are, which eliminates a lot of uncertainty for them and discussion for you.

When an employee is doing something wrong, it is powerful to point to a page in the employee manual and say "This is what you aren't doing." They can't say they didn't know – they had better know if they signed the acknowledgement form saying they read and understood the entire manual. Even if they didn't remember, they can now see that it was expected all along, not something new dreamed up by a capricious boss.

The first few weeks on a new job are tough for every employee; there is so much to remember about how the place works. Having the company rules, organization chart, and job descriptions in one place provides the new employee with a handy reference for those questions



that they may not want to ask, or aren't sure who to ask: Who do I talk to about accommodations? When do I get my first paycheck? What do those other people do? What would I have to be able to do to ask for that position? While it is still a good idea to discuss the material in the employee manual during orientation, that process can be overwhelming; having the information written down lessens the burden for both trainer and trainee.

Once you start thinking about policies, it is easy to consider new ones. Do you like the idea of letting employees bring dogs to work but worry about problems? Writing a policy for it gives you a chance to think through how to resolve problems and sets the ground rules before the first dog shows up in the work place. Or are you allergic to dogs and know they don't belong in your office, but have a lot of dog-owning employees? Writing it down as a policy will head off most (although probably not all) of the requests.

Coming up with new policies might get too easy. Be careful to include only ones that address an issue in your company, not good ideas that don't apply and won't for some time into the future, if ever. Once you start adding good ideas, the manual can quickly balloon to a size where no employee will ever read it. So use moderation, but do include issues that have come up in the recent past.

Another way to make use of your employee manual is to use it to tell your employees the three most important things they need to know to be good employees for your business. This doesn't mean things like "Show up on time" or when to get their paychecks. It means telling them what your three top priorities are as a manager. This will usually include customer service, however your company defines it. Other items that might be important to your company include safety policies, attitude, how you define excellence, or your company culture – it all depends on what is important to you and what will help a new employee fit in smoothly.

Just don't forget to update the manual when you change or add policies. And don't forget to have an employment lawyer review it before you hand it out to employees.

Once you have an employee manual that is up to date and records the decisions you have made for your company, leave it on your desk as reference for all the times that employees come to you with questions that are answered in the manual. This will reduce the chance of giving different employees different answers to the same question and train employees to look it up before asking you. (Well, in an ideal world, anyway.) Best of all, it will save your brain power for the decisions that will keep your business running smoothly.

