

## Why do we need an employee benefit manual?

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My attorney told me we should have an employee benefit manual. It seems like a lot of work. I own a service company in Connecticut with 27 employees. We're busy enough, but I'd rather spend my time working on sales than dealing with this topic. Any shortcuts?

Ever had to deal with an employee who shows up late and then says he thought that start time was later than it really was? What about the employee who leaves early, takes long breaks or is often out sick? Or the employee who asks you for a loan? Or the one who spends too much time on personal calls? What about the manager who's unsure how to handle specific situations? How about just plain answering the phone properly? These are all challenges business owners face every day and an employee manual can help.

### A Basic Manual

Get new employees off the ground correctly. Keep good employees within bounds of acceptable behavior. Help an employee who may be struggling to understand what is and is not acceptable, as well as what might happen if lines get crossed. These are all valid reasons for having an employee manual.

An employee manual is a tool to set out expectations between company and employee. Educate employees and managers about what you consider to be correct. Lay down rules about general behavior. Use it to help you get through disputes. Clarify routine items like holidays and vacations. Address touchy items like hiring and firing, jury duty and funeral leave. The manual is considered a contract, so be careful how you put it together.

State in the manual what you want employees to do. Reference all of the above topics. Include start time, end time, amount of breaks, and sick, personal and vacation days. State your policy on giving out loans (I recommend you don't give any - that's what banks and credit unions are for). Limit personal calls and other interruptions to the business. Describe how the phone is to be answered. Clarify your dress policy (no midriff, no t-shirts, nothing low cut are examples of everyday challenges owners deal with through policy manuals).

### Those Are The Rules

Include a dispute and resolution section. What does it mean to put someone on warning or probation? What actions might result in immediate suspension or termination (think about cases of an employee physically threatening someone, stealing, lying). How does a manager handle an employee who's out of bounds? What constitutes out of bounds?

In my experience, once an employer puts into writing their policies about these tough issues (especially warnings, probation and termination) they find it much easier to deal with situations and enforce consequences. Saying, "Those are the rules" makes more sense when the rules are laid out for everyone to see.

Get policies on paper, so employees don't wonder if you care. How does someone come forward when they feel they are being treated unfairly? Is it clear your company won't tolerate aggressive behavior, discrimination or other unethical practices? Who can an employee go to when he's having a dispute with a co-worker or manager?

Most companies spend a lot of time answering basic questions, for both employees and managers. How many days of vacation do I get? What holidays do we get off? How about sick leave? Jury duty? Family emergencies? Pregnancy and family leave? What are the proper steps to interview, hire and fire? How about giving out promotions? Put it in writing and cut down on the interruptions.

### Get Some Guidance

At 20 employees, the rules do change. The company has more employee responsibilities. That makes the employee manual even more crucial. As the relationship between company and employee become more formal and responsibility-laden, make sure your company's position is known and noted by each and every employee.

Regardless of company size, do be aware that the policy manual is a legally reference-able document. Make sure your attorney has reviewed and approved of the manual. Include a cover page that each employee signs to acknowledge receipt of the manual. Put those signed cover pages in employees' human resources files, in case there's ever a question.

Wondering how to get started? There are lots of templates out there for drafting employee manuals. Pick one and lay out a basic set of policies. Then add to the document as you go along. Have your attorney review the basic policy, as well as updates before they are posted. Keep the manual online so that employees can always access the most recent version. Treat it as a living document.

Looking for a good book? Try "Create Your Own Employee Handbook: A Legal & Practical Guide" by Lisa Guerin & Amy DelPo.

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