

Effective Employee Handbooks: Best Policies and Practices

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Effective Employee Handbooks: Best Policies and Practices

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I. What Is the Purpose of Personnel Policies?

As employers, virtually every local government or government entity (like a Library!) has a set of personnel policies or an employee handbook in place. As Library Trustees, we understand, broadly, why we have personnel policies – to communicate expectations, to promote fairness, to reduce the employer’s risk, and, selfishly, to make life easier for us. However, it is worth taking a step back and asking, “Why, specifically do we have personnel policies?” and “Are our personnel policies working for us?”

Personnel policies serve a variety of important purposes, including but not necessarily limited to, the following:

- A. Communicating the employer’s mission and philosophy – your purpose and what you stand for;
- B. Helping the Trustees, Directors, Town (if applicable) and employees comply with applicable laws;
- C. Communicating expectations and standards of conduct for employees;
- D. Letting employees know what they can expect from their employer;
- E. Providing guidance for those who supervise employees;
- F. Providing consistency in how employees are treated;
- G. Answering common employee questions about the workplace; and
- H. Protecting the employer from legal liability.

II. What Personnel Policies Are Needed?

Personnel policies should cover the important aspects of the employer-employee relationship. The topics that are covered will necessarily vary in some respects depending on the Library structure, the type of work the Library is doing and the nature/size of workforce, but a comprehensive set of personnel policies for any employer should address the following:

- A. Who you are as an employer (history, mission, values);
- B. Equal employment opportunity statement and related employee protection statements (nondiscrimination/harassment/retaliation policies, workplace accommodation (pregnancy and disability), etc.);

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- C. Basic employment issues such as job classifications (exempt, non-exempt, full-time, part-time, temporary, on-call, etc.); at-will employment; statutory protections; introductory or probationary period; job postings, transfers, and promotions; personnel files; training, evaluations; outside employment, resignations, and return of property; etc.;
- D. Wage and hour issues such as work week, pay periods/pay day, work schedules, time records, overtime, rest and meal breaks, etc.;
- E. Employee benefits such as insurance, retirement plan, tuition reimbursement, etc.;
- F. Employee safety, including accident reporting, workplace safety rules, security, etc.;
- G. Employee leaves, including PTO (or vacation/sick), FMLA (if applicable), statutory leaves (NH Crime Victim Leave, NH Maternity Leave, Military Leave, etc.), and unpaid leaves;
- H. Employee conduct expectations and work rules such as attendance, nondiscrimination/harassment, drugs and alcohol, smoking, dress code, social media use, computer use, distribution of materials, conflicts of interest, confidentiality, etc.;
- I. Employee discipline;
- J. Grievance/complaint/open door procedure;
- K. Operational rules such as expense reimbursement, parking, workplace closings, visitors, uniforms, etc.; and
- L. Appropriate disclaimers (i.e., the handbook is not a contract; the handbook may change.)

III. Components of Effective Personnel Policies

The overarching goals in creating effective personnel policies are:

A. Clarity

Anyone who reads a policy should be able to understand what it means; there should not be room for multiple interpretations. If you have to read a policy several times to understand it, it is not clear enough. It is good practice to have several people read draft policies before they are implemented to make sure they impart the intended message.

B. Simplicity

Get to the point as quickly as possible. Include the information that employees really need to know (and not information they do not need to know). If the information is important only for HR and management to

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know to do their jobs, it should be included in HR procedures rather than policies distributed to all employees.

C. Legality

Any policy should be consistent with applicable law; beware of citing federal or state laws that do not apply.

D. Fairness

Policies should treat employees fairly. If there are different benefits or “perks” for different employees (e.g., exempt versus non-exempt), have a legitimate, identifiable, nondiscriminatory business reason for why this is the case.

E. Protection

Protect the municipality against legal actions and improve employee relations.

In our view, the best practice is to write personnel policies in a user-friendly, concise format and to include the entirety of the policies in the employee handbook. Having policies separate from the employee handbook can create confusion and undermine the effectiveness of the employee handbook as an efficient communication tool.

The one exception to this general principle is if you have certain departments with their own supplementary set of rules, guidelines, or operating procedures. Those, of course, will be separate and only distributed to the employees to whom they apply. However, they should be carefully reviewed for unnecessary redundancy with your regular policies and (unintentional) inconsistencies with your regular policies. Where necessary for clarity, these department-specific rules, guidelines, or operating procedures should be cross-referenced in the handbook.

IV. Policy Pitfalls to Avoid

The following are common policy pitfalls to avoid:

A. Illegal Policies

This can be problematic for employers. Periodically review your handbook to ensure removal of policies that are out of date, against the law, or that paraphrase laws incorrectly. Be sure to correct any out of date policies with the most updated information.

B. Fragmented Policies

Having a topic addressed in multiple policies makes it difficult for employees to follow the rules and creates the possibility of overlaps or gaps in policies.

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C. Inconsistent Policies

This is a hazard of fragmented policies. For instance, having one policy that states that employees have to call in two hours before the start of their shift and another that states that they need to call within 30 minutes of the start of their shift.

D. Inflexible Policies

Do not adopt policies that you are not willing to enforce or that will be enforced inconsistently. Provide enough flexibility to allow exceptions in truly unusual situations.

E. Policies That Are Too Flexible

There needs to be enough consistency so that employees feel that they are being treated fairly, both within the same department and across the workplace.

F. Policies That Are Negative in Tone

With a little care, there is almost always a way to write a policy in positive language rather than negative language.

G. Policies That Are Not “Policies”

Remember who the audience is. Detailed procedures that HR and/or managers need to follow should not be in the handbook. Create a separate procedure manual for hiring procedures, evaluation procedures, discipline procedures, termination procedures, and the like.

H. Adopting “Boilerplate” Policies

It is often tempting to use policies found on the internet or borrowed from another library, town or city. However, such policies should not be adopted without careful review to ensure that they reflect the employer’s values, meet the employer’s specific needs, and are compliant with applicable laws.

I. Policies without Supervisory Buy-In

Supervisors do not necessarily need to agree with every policy implemented by their employer, but without some amount of supervisory buy-in the policy isn’t worth the paper it is written on. Employers need to take steps to engage with their supervisors when adopting or modifying policies so that they will actually be implemented as intended.

V. Auditing Your Policies and Employee Handbook

It is best practice to conduct a systematic review of your policies and employee handbook on a regular basis. The following steps are key to ensuring that your policies and handbook remain effective tools that contribute to good employee relations and smooth operations.

- A. Gather your employee handbook, benefit plans, and related procedures and forms.
- B. Look at the big picture: Is there anything missing that employees need to know? Have laws or practices changed? Are there gaps, overlaps, or inconsistencies among policies? Are there procedural issues or topics included in the handbook that would be better separated out as HR/management procedures?
- C. Are there topics that only apply to a few employees that might be disseminated in a more efficient way?
- D. Have existing policies caused any problems? Are policies being consistently followed (and if not, why not)? Are any differences in benefits provided to employee groups handled in a sensitive way, and do these differences have a rational basis?
- E. Do any policies undermine the at-will employment status of at-will employees (i.e., discipline policies that provide just cause, etc.)?
- F. Are policies written in a reader-friendly way? Are policies subject to multiple interpretations?
- G. For workplaces that have unions, is it clear which policies apply to unionized employees and which do not? Are there any inconsistencies or gaps between policies and contracts that need to be addressed?
- H. Is the handbook in a manageable format? Is the handbook easy to update?
- I. How are employees notified of changes in policies?

It is good practice to have several individuals review the handbook before it is approved and rolled out to employees. It is commonly helpful to obtain review from legal counsel.

Finally, identify an employee who can flag potential necessary updates between revisions. Establish a regular schedule for reviewing the employee handbook as a whole.

VI. Training Employees and Supervisors

Give some thought to the process of training employees and Directors (or other supervisors) on your employee handbook. If you expect employees to take the handbook seriously, you have to demonstrate to them that it is important by taking the time to discuss it with them. Employees should sign an acknowledgment

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that they have received and read the employee handbook; it is also good practice to have employees sign in for any training sessions. Keep these documents to demonstrate that you have clearly communicated policies to employees before implementing them.

Equally important is training supervisors on how to implement the handbook policies. Consistent compliance and enforcement of the employee handbook should be considered as a factor in supervisor performance reviews.

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