



**Manuella Hancock, Writer**

## **Employee Handbooks Create Successful Employee Relationships**

Many small business owners ask, “What’s the point of an employee handbook?” So ask yourself, if there’s a fire, is it better to have had a couple fire drills or to just cross your fingers and hope everyone gets out ok? An employee handbook is a good way to clarify how you want to treat your employees from the start of the relationship to the end. It’s a marked path that makes sure everyone is clear on expectations. An employee handbook can contain the policies that are important to you as an owner. It will promote fairness and transparency, which leads to successful employee relationships. It can guide hiring, firing, promotions and vacations. It can spell out dress codes, codes of conduct and rules about use of workplace time and equipment for personal reasons. The point of an employee handbook is to make sure you’ve covered all of these issues from the start.

While an employee handbook doesn’t need to be a three volume set, here are some essential elements that should be included.

### **Make Sure Your Employees Actually Read the Handbook**

As a small business owner, you don’t want an employee filing a claim against you and asserting that she or he never saw the employee handbook. A part of every new employee orientation should include giving the employee a written copy. And there should be a page in the handbook for the employee to sign that says it has been received. Keep a copy of that page. On that same page, you should make sure to clarify that the employee is “at will.” At will means that you can fire the employee for any reason or for no reason at all. You definitely don’t want to fire an employee and have him or her coming back and claiming they had a right to stay employed. This page, and making sure the employee signs and dates acknowledgement of receipt, are critical.

### **If There Are Lines Employees Shouldn’t Cross, Be Clear About It.**

A handbook should identify reasons an employee will be fired immediately. Even though an employee is “at will,” it’s natural for a person to expect the employer to give a reason. These policies should begin by reminding the employee that he or she can be fired for no reason at all, but they also should list the deal breakers. For example, drug use, sexual harassment, violence at the workplace and conviction for a crime can be reasons for immediate termination. This is a good place to establish standards for respect and behavior expected of all employees.

Be careful about having policies about employee reviews, warnings and ways that an employee can expect to be given a chance to improve. Of course these are good policies to have, but if you put them in writing, make sure to follow them for all of your employees. And that in mind when you establish the procedures. You don’t want a long, complicated process that will be a pain to implement. An employee should be able to read the policy and know what to expect.



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### **Make Sure You Have Industry Specific Standards**

Other policies are important based on your industry. A store owner will want employees to dress appropriately, but a tech company won't be as interested in the outfits of employees who won't be interfacing with customers. On the other hand, a tech start-up may expect employees to take regular courses in the latest developments where a restaurant can probably manage regular in-house training. These sorts of requirements are useful tools for any small business that is regulated. If periodic training on workplace safety is an OSHA requirement, it would be a good idea to have a policy mandating attendance at these trainings. When putting together an employee handbook, think through these industry issues and how a policy can help with business success.

Employee handbooks are a resource and a risk prevention necessity for every business. If you haven't yet, you should take immediate steps to put one together.