



**Update
Your
Employee
Handbook**

**for the
Digital
Age**

Employee handbooks need more than a “quick update”? Use these great ideas to transform it into a living document that’s compliant, comprehensive, welcoming – and (dare we say it) fun to read!

Your employee handbook sets the “ground rules” for your staff. It provides a blueprint for your company culture. It keeps you on the right side of the law. And it forestalls any number of potential legal and professional disputes.

If it’s up to date and readable, that is.

Here’s how to create an employee handbook that not only says everything you need it to say, but is fun to read, too! We’ll cover:

- What an employee handbook is and why you need one
- Why your employee handbook needs to be (and stay) up to date
- How to spot a great handbook (and create one)
- Which “don’ts” to avoid when creating your handbook
- Major legal considerations in creating an employee handbook
- Ways to make your handbook a document staff want to read.

Why You Really Do Need That Handbook

If you haven't updated (or even read) your employee handbook in a while, you may be wondering why you need it. Staff know their jobs and your goals are in line. What's the big deal?

Here's what you're missing with an outdated or nonexistent handbook:

Your handbook defines your company culture.

The handbook sets standards, focuses on company priorities and helps your staff understand what they should do and how.

Your handbook answers questions so you don't have to.

Everyone on the team wants to know about vacation time, expense reports, social media, email use, overtime and more. You can answer the same questions over and over – or you can update the handbook to answer them for you.

Your handbook reduces your liability.

In an employer/employee dispute, who wins may depend on what the handbook says. Make it clear and compliant, and you help protect the entire company.

Your handbook helps you train new staff.

Get new employees up to speed more quickly with a handbook that tells the story of your company and helps them understand the "how-tos" of a day on the job.

...And Why You Really Do Need to Update It, Too

Having a handbook is essential. So is keeping it up to date. Why?

Laws change. A handbook can only protect your company in a legal dispute if the handbook itself complies with current law—which changes over time. Make sure your handbook changes with it.

Needs change. Staff have varying questions throughout the year. As summer arrives, more staff want to know what their vacation options are. A sick family member or a sudden diagnosis sends them scrambling to look up leave policies. Make sure your staff have access to accurate information when they need it, so they can make educated choices about handling work.

Your company changes. As your company grows, the expectations placed on your staff change to meet the demands of that growth. An updated handbook lets staff know what to expect and helps them adapt to what's ahead.

What Makes a Great Handbook?

One study from GuideSpark found that only 30 to 40 percent of staff read their handbooks — and that just as many have no idea where their handbook is, let alone what's inside it. What makes a handbook staff want to read?

It's readable. Scanning words doesn't help your employees if they can't parse the meaning. The best handbooks use plain language to make topics clear.

It's engaging. Engage readers in a way that's consistent with your company's culture by using images, infographics and interactive moments. Or go digital: more companies are taking advantage of additions like video and games by putting their handbooks on the web.

It's accurate. The contents of a good handbook reflect the company's actual culture and processes for handling issues like sick leave and social media use. They also reflect current law, so employees stay informed.

It's accessible. When a third of your staff don't even know where to find a handbook when they need one, making it easy to find should be a top priority—whether you put it in print or online.

Great Handbook Examples

Hailed by Inc. in 2003 as “The Coolest Small Company in America,” Zingerman’s Deli in Ann Arbor, Michigan, also has one of the coolest employee handbooks. What makes it great?

It’s fun to read. The text is enthusiastic and straightforward, topics are easy to find and graphics—including a flipbook of a dancing sandwich—make the reader keep turning pages.

It’s interactive. Managers make sure staff are up to date on their handbook’s contents by holding periodic trivia contests based on the information in the handbook.

It’s organized. Topics are kept short and simple, organized with easy-to-remember bullet points and given catchy names like “A Guide to Good Wastebusting” and “Four Steps to Productive Resolution of Your Differences.”

It’s updated regularly. To ensure that staff always have the latest information, the handbook is updated to keep track of changes in employment law and in company policy — and these changes are communicated to staff promptly.

How NOT to Handbook: The Biggest Don'ts and How to Avoid Them

Creating a great employee handbook can boost productivity, teach your culture, forestall questions and settle legal disputes before they begin. But even the most boring handbook needs to avoid some major pitfalls.

Here's what NOT to do when creating an employee handbook:

Copy-paste. When your handbook touches on legal topics, running your text past your lawyer is a good idea. Copying and pasting boilerplate, however, is a recipe for disaster. The text might be outdated. It might be inaccurate. And even if it's not, your staff aren't likely to read it.

Procrastinate. The longer your company goes without a handbook, the longer you'll be answering the same questions over and over, watching your staff struggle to understand priorities, and opening your company to potential liability. Don't let the handbook fall to the bottom of your to-do list.

Set and forget. From the start, treat your handbook as an ongoing process, rather than a "one and done" project. This way, you'll stay up to date on what's in it, and you'll update it as needed, instead of letting it become obsolete.

Keep It Legal!

The evidence is in: The U.S. Supreme Court likes employee handbooks.

Actually, the justices haven't expressed any personal opinions. But again and again, the Court has relied on employee handbooks in order to resolve labor disputes—and been critical of companies with outdated or nonexistent handbooks.

Here are some legal considerations to cover when updating or creating a handbook:

NLRB decisions. Some of the biggest legal decisions in the U.S. come from the National Labor Relations Board, not the courts. The Board's website, nlrb.gov, offers access to recent news and updates.

Whistleblowing. Reporting potential legal violations to government agencies is protected by state and federal law in a wide range of contexts. Make sure you don't discourage readers from whistleblowing and your handbook complies with applicable whistleblowing rules.

Background checks and drug tests. Are your background checks and drug-testing procedures compliant, or are they violating discrimination laws? Check at the federal, state and local level to be sure.

Local rules. Local and municipal governments throughout the United States have set specific rules regarding minimum wage, background checks, parental leave, sick leave and more. Be sure you're covering your city's or county's rules as well as the state's and the federal government's.

Writing the Handbook Your Staff WANT to Read

Even the most up-to-date, elegant, organized and compliant handbook is useless if you're staff aren't interested in reading it. And while most employers require staff to sign a form stating they received a handbook, "I got it" is not the same as "I read it."

Here are some tips for creating a handbook staff want to read:

Keep it focused and relevant. Staff members reading a handbook typically want a quick, clear answer to their questions. One to two pages, with bullet points, is often all you need. Sometimes, an entire page is too much.

Organize it logically. It makes sense to keep similar information in the same places in the handbook. Or you can follow the lead of video game company Valve, which organized its handbook chronologically: Part 1 covers an employee's first day at Valve, Part 2 focuses on first-month essentials, Part 3 on performance evaluation and so on.

Don't make them (merely) read. Going digital with your handbook greatly expands your multimedia options, making it easy to create a handbook that is accessible to employees with a wide range of learning styles. Add images, sound, video or even "mini-games" that help employees retain what they're learning.