

The Redo: How to Makeover Your Employee Handbook for 2022



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)
- Missteps to avoid when creating your handbook
- New legal issues to consider when creating an employee handbook
- Ways to make your handbook a document staff want to read
- Work benefits that align with what employees want today

Please keep in mind: The materials and information included in this eBook are provided for reference purposes only. They are not intended either as a substitute for professional advice or judgment or to provide legal or other advice with respect to particular circumstances.



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Here's what you're missing with an outdated or nonexistent handbook: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, DEI initiatives, 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 Covid-19 protocols and vaccination policies, as well as paid family medical leave, vacation time, expense reports, social media, 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.** Vaccinations. Hybrid workplaces. Legalized marijuana. DE&I. Countless issues have changed the workplace – and countless laws – over the past two years. A handbook can only protect your company in a legal dispute if the handbook itself complies with current law.
- **Needs change.** This has never been truer than now, during a global pandemic. Even during unprecedented times, staff have varying questions throughout the year. As summer approaches, 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 changes (e.g., hybrid and virtual work models) and grows, the expectations placed on your staff change. 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% 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.
- **It's relevant.** In this age of the expanding workplace, your employee handbook may need to include information about remote and hybrid work policies, such as appropriate communication tools, employee oversight, and work hours.
- **It's inclusive.** Paging through the handbook is often one of the first experiences during onboarding. Create a welcoming experience for all by using inclusive language and images.
- **It's acknowledged.** If your handbook is engaging and your staff have read all the way to the end, make sure they find an acknowledgement page. Ask employees to sign and return a document stating that they have received the manual. Keep those documents in a safe place and update them every time you change your policies.



Great Handbook Examples



- Sterling Mining, a natural resource company in northern Idaho, has an employee handbook ([you can check it and other great examples out here](#)) that hits all the right notes. **What makes it great?**
- **It's warm and welcoming.** A letter from the CEO greets readers on the first page, and its informal Q&A style delivers detailed information in a relatable format.
- **It's fun to read.** The text is straightforward yet humorous, topics are easy to find, and graphics—including dog and cat memes—are colorful, engaging, and feature diverse individuals.
- **It's organized.** Topics are kept short and simple, organized chronologically starting with “Your First Day” and then leading into useful work tools, company contacts, and a wealth of HR and employment policies.
- **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. Be sure to collect a new handbook acknowledgement sign-off from each employee every time you update the company handbook.



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](https://www.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.
- **Marijuana and illegal drug policy.** Federal law prohibits the use of marijuana, but many states have begun experimenting with new rules based on state and local laws, including rules related to medical marijuana use. Understand the laws in effect in your jurisdiction before updating your company drug policy and consult with a lawyer familiar with current state drug laws.
- **Vaccination and Covid-19 testing policies.** A recent mandate—issued by the Biden administration and enforced by OSHA—requires all employers with 100 or more employees to make sure their workforce is vaccinated or require weekly Covid-19 tests. To boot, the definition of “fully vaccinated” is likely to evolve as the CDC and state health departments update their health guidance based on booster shot efficacy. Make sure your employee handbook covers your company's vaccination requirements and testing policies and that your company stays abreast of applicable mandates.
- **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 your 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 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.



What Work Benefits Do Your Employees REALLY Want?

The employee handbook is often the first place staff look to find information about company benefits. Has your company kept pace with the changing needs of the workforce? Or do you need to revamp your benefits package to better serve your employees and encourage their engagement, loyalty, and retention?

Here are some factors to consider:

Paid time off.

35%

of employees say PTO is the most important employer-provided benefit.¹

Flexible/remote work.

94%

of business professionals believe they would benefit from a more flexible schedule.²

Health/fitness benefits.

Good health is at the center of the global consciousness, yet

85%

of employers do not provide mental or physical health perks.³

Financial planning.

<50%

of employees rate their financial wellbeing as good or excellent.⁴

As you know, every employer's organization is unique, and each employee has different needs. The best way to find out what your staff need from you is to ask them and try to deliver...and then update your employee handbook accordingly!

Sources:

1. <https://hrexecutive.com/these-are-the-perks-employees-want-most/>
2. <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/workplace-flexibility-survey.html>

3. <https://justworks.com/blog/6-surprising-statistics-benefits-employees-want-infographics>
4. https://www.bofaml.com/content/dam/flagship/institutional-retirement/id20_0901/documents/2020workplacebenefitreport_singlepage_final_9.16.20.pdf

Final Thoughts

With as much as the modern workplace, the legal landscape, and employees' expectations have changed, it's critical for your handbook to keep pace. By using the tips in this guide, you'll be well on your way to building a modern document that's compliant, comprehensive – and creates a great employee experience.

