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## Three Employee Handbook No-Nos to Avoid

Here's what you can do to steer clear of the biggest pitfalls of employee handbooks.

By Michael Hickey Mar 24, 2022

Even if an association has just two staff members, it needs an employee handbook. It's an important document for both organization and employee, as it spells out the organization's mission, values, ethics, policies, and procedures. It also communicates staff and organizational responsibilities, helps your association comply with labor laws, and explicitly outlines appropriate (and inappropriate) conduct.

But particularly for associations that don't have an HR department, it's easy to create an employee handbook with the best of intentions—only to wind up with a document that took a lot of time to create and isn't as helpful as it could be.

“These are things that I sometimes see are either not addressed at all or not addressed sufficiently” in an employee handbook, said **Patricia Williams, managed human resources services partner at Raffa, the social sector and nonprofit arm of the Marcum firm.** “An employee needs to know what the rules are.”

Consider these employee handbook pitfalls and Williams' insights on how to avoid them.

### **Pitfall #1: Set It and Forget It**

Williams argues that organizations should review their handbooks at least once a year and make necessary updates to ensure it isn't outdated. Essentially, your employee handbook should be treated as a living document. After all, laws change, workplace culture changes, and societal values shift; your handbook needs to reflect those changes. Yet when working with companies, Williams encounters organizations that haven't touched their employee handbooks in years—in some cases, a decade or longer.

“In my experience, this isn't done often enough,” she said of handbook updates. “It can put the employer at risk in a lot of ways.”

The solution: Review your employee handbook at least once a year, make updates as needed, and circulate the latest version among staff.

## **Pitfall #2: Going Heavy on the “Legalese”**

While some technical language is absolutely necessary—around laws, harassment policies, ethics—your employee handbook shouldn’t be overly technical or needlessly complicated. Your handbook won’t do anything if your employees don’t understand what they’re reading, or if they find the handbook so dry that they can’t get through it.

Williams has helped organizations liven up their handbooks by using a tone that matches their culture. For example, an organization she worked with that had a fun and playful personality wrote its handbook in the first person to make the language sound more human and engaging.

“You can strike a balance between having the tone match the employer’s culture and having the compliance and legal language in the handbook that has to be in there,” Williams said.

The solution: When writing, put an emphasis on being clear and concise while limiting jargon. And don’t be afraid to inject your organization’s personality into the tone of your handbook.

## **Pitfall #3: Too Much Legislation**

Employee handbooks are useful roadmaps and risk-management tools for organizations, so it could be tempting to be [overly prescriptive](#) about policies and too controlling of employee behavior. Williams said you don’t need a policy for every possible scenario or incident.

“You don’t have to sketch out the what-ifs of every situation. It’s not a good idea to do that, because you have no flexibility,” she said. “An example of this is a disciplinary policy.”

Say you’ve written a rigid, step-by-step disciplinary process that takes considerable time and resources to complete. Now that the process has been established, you can’t deviate from it. This means you can’t simply fire an employee for doing something egregious or be lenient toward a well-meaning employee who is just struggling a little.

The solution: Identify and include the must-have elements of your handbook, but don’t be too prescriptive. This gives you the flexibility to enact your policies in more than one specific way.