

The do-it yourself guide to employee handbooks

Tips on creating and updating your company Bible from the experts

by MARIA GAGLIANO

WHILE CREATING AN EMPLOYEE HANDBOOK MAY NOT SEEM LIKE A TOP priority when faced with the myriad responsibilities of running a restaurant, it is nonetheless *the* most crucial line of communication between you and your employees. An employee handbook gives you the opportunity to protect your business by explaining—in writing—what is required from all employees and what they can expect from you as a supervisor. It is also a key timesaver for you, as it can guide your training sessions and serve as a go-to source for common questions.

It can be difficult, however, to know where to start without the help of a skilled human resources department to guide you. While the task of putting together your handbook will take some time, the following tips will help demystify and simplify the process.

Content

Everything in your handbook should be explained as clearly and simply as possible. Avoid vague or complicated language that runs the risk of being misunderstood.

For a full list of topics to include in your handbook, refer to the Pass it On box (right). This list may seem daunting, but remember that your goal is to state your company's policy on each point in the simplest terms, so most sections will be relatively short. Start by breaking this list down into digestible parts and drafting small sections at a time.

Although California law does not require you to provide employee handbooks in both English and Spanish, this is something you might want to consider if a large part of your staff is Spanish-speaking.

Tip reporting and meal and rest periods

A tip reporting policy and a meal and rest period policy are especially crucial to a restaurant owner's employee manual. California employment lawyer John Boggs advises that both policies should set forth the legal requirements as well as your expectations, making it clear that employees are expected to abide by the those requirements and expectations.

Distribution and updates

An employee handbook will be futile unless you distribute it and receive signed confirmation that every employee has read it. Distributing your handbook digitally is the most effective way to accomplish this. Employees can submit an electronic signature to confirm that they have read the manual and you can alert them to any updates without having to print and redistribute new hard copies. A new acknowledgment form must be signed and submitted by each employee every time a change is made to your handbook. John Boggs notes that companies such as HotlinkHR now offer automated, Web-based services to help California restaurant owners create and distribute employee handbooks electronically.

Review your handbook for legal accuracy at least once per year and update it any time a change in your company polices goes into effect. You can subscribe to a service Web-based that notifies you of changes in the law so you don't have to worry about staying on top of legal news.

Once you've drafted your employee manual, make sure to take the crucial step of having it vetted by an employment attorney. Boggs warns that a poorly drafted or out-dated employee handbook can result in employment claims and create a liability risk that would not otherwise exist. **TRS**

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Handbook contents

PASS IT ON

Kim Parker, executive vice president of the California Employers Association, advises that if you have an employee handbook (which is *not* required), it is legally required to include the following items/topics:

- Illness & Injury Protection Plan (IIPP)
- workplace violence
- workers' compensation
- personnel records
- employee property
- payment of wages
- timekeeping requirements
- smoking policy
- confidentiality
- conflicts of interest
- time off for protected activities
- use of electronic media
- bulletin boards
- solicitation and distribution of literature
- work schedules
- overtime
- miscellaneous time
- expense reimbursement

The following items are recommended, but not required:

- arbitration
- employee classification
- job duties
- vacation/PTO
- holidays
- employee education
- insurance benefits
- leaves of absence
- retirement benefits
- off-duty use of facilities
- off-duty conduct
- prohibited conduct
- performance evaluations
- punctuality and attendance
- employer property
- conducting personal business
- disciplinary process
- dress code and other personal standards
- customer relations
- business conduct and ethics
- housekeeping
- parking
- telecommuting
- employment of relatives
- pay differentials
- advances
- recreational activities and programs
- employees who are required to drive
- employee references
- termination