

# Employee Handbook 101

Incorporate these principles to keep workers in the know and liability low

by Erin Brereton May 29, 2018



After being hired as Georgetown University's director of facilities management in 1992, Dr. Richard Payant, co-author of "The Facility Management Handbook," asked for a copy of the department's policies and procedures.

He was told there weren't any. So Payant decided to write his own book about policies and standing operating procedures for the school to use.

An employee handbook can be a valuable asset because it can clarify employers' expectations—and also provide protection for both employees and their organizations. "It has a dual purpose: It's a communication tool for management to use for employees; the other is it's a legal defense tool—your most fundamental tool for managing liability," says Evan White, a partner at employment law firm White Harris PLLC. "Employees are your biggest investment, and also the biggest liability. You need a risk management program, and it all starts with an employee handbook."

Although each handbook will likely be tailored to the organization's individual needs, facility managers and building service contractors might find it helpful to include information about a few common industry concerns.

## Employee Leave and Time Off

Workers often have questions about personnel policies, such as vacation time, family medical leave, and other paid or unpaid time off. Regardless of whether employees ask, employers in some states may need to make sure they're conveying all the details involved in the company's time-off plan. "Certain states require leave policies, in general, to be in writing," White says. "For example, not having the correct notices and documentation where paid sick leave is required may put you in immediate violation. If a complaint is filed against you with the governing body in charge of enforcing that, it could involve an investigation."

Making sure employees are aware of time-off benefits and other amenities by publishing the information in the handbook can also help boost retention: *CMM's 2018 In-House/Facility Management Benchmarking Survey* found a correlation between low turnover rates and employee benefits, particular in regard to cleaning work in K-12 and higher education settings.

## Salary Expectations

Frank Bundy, owner of Maryland-based Five Star Cleaning Service, LLC, which services medical, office, and industrial buildings, says wages are one of most frequent topics employees ask about, which is why he recommends including the information in the employee handbook. Include a policy that documents how employees are paid—whether by percentage, hourly, or salary—in addition to payday schedules, when the clock stops and starts during their shifts, and if they receive reimbursement for mileage.

Overtime and employee classifications are areas employers need to approach carefully. "What high-turnover businesses tend to do is give people a trial period, and then pay them as independent contractors," White says. "They're under the false assumption if [the people] are not really working there [yet], they don't have to put them on the payroll." Inappropriate classification of employees can lead to problems like lawsuits or government audits, so it's important to get it right initially.

## Dress Code

Five Star Cleaning's dress code—khaki pants and a company-supplied T-shirt, and a stipulation employees need to pull back long hair when working—was one of the first items Bundy decided to include in the company handbook. "It's about trying to look professional," Bundy says. "The pants have to have pockets; you can't try to wear gym shorts that are khaki-colored."

Explicitly explaining what should and shouldn't be worn while on the job can help clear up any confusion. "I pride myself in being fair and honest at all times," Bundy says. "Everything is in there; I've never had an employee not understand why they can't wear a tank top to work."

## Harassment

The #MeToo movement has increased focus on addressing sexual harassment in the workplace; and according to data compiled by PBS' *Frontline* series, women in the janitorial industry who work in insolated situations at night—such as office cleaning—are especially vulnerable to harassment.

Today, it's critical to have both a robust reporting policy and an antiharassment policy, which could potentially be presented in a code of conduct within the employee handbook, along with clear examples to illustrate expected behavior.

"It's also important for employees to know they are going to be accountable for their behavior toward others—to treat their coworkers respectfully," White says. "Some people say, 'You can't say anything anymore;' other places are a little more proactive and say, 'Now we need to educate ourselves and be mindful about what is and isn't appropriate.'"

## Cell Phone Use

With the advent of texting, Skype, FaceTime, and other mobile communication options, the chance employees may be on their phone throughout their shift has increased in recent years. To prevent that from happening at Anago of Cleveland, the commercial cleaning service provider added a policy several years ago to its handbook, which is geared toward employees who work in the main office.

"Cell phone usage during work became an issue," Vice President Chastity Schaffer says. "Franchise owners do contact you on it; but other people do, as well. [Employees] have both personal and company phones now."

## Theft and Damage

When it comes to employee theft, you may want to put a no-tolerance policy in place. Property-related policies can also prove helpful if cleaning professionals cause unintentional damage. "I tell our franchise owners to put something in their handbook and have employees sign off on [it regarding] equipment and supplies," Schaffer says. "If something's missing, or they break a portion of it or the whole thing, it will be deducted from [their] paycheck—those types of things protect franchise owners' business."

## Protecting Your Organization

In addition to mitigating risk, by erasing any confusion over company policies, employee handbooks can provide team members with a stronger sense of what's expected of them at work—which can positively affect performance, and, Schaffer says, help ensure all employees are treated fairly.

"There's no gray area; it's black and white," Schaffer says. "There's no room for error, really. It allows the company to be structured so it's the same for every employee."



### Erin Brereton

CHICAGO-BASED FREELANCE WRITER, EDITOR, AND MARKETING CONSULTANT

Erin Brereton is a Chicago-based freelance writer, editor, and marketing consultant who has written about the cleaning industry; business and finance; and other topics for the Chicago Tribune, trade magazines, and other publications.

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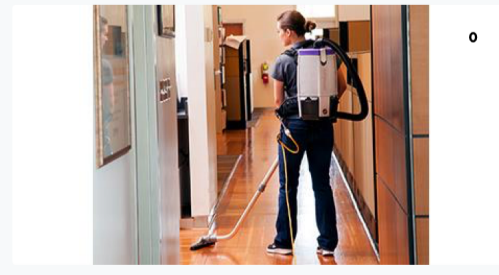
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