

It's Time to Update Your Employee Handbook

Is a review of your organization's Employee Handbook on your to-do list?

Author: **Jennifer Berman**

Published: 6/1/2006



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If you're like most employers, this is something you know you need to do, but may not have the time, expertise, resources, or motivation to tackle. Here are a few things that just might motivate you to move that Handbook to the top of your list...

Why even have an Employee Handbook?

Handbooks get a bad rap. How many of us would try to operate a complex piece of equipment without guidelines on getting started, safety precautions, tips for correct operation, etc. We'd probably be even more surprised to get a call from the company telling us about all of these things because they decided against putting it in writing!

An Employee Handbook operates upon the same premise. It's the "instruction manual" for employees. It educates them on how to get started, what rules must be followed to promote safety and productivity, and what benefits and services are available. Properly communicating this information to employees provides needed structure, expectations, guidelines, and resources to make their employment positive and productive – something most employers recognize has a direct effect on the bottom line.

Why update the Handbook you have?

You carefully crafted your Handbook, paying particular attention to federal and state legal requirements in effect at the time it was drafted and avoiding the danger zones that compromise employment at will. (If these steps sound unfamiliar to you, you may want to get some help with that Handbook now!) You're in the clear, right? Wrong!

An Employee Handbook must be a living document. Laws change, your organization changes, and such occurrences necessitate that policies and procedures evolve accordingly. In the past year, new laws have been passed and regulations enacted in a wide variety of areas, including anti-discrimination, wage and hour, benefits, and Workers Compensation. Additionally, world events, such as natural disasters and concerns about potential health emergencies, have prompted some employers to examine their policies to see if employees need guidance from the organization in the event of a crisis.

What should you do?

Now is the time to pull out that Handbook and think about what is and isn't in it. Some key points to remember:

- Don't forget about state and local laws. Most handbook software only includes federal regulations or requirements for one specific state.
- Think about changes within your organization. For example, if you've updated expense reimbursement procedures or amount of paid time off you provide, don't forget to make those changes in the Handbook.
- Ensure your disclaimers are conspicuous and that employment-at-will is clearly described.
- Avoid "guarantee" language. Instead of saying the employer "will" or "shall" do certain things, say "may" or "strives to."
- Get an outside opinion. Whether it be complete preparation, assistance with preparation, or a review of the Handbook, get an outside consultant or attorney involved.

Whatever you do – DO NOT DELAY! From both a practical and legal standpoint, a current Employee Handbook provides critical support for the needs of the employees and the organization.

If you would like more information on how to develop or update an Employee Handbook, or have questions on other Human Resources matters, please contact the author or your local CBIZ advisor.

About the author...

Jennifer L. Berman is an attorney who has provided Human Resources Consulting services to companies and organizations since 1995. In 2002, Jennifer became the Practice Leader for the Human Capital Advisory Services group of CBIZ in Chicago, where she manages a team providing Human Resources Consulting services for clients in the Great Lakes Region.

Jennifer has extensive experience consulting to middle market and emerging organizations in a wide range of industries, including manufacturing, distribution, energy, construction, advertising, banking, professional services, travel, graphic arts and not-for-profit.

Jennifer received her law degree from DePaul University College of Law and her undergraduate degree from Newcomb College of Tulane University. Jennifer is admitted to both the Illinois and Federal bars, and is a member of the Labor & Employment Law committees of both the American Bar Association and the Chicago Bar Association. Additionally, she is SPHR certified and a member of SHRM, SHRP and HRMAC. Jennifer has been a featured speaker and panelist for many national, regional and local associations and conferences.

Jennifer's practice focuses on services such as:

- HR Outsourcing
- Employee and Management Training
- Management and Employee Development
- Employment Law Compliance
- Performance Management
- Policy and Handbook Development
- HR Process Design and Implementation
- Recruitment Assistance and Search Services
- Benefits Consulting and Communication
- Compensation Plan Design and Administration
- Affirmative Action Plans
- Job Description Systems
- Strategic Planning and Organizational Analysis

For assistance with any Human Resources issue, Jennifer can be reached at (312) 602-6816 or at jberman@cbiz.com.