

You greet each new employee with a handshake – why not a handbook?

Congratulations! You've hired a dream candidate with a sterling resume and a can-do attitude! The good news? You can now mentor her to greatness, while making money in the process. The bad news: this employee may turn out to be a bad fit. She may show up late every day except today. She may be the most annoying person you've met since your brother-in-law. She may treat customers with disdain, and colleagues with contempt. You may later remember her as the worst person ever.

I know, I know. You can't imagine it. She's perfect! But hear me out: *Do you remember how much you loved your high school sweetheart? The one you were going to marry?*

Things change.

Business owners know how to run their businesses, but are often lost when it comes to the law. Yet when owners become employers, they must understand the basics of employment law. And there are more than a few affecting employers today, including the ADA, ADEA, EPA, ERISA, FLMA, FLSA, GINA, Title VII, and the U.S. Constitution. Don't forget the IHRA in Illinois, too. These laws are interpreted and ruled upon by a host of authorities, including the DOL, EEOC, NLRB, OSHA, and your (hopefully) friendly state and federal judge.

The Employee Handbook: Not Just for Dress Codes Any More

Sure, everyone wants to know if casual Friday *really* means casual. And yes, a good handbook will lay out company dress code, code of conduct, holidays observed, and perhaps kitchen etiquette (no soaking allowed!) But a *great* handbook will act as a roadmap for your employees as they navigate the office on a daily basis, interacting with one another constantly. In turn, your handbook puts each employee on notice: when in the office, you do things the Company way. While here, there will be no jokes at another's expense, or commentary on one's appearance. Discrimination on the basis of disability, ethnicity, familial status, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or age is not permitted. Everyone will be treated equally, and those who feel victimized will have a way to make their voices heard. Complaints will be answered by thorough investigations. When disciplinary action is taken, it will not be random, but consistent. We will write down everything. You will receive a copy. You will never be fired, demoted, or otherwise adversely impacted for exercising your rights.

Yes, your handbook is an opportunity to set the tone for your office. And when consistently provided to and enforced on all employees, your handbook is a piece of evidence in your defense. Should you find yourself seated before the EEOC, Department of Labor, or Your Honor, your lawful, equitable policies will help counter allegations of a culture promoting the very opposite.

Use It or Lose It

A glossy, bound employee handbook does no good if it is not understood and enforced. Accompany each handbook with an acknowledgement form for each employee to sign, and keep a copy in their individual HR files. Update your handbook annually, and provide a refresher course for all employees. Pay special attention to the actions of your supervisors, managers, and HR staff; if they aren't following the handbook's policies, you, as their employer, aren't following them, either. It is vital that you see that those on the front lines of reward and discipline do not jeopardize company profits and reputation by their actions.

Finally, ask for feedback from your employees on how your workplace can improve. Instill a sense of security for all employees who wish to speak, and provide ways to do so anonymously. By your actions, show employees that you address issues head-on. The law does not expect conflict-free companies, but smiles upon those who address problems through open door policies and swift action.