

Everyday workplace policies

Managing people takes time and resources. You can save yourself a lot of effort simply by having a clear policy on many everyday issues.

Employees need to know where they stand, especially when starting a new job. Problems quickly arise if it is unclear what the policy is on any one of a hundred seemingly minor matters — for example, making personal phone calls.

This briefing looks at the most common problem areas, excluding employment law issues. It covers:

- Setting up new employees.
- Inappropriate conduct.
- Office rules.
- Absences from work.

1 Right from the start

It pays to invest time in recruiting the best people you can find and setting them up properly in their jobs.

1.1 Provide every employee (full- or part-time) with an **employment contract**.

- This should be a clear agreement, covering the essential terms and conditions of employment.
- Include a detailed job description, but one that does not limit the person's role.

You also need written agreements to cover jobs being done by the self-employed.

1.2 Develop a systematic **induction process** to help new employees find their feet quickly.

- Use the opportunity to tell them about the culture and customs of the company, as well as about their jobs.

1.3 Schedule the employee's first **performance appraisal** towards the end of a short probationary period.

- Explain your grievance procedure, which must conform to the Acas Code of Practice.
- Tell new employees who they can approach if they have a grievance.

1.4 Provide a **company handbook** for new employees. This can be as short or as long as you like.

- The handbook sets out your policies and day-to-day expectations on issues that

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could not be covered in the contract. Include details of your discipline and grievance procedures if they are not covered in the contract.

- Run through the handbook as part of the induction process (see 1.2).

2 Working together

2.1 Clarify **who does what** in the team, to avoid misunderstandings.

- Create a fair division of labour for chores. For example, making cups of tea (for colleagues and visitors) can become a bone of contention if it is left to chance. It is often minor issues like this that most undermine teamwork.

2.2 Even if you have a receptionist, make it plain that **everyone** is expected to pick up the phone after a certain number of rings.

Disciplinary procedure

A new Code of Practice on discipline and grievance has been issued outlining what is considered 'fair and reasonable' behaviour when dealing with problems in the workplace. Unreasonable failure to follow the Code can result in an employment tribunal increasing any tribunal awards by 25 per cent.

Employers and employees should attempt to resolve any dispute informally — perhaps through mediation — before instigating formal procedures. However, where this does not resolve the issue you should ensure your procedures are fair and transparent.

- A Investigate the **facts**.
- B If there is a case to answer, you should **write** to the employee concerned explaining what the problem is.
- C Hold a **face-to-face** meeting to discuss the problem.
 - Employees have the right to be accompanied by a colleague or trade union representative.
- D Decide on appropriate action.
- E give the employee an opportunity to appeal against the finding.

- Include telephone training as part of the induction process (see 1.2). Train all employees how to handle enquiries, take and pass on messages and transfer calls.

3 Inappropriate conduct

3.1 State your position on **antisocial behaviour**.

- Make persistent rudeness, lewdness or swearing disciplinary offences.

3.2 Explain that all employees are expected to **dress** in ways that are appropriate to the working environment, and to maintain reasonable standards of hygiene.

- If protective clothing is necessary, supply it and make sure it is worn.
- If it is important that some employees, such as frontline staff, present a smart appearance, spell this out. Do not discriminate. If it is important for men to dress formally, it is important for women doing the same or equivalent work to do likewise.

3.3 Theft, fraud, violence and the possession or use of drugs are usually regarded as **gross misconduct**.

- In these cases, consider suspending the offender on full pay while you investigate the incident.
- You should follow the Acas Code of Practice, which sets out 'fair and reasonable' procedures.

4 Workplace rules

4.1 Decide on a realistic policy on **receiving personal phone calls**, given the circumstances of your business.

- There are some situations where stopping to take a call would be seriously disruptive. For example, on a production line.
- In less clear-cut cases, tell employees that they should keep personal calls to a reasonable minimum.

4.2 Discourage employees from **making personal calls**, and ban international calls.

- Explain that you make a point of periodically analysing outgoing phone calls and personal use can be quantified. (You

can get itemised bills from your telecoms supplier, listing your most called numbers.)

- Mobile phones are wide open to abuse, so you may need to set usage limits. The use of phonecards and telephone charge cards can help keep mobile phone bills down.
- Be careful about monitoring calls. You may fall foul of data protection laws.

4.3 You may need to limit **personal visitors**.

- Visitors should stay in the reception area, unless the employee has permission to show them around.

4.4 Establish a policy on personal use of **email** and the **Internet**.

- Personal email not only takes up time, but takes up space on the computer server, too.
- The company may be liable for anything downloaded from the Internet.

4.5 Do not let people use their own **software** or computer games in the office.

4.6 Communicate your **smoking policy**.

- All enclosed workplaces in the UK are required to be smoke free. This includes company cars and vans.
- Indoor smoking rooms are no longer allowed and all enclosed workplaces must display no-smoking signs.

The Smoke free England website provides further information and downloadable signs (www.smokefreeengland.co.uk).

4.7 Establish a policy on employees' use of their **own cars** for company business.

- Insurance is a problem, so some firms ban the use of private cars for company business. Take advice from your broker.
- Ask employees to confirm, in writing, that their private insurance covers them for business use.

5 Holidays

5.1 Decide how **holiday dates** are to be allocated, and how you are going to provide for cover during holiday periods.

- Most companies work on a 'first come, first served' system.
- Many companies put a limit of, for example, two weeks on the amount of holiday that

can normally be taken at any one time.

5.2 Set out your position on holiday **rollovers**.

- For example, you might stipulate that no more than one week of unused holiday can be rolled over into the next year.

5.3 Establish policies on **bank holidays** and **time off in lieu**.

5.4 Make it clear that employees need permission to take any **unpaid leave**.

- Any extensions to time away from the workplace should be agreed in advance. There may be tax implications if an employee adds a week's holiday to an overseas business trip.

6 Lateness and absence

6.1 If you keep standardised working hours, make it plain that **persistent lateness** is a disciplinary issue.

- Stipulate that employees must let you know if they are going to be late, and must report to their managers on arrival.

6.2 You cannot expect people to come to work if they are **genuinely ill**. But you can decide how much you are going to pay them, beyond the limits of statutory sick pay.

- You may want to set a limit on the number of days for which you provide full pay, but make exceptions where appropriate.
- Have a policy of monitoring absences and issue warnings to employees as soon as the level becomes unacceptable.

6.3 Set out your policy on leave and pay for **maternity**, paternity and adoptive parents, conforming to legal requirements.

- Employees are also entitled to unpaid parental leave.

6.4 All employees have a legal right to **dependant care leave**.

- Workers can take 'reasonable' unpaid time off to deal with an emergency involving a dependant.
- With the illness or death of relatives, it will pay to be compassionate.

6.5 Decide your policy on absences due to **domestic problems**.

- Be realistic. People in the throes of major marital crises are likely to feel their own problems must take priority over work.
- More minor domestic problems, such as a burst water pipe at home, may also require employees to take time off.

6.6 You will also need a policy on **jury service**.

- You may want to continue paying people, though the law does not oblige you to. Set a limit, or you could find yourself part-financing a six-month fraud trial. Many companies pay people for two weeks.
- It is illegal to subject employees to any detriment if they accept a call to jury service.

6.7 There are other reasons why people may have **absences from work**, such as Volunteer Reserve Service within the Army (TA), Navy, or Royal Marines, alongside being a Magistrate or School Governor.

- Ensure you have a policy to cover such absences.

7 Expenses and theft

Nip potential problems in the bud with clear policies about dishonest behaviour.

7.1 Lay down rules about the type and scale of **business expenses** employees can claim.

- What are the guidelines for meals, overnight accommodation and travel?
- What other expenses are allowable while out of the office?
- What can be spent on client entertainment?
- What restrictions are there on the use of a company credit card?

7.2 Emphasise that expenses claims will be **checked**. Make it clear that falsifying claims is theft and therefore a sackable offence.

- Insist on receipts as proof of expenditure (and for VAT purposes).
- All expenses should be signed off by the employee's line manager.

7.3 Take steps to prevent **petty theft**.

- Give one person responsibility for the most likely targets — stationery, stamps and use of the franking machine for personal post.
- Keep a detailed register of assets, including the serial number of each item and details of who is responsible for it. Decide what can be taken out of the office (eg portable computers) and any

procedures that must be followed.

- Make it clear that police will be involved in investigating any valuable missing stock.

8 Confidentiality

8.1 Divulging commercially significant **trade secrets** to a competitor, even unwittingly, could be grounds for dismissal.

- Consider restricting such information to the people who need to know.

8.2 If you want people to be careful about **sensitive information**, explain the need for discretion.

- Otherwise, junior finance assistants, for example, might inadvertently mention your business' cash problems to suppliers.

8.3 Decide which types of information must be kept in **locked cabinets**. For example, personnel files and payroll details.

9 Departures

Do not wait until someone leaves before you explain the procedures involved. Do it on day one, preferably in a company handbook, alongside the other key information in **2–9**.

9.1 Keep **notice** periods as short as possible.

- Consider how long it would take you to find and train a replacement.
- Even the most conscientious people will be gone, in spirit if not in body, once they have given in their notice.
- In cases of redundancy or dismissal, it is common for employees to leave straight away and receive pay in lieu of notice.

9.2 There should be a **job handover** where appropriate, especially if the employee is leaving on good terms.

- Get leavers to use the last few weeks to create 'job packs' for their successors, listing important contacts and information.

9.3 Use a standard checklist to identify all the **company property** that must be returned.

- For example, keys, credit card, security pass, car, laptop and mobile phone.

9.4 Except when someone retires, there is no reason for the company to contribute to a **gift** for a departing employee.

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