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## Staff Matters: Do I Really Need an Employee Handbook?

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By Jodi Schafer, SPHR, SHRM-SCP  
HRM Services

# Do I Really Need an Employee Handbook?

**Question:** I have a small practice with only three employees. With such a small practice, why do I need an employee handbook? What are the basic policies that I can get away with without a handbook?

**Answer:** If you have one employee or 20 employees, you need an employee handbook. This is the best tool to communicate your rules/expectations with your team, and it provides you with the first line of defense should you need to enforce a policy or respond to an employment claim. A handbook allows you to have a formal document, signed and acknowledged by the employee, to show that they were aware of your office policies and agreed to abide by them. Without it, it is your word against theirs — which is not a good situation.

It is important to include policies related to state and federal legal requirements in your handbook. These include policies related to being an Equal Opportunity Employer, anti-harassment and anti-discrimination, wage/pay and employment classification laws, etc.

Handbook length can vary greatly, but if minimalism is the goal, then in addition to policies related to legal requirements outlined above, I would suggest starting with the following policies:

**“At-will” status:** Clarifies that you do not have a contract of any kind with your employee and advises them that their employment is based solely on your “will” to employ them and their “will” to stay.

**Standards of conduct:** Contains specific expectations related to behavior and conduct.

**Compensation:** Outlines the terms and conditions of your pay practices, including your established seven-day workweek for payroll purposes, how hours are to be reported, eligibility for overtime, and when you pay your employees.

**Benefits:** Describes the benefits you offer and who is eligible for them. Including a summary in the handbook provides a helpful reference and ensures that consistent

information is shared with all your office employees.

**Communication:** Establishes expectations for staff and management. Employees are advised they have an obligation to report any incident they perceive as harassment or discrimination, and to communicate concerns of any kind regarding their employment. This policy is important. You want employees coming to you.

**Attendance:** Describes your expectations for reliable attendance and punctuality, as well as outlining your call-in procedures and ability to discipline/terminate for excessive absenteeism and/or tardiness. Unreliable attendance is a very common reason for discharging an employee. If the employee files for unemployment, you are going to be asked whether or not you had an attendance policy and whether or not the employee violated it. If you are unable to provide your written expectations (and proof that the employee knew about these expectations) then you are not only going to be down an employee, but probably on the hook for unemployment too.

**Discipline:** Informs your staff of the consequences you will enact if policies and procedures aren’t followed. List various courses of action you might take without listing them in any particular order as in a progressive discipline policy. This policy gives you teeth when dealing with non-compliance. If, however, the policy is not fairly and consistently administered, it can do great damage to morale, relationships, and productivity.

**Handbook acknowledgement:** This is a separate document from the handbook and provides evidence that your employee formally received the handbook, has read it, and agrees to abide by the policies outlined within it.

All of these policies should be carefully constructed. Poorly written policies may result in confusion, and illegal policies can create more serious liabilities. Have your handbook reviewed by a HR professional or an attorney before implementation. ●

*A sample, customizable handbook is available in the MDA’s Staff Matters® system, available for free download at [store.michigandental.org](http://store.michigandental.org).*