

UPDATE

Policies and Employee Handbooks

We show a short video (English and Spanish) that introduces the many facets of our vertically integrated business. The employees can see the kind of work they will be doing and, more importantly, how their work fits into the bigger picture. Also, we hope to impress upon them the diversity of opportunities available within our company. We strive for retention (i.e., to keep them after harvest and into the packing season) and for a high returnee ratio year-to-year.”

Annika Forester, Training Specialist,
Bear Creek Corporation

What Does an Employee Handbook Provide?

Business owners and managers should have a set of workplace policies, procedures, and expectations in place, whether their businesses have 1 employee or 500 employees. These policies and other conditions of employment may be outlined either formally or informally. Many agricultural employers have found written personnel policies helpful to guide decisions and clarify what workers and managers can expect of one another. Written policies can save administrative time, reduce uncertainty for employees, promote consistency of management action across supervisors and points in time, and help reduce the incidence of decisions that violate a public law or a private sense of fairness.



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Jeffrey E. Tranel—Colorado State University and
John P. Hewlett—University of Wyoming.

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Business policies are often described in an employee handbook. Such a handbook will often provide extensive information about business history and purpose, goals and values, administrative policies, organizational structure, procedures, rights and responsibilities. The existence of a handbook, however, does not make its policy content either logical or effective.

Some growers and producers have compiled employee handbooks from a combination of policy statements previously scattered in the back of a drawer, newly written expressions of principles residing in the back of somebody's mind, and "model" statements gleaned from other employers' handbooks. Not all farmers have the time to develop one, but reference books and consulting services provide example policies that can serve as a template or be modified for individual firms.

What Goes Into an Employee Handbook?

Like every company, every employee handbook is different. Owners or managers should not simply photocopy another company's handbook and distribute it to their own employees. A good employee handbook defines unique workplace rules and practices and should be written in a voice that reflects the vision and culture the owner/manager has built — or wants to develop.

Many employee handbooks cover similar topics and types of information, often these are organized into nine groups. Not all sections will be found in every employee handbook, but sufficient information about the company's policies will help employees better understand the business, meet legal obligations, and increase employees' sense of fairness.

- 1. Introduction.** Employees should be in alignment with the company's values, mission, and goals. Covering these details in a general introduction, can increase the business's chances for success.
- 2. General Employment Information.** Some businesses split this group into separate sections for hiring policies, employment status, time keeping and payroll, leaves of absences, etc.
- 3. Employee Benefits.** This category should include what benefits will be provided and when the benefits will be made available to employees.
- 4. Anti-Discrimination and Anti-Harassment Laws.** It's important to list the current federal, state, and local laws that apply to the business's workforce.
- 5. Standards of Conduct.** Most managers have expectations for how employees will conduct themselves on the job. As a result, policies should be geared to specific on-the-job conduct, beyond the requirements of law. See Ag Help Wanted Update: CODE OF CONDUCT | What is It, Who Needs One? for more information.
- 6. Confidentiality / Non-Disclosure Agreement / Conflict of Interest.** Not every company includes this section, but some businesses may have concern about employees sharing information with a competitor or doing something in conflict with company values.

Employee Handbook

Introduction – title, welcome, company values, mission statement, and employee acknowledgment

General Employment Information – employment categories, hiring procedures, records, probationary periods, meal and rest breaks, payment schedules, performance reviews, safety and security procedures, resignation, and termination policies

Employee Benefits – vacation, child care, holidays, sick leave, retirement plans, insurance, vehicle and equipment use, and training opportunities

Anti-Discrimination and Anti-Harassment Laws – a list of federal, state, local, and company policies covering discrimination and harassment

Standards of Conduct – dress code, drug and alcohol use, ethics, personal technology use, social media policy, gifts from others, smoking, attendance, punctuality, and conflict resolution

Confidentiality / Non-Disclosure Agreement / Conflict of Interest – a list and examples of forms to be signed by employees

Disciplinary Policies – policies and procedures for disciplinary actions and appeals

Disclaimer – a statement that the employee handbook is not a contract between the employer and employee

Miscellaneous – procedures pertaining to a pandemic and other relevant information

7. **Disciplinary Policies.** The employee handbook should explain the process and consequences of not following policies, laws, and procedures.
8. **Disclaimer.** It is important that employees understand that the employee handbook is not a contract, but rather an organized list of rules and procedures.
9. **Miscellaneous.** This section includes all other information to be shared with employees.

Developing an Employee Handbook

Many business owners, especially of small or new businesses, realize they have not yet formalized the company's policies. In some cases, policies may not even exist.

Farmers and ranchers who "haven't had the time" to create a policy handbook can do so at a modest cost and a few hours of time at the keyboard. Several employee handbook templates and guidelines can be found on the internet. While the handbooks (actual and examples) should not be copied word-for-word, they can provide inspiration or ideas. See AgHelpWanted.org for a listing of useful sites.

Computer software packages now offer similar aid, plus the ability to print policies in handbook form bearing a company name. The best handbook programs cover a large number of policy topics generally pertinent to firms in various industries, offer choices within each area, allow the user to edit draft wording, and provide information to aid in understanding the standard options.

A good place to start developing an employee handbook is to draft a company values statement and mission statement. Small or new business owners will want to first think about their personal values and which of those should be emphasized for employees. Further, business owners will want to incorporate a value system and culture that will motivate employees to do their best.

Policies can be developed to attract and maintain a motivated, high performing workforce with clearly written vision and mission statements. It is important that policies be included in the handbook which the desired workers can embrace. For example, a strict or overbearing policy may turn off workers seeking workplaces that promote flexibility and openness.

The employee handbook is not a contract with employees. However, it should contain a list of federal, state, and local laws regarding employees and how the company will abide by those laws. Some software packages and web sites will help an employer determine which laws apply and which do not (certain agricultural businesses are exempt from some labor laws). Also, the state government's website will have detailed descriptions of the state's labor laws. AgHelpWanted.org offers links and recent updates on many of these details.

Sharing the Employee Handbook

Simply having policies, even good ones, is not worth much if the people whose decisions they are to guide do not know they exist. Some employers carefully stratify the distribution of their policies to employees on a legal or operational need-to-know basis.



"We have both an Employee Handbook and a Manager's Guide to the Employee Handbook which elaborates on handbook issues and gives forms and guidance the managers may need to administer the items in the handbook. With 650 employees on seven different farms, we don't give every employee a copy of every policy unless there is a real need. There are several policies that we do distribute to our employees both in English and Spanish.

I have a hierarchy of importance. There are three policies that we distribute in writing and require employees to sign an acknowledgement of receiving:

- Harassment and Discrimination Policy*
- Drug-free Workplace Policy*
- Information Security Policy (for those who have access to company computers)*

There are several policies/procedures we give to employees as applicable to their jobs:

- Hazard Communications Program*
- Hearing Conservation Program*
- Personal Protective Equipment Program*
- Respiratory Protection*

Other policies that are available anytime to the employees if they want to see are:

- Workplace Violence Policy*
- Employee Leave Policy*
- Family Medical Leave Policy*
- Educational Reimbursement Policy*
- Employee Loan Policy*
- Workplace Searches Policy*
- Emergency Action Plan (by farm)*

The remainder of our policies are not published for employees but are mentioned in our handbook with a note to ask the farm managers if the employee has questions."

Seasonality of agricultural operations includes a burden of needing to communicate policies more often and to more people. Most agricultural employers also have the challenge of communicating policies in at least two languages, for example English and Spanish. Policies can help employees perform well, both individually and as work teams, when they are well formulated and accurately portray the philosophy and expectations of the company.

Policies can actually work against and hurt the business if they are not communicated, understood, and followed. It is difficult to hold employees accountable for not observing policies they do not understand or have not read. This can breed distrust and create the impression that the company's real policy is contrary to its written one. Attempts to enforce policies that have been practically ignored in the past could be challenged for being selective, discriminatory, and arbitrary.

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Ag Help Wanted: Guidelines for Managing Agricultural Labor is an educational guidebook designed to assist every person who currently manages or expects to manage human resources on farms, ranches, nurseries, dairies, and other agricultural operations. The text includes chapters covering:

- Communication and Problem Solving | Formal Communication and Written Documents;
- Communication and Problem Solving | Communicating the Employment Contract; and
- Communication and Problem Solving | Policies and Employee Handbooks.

RESOURCES:

AG HELP WANTED: Guidelines for Managing Agricultural Labor | Chapter 6: Communication and Problem Solving.

<https://AgHelpWanted.org>. (accessed May 2021).

Ag Help Wanted Update: CODE OF CONDUCT | What is It, Who Needs One?

<https://aghelpwanted.org/FrameUpdates.htm>. AGWU-20210511001. May 2021.

"How to Create an Employee Handbook for Your Small Business: The Ultimate Guide". SCORE Association and Small Business Administration.

<https://www.score.org> (accessed May 2021).

"Farm Employee Handbook Template".

<https://cornell.app.box.com/s/k7d7ft35s9ax2yaxadp8yo9g1hjun96o> (accessed May 2021).

"Agriculture Employee Handbook Template". Michigan State University Extension.

<https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/agriculture-employee-handbook-template> (accessed May 2021).

O'Rourke, Melissa. Farm Employee Management: Do We Need an Employee Handbook. Ag Decision Maker. Iowa State University Extension.

<https://www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/wholefarm/pdf/c1-72.pdf> (accessed May 2021).



AgHelpWanted makes its programs and materials available to all individuals regardless of race, color, national origin, age, disability, or where applicable, sex, marital status, family status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program.

