

Policies and Employee Handbooks

Many agricultural employers have found written personnel policies helpful to guide decisions and clarify what workers and managers can expect of one another. 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.

Policies are often communicated in employee handbooks, which provide more extensive information than the employment understanding about business history and purpose, goals and values, administrative policies, organizational structure, procedures, rights and responsibilities. The very 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, new 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 be used verbatim or modified for individual firms.

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. Handbook topics included in one good package, for example, are organized into the following nine groups, and several are noted as "legally important" to include in employee handbooks:

Introduction: Title Page; Welcome; Organization Description; Introductory Statement; Employee Acknowledgment

Employment: Nature of; Employee Relations; EEO; Relatives; Physical Exams; Immigration Law; Conflicts of Interest; Outside Employment; Non-Disclosure (of proprietary information)

Employment Status and Records: Employment Categories; File Access; Reference Checks; Record Updates; Probationary Period; Applications; Performance Evaluation

Employee Benefits: General; Vacation; Child Care; Holidays; Workers' Compensation; Sick Leave; Voting Time; Bereavement; Relocation; Jury Duty; Witness Duty; Benefits Continuation (COBRA)

***Policies guide
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expectations.***

Timekeeping/Payroll: Timekeeping; Paydays; Termination; Severance Pay; Pay Advances; Pay Corrections; Deductions and Setoffs

Work Conditions and Hours: Safety; Work Schedules; Phones and Mail; Smoking; Rest and Meals; Overtime; Equipment and Vehicle Use; Emergency Closings

Leaves of Absence: Medical; Family; Personal; Educational; Military; Maternity

Employee Conduct and Discipline: Conduct and Work Rules; Drugs and Alcohol; Sexual and Other Harassment; Attendance and Punctuality; Personal Appearance; Return of Property; Resignation; Security Inspections; Solicitation; Drug Testing

Miscellaneous: AIDS

Policy topics treated by any software package are not equally pertinent or suitable to agricultural firms. Growers, however, can simply neglect topics that do not apply and adapt or augment others to fit. Perhaps because of the care taken to ensure compatibility with laws, standard policy statements may come off as rather stiff or bureaucratic to a peach picker or D-6 chisel operator, so it is usually a good idea to edit for appropriate style.

These references can help in planning terms and conditions of employment. But more than a checklist, a policy software package is a tool for thoughtfully developing and producing a handbook that tells about organizational culture as well as expectations of people at work. It communicates to employees, creditors, and other third parties.

Farmers and ranchers who “haven’t had the time” to create their first policy handbooks can do so with a modest dollar outlay and a few hours of time at the keyboard. The price of software is paid back to the business many times over when end results are more rapid orientation, improved retention, avoidance of lawsuits, or people working together more cooperatively.

Handbook references can be found through standard search engines of the World Wide Web. See *AgHelpWanted.org* for a listing of useful sites.



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 their dissemination of policies to employees on a legal or operational need-to-know basis. One general manager describes how he shares policy information as follows:

“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.”



If policies are not communicated, understood, and followed, they can actually work against and hurt the business. 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 could be challenged for being selective, discriminatory, and arbitrary.



An orientation to company policies

The following describes how one large vertically integrated farm corporation introduces its company policies during an orientation for new employees:

At our company, we want to go beyond . . . mere compliance. Our goals are multiple-compliance, as well as hopefully welcoming a new person into our organizational culture, with the objective of optimally initiating a successful, satisfying, and mutually beneficial relationship.

We require a one-hour 'corporate orientation' for all seasonal employees, briefly reviewing key policies (harassment, drugs, absence, benefits) and the more mundane information (where to park, how to get your ID badge, discounts etc.) before employees report to their work assignment. This is paid time.

The orientations are offered in both English and Spanish, and employees are scheduled according to their preference. All new hires receive a handbook, available in both English and Spanish, and are oriented to where to find key information. At the beginning of the orientation, we explain that the session is an overview, and that everything explained in the session may be found in the handbook in greater detail. Employees sign an acknowledgment that they have received the handbook and that they basically agree with the policies contained therein. Another objective of the orientation besides covering the legal bases is to give the new employees an overview of what our company is all about. We start with our corporate philosophy, mission, and values.

I am sincere in presenting this material and point out that these are ideals and that, as always in life, reality often exists somewhere short of our ideals. But at least we have the ideals formed, verbalized, and disseminated to every single person entering our organization. I challenge all new employees to keep the philosophy and values in mind when they are working. Should they ever find their work reality in disagreement with these values, they are encouraged to raise questions about the processes they feel are diverging from the ideals. Perhaps in doing so, they will unlock the solution to the problems we have not yet solved.

We show a short video (again, 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.

I try to engage participants in active critical thinking throughout the orientation. For example, rather than simply reciting the absence policy, I ask them, “If you’re working with a team of six or eight people and one of your coworkers is absent a lot, what effect does that have on your work?” This stimulates comments from the whole group, since everyone can relate to this—have to work harder, faster, more stress, more accidents, bad feelings etc. Then I emphasize to them that for these reasons, it’s important to notify us as early as possible when they must be absent from work. So, in effect, the employee has been engaged in a generative process of forming, identifying, and valuing an expectation that they can relate to. In this way, when employees can relate to the rules, they are much more likely to cooperate with them.

To do all this is expensive. That extra hour of pay for several thousand people each year adds up. And printing a nice, comprehensive (but not too detailed) handbook in both English and Spanish isn’t cheap—not to mention producing a video that must be revised every couple of years. As for quality of translation, we do our best to source a qualified, professional translator; then a group of biliterate employees edit heavily in order to make it “sound right.” One of the great challenges we still need to master is getting the original text, in English, written at a level that better meets our audience’s reading skill level.

In the end—will all this save our behinds when the lawsuit comes along? I certainly don’t know. However, I think at the very least we can definitely show due diligence in the matter, and I think that’s more than many can say at this point.

Annika Forester, Training Specialist, Bear Creek Corporation



Seasonality of agricultural operations presents the burden of having to communicate policies more often and to more people. Most agricultural employers also have the challenge of communicating policies in at least two languages: English and Spanish. But if policies are well formulated and accurately portray the philosophy and expectations of the company, they help employees perform well both individually and as work teams.