

Human Resource Policy Manuals – A Necessary Association Resource

Capturing explicit knowledge for an organization's most important resource - people - is a key first step in improving an organization's knowledge management practices. Tools such as manuals are often used to capture knowledge that supports employees and managers as they conduct association business.

Associations with five or more employees often have an Employee Policy Manual, while associations with three or fewer employees rarely, if ever, take the time to develop this important resource. Having policies in a manual that is accessible to employees is just as valuable in a two person office as it is in a ten person office.

Committing to having a Human Resources Policy Manual goes beyond initial compilation. Maintaining it is a must, and involves timely reviews and updating, employee/volunteer and manager orientation, and compliance.

Having a manual will also reduce association risk, such as potential legal liability situations. A manual also demonstrates the value an organization places in its employees and volunteers, and removes uncertainty. Employees and volunteers will know up front precisely how they will be treated and what is expected of them.

Policy language and format

Policies and accompanying information should use simple language to ensure that all employees and volunteers understand it. Avoid the use of negative language. It is important to ensure clarity in all of your policies - phrases denoting mandatory provisions should be firm, using phrases like "will be", "must be", or "are required". Discretionary items should use phrases such as "may be" or "have the authority to".

Manuals are often presented to employees and volunteers in a ring binder format to allow for easy revisions and additions. In recent years, manuals are being placed on association websites in a restricted access (members only) area.

It is highly recommended that employees acknowledge the initial receipt of and review of the HR Policy Manual, as well as subsequent updates and revisions. All updates should be clear, and an opportunity for employees to ask questions should be provided. As managers play a key role in enforcement of the policies and the procedures provided in a manual, it may be necessary to provide them with additional training to help them apply and enforce any new policy.

Sample HR manuals or handbooks are widely available on the Internet and through other sources such as the Canadian Society of Association Executives. Manuals should be customized to each organization's unique environment – in this instance, one size doesn't necessarily fit all. Benchmarking with other associations is a very good idea, and is highly encouraged.

The Employee Section of the Human Resource Manual usually lists all key policies and supportive procedures. It assists in ensuring that all employees are treated in the manner planned and intended. It captures explicit knowledge, serves as an effective orientation tool and is a quick reference that provides necessary direction and reduces uncertainty.

If an employee is unclear on an employment issue or a number of employees frequently ask questions about a particular matter, you're likely missing an important policy. And remember, the Human Resource Manual is deemed part of an employment contract, and as such, it is important to ensure that what is included in it can actually be delivered.

Checklist of Possible Employee Policies

For each of the following possible policies ask yourself:

Do we have a policy for this? If so, does it need updating?

Do we need a policy for this? Is it required for our situation?

WHAT IS EXPECTED

- Organizational Policy on Staff Treatment
- Service Standards

TERMS OF SERVICES

- Attendance and Tardiness
- Acceptance of Gifts
- Alcohol and Drug Abuse
- Breaks and Meals
- Code of Conduct
- Conflicts of Interest
- Confidentiality and Copyright
- Dress and Appearance
- Employment of Relatives
- Hours of Work
- Interpersonal Conflicts
- Overtime
- Outside Work (other jobs, etc.)
- Parking
- Personal Phone Calls and Mail

- Probationary Periods
- Smoking Policy
- Safety
- Telecommuting
- Unauthorised Use of Property (Internet, E-mail, and equipment)

WHAT WE ARE COMMITTED TO

- Affirmative Action
- Appeals
- Change of Position
- Copies of Policies
- Court Leave
- Complaints
- Discipline Employee Records
- Employee Training and Tuition reimbursement
- Exit Interview
- Harassment in the Workplace
- Insurance and Health Benefits (Disability, AD&D, life insurance, vision, dental, etc.)
- Job Descriptions
- Layoffs
- Loans and Pay Advances
- Orientation
- Other leave (with pay, without pay, paternity, maternity, bereavement, etc.)
- Pay Days and Method
- Performance Evaluation and Compensation Review
- Pension Benefits
- References
- Sick Leave
- Statutory Leave
- Termination
- Travel Expense
- Vacation Leave

Some manuals classify policies into different sections other than those provided above. Other methods of classification may include sections such as Employment, Benefits, Learning, Relationships, Assistance and Performance Management.

Some current and future HR policy issues to look out for include privacy rights in the workplace, new types of leave provisions, wrongful discharge, after hours conduct, and discrimination action and remedies. For example, the Government of Ontario enacted a new Employment Standards Act. Policy manuals for associations in Ontario should include relevant standards and use similar language. The Act has new provisions for rest periods and emergency leave, pregnancy and

parental leave, hours of work and overtime. Other provinces are also amending legislation – change must be monitored.

Employment law covers most areas of employer/employee relationships. Federal and provincial governments change legislation affecting the relationship on an ongoing basis. Policies must be consistent with legislation. This means regular reviews and updating of your manual. Another time to consider new policies or adjustments should be right after strategic and business plans are updated.

Not all HR activities are covered by policies and documented processes. Some possible HR issues and practices do not need to be covered in a policy and procedures manual. As a result, association managers will sometimes be required to make decisions that involve managing the human resource according to the organization's strategic intents and values.

Best practices can be applied to ensure human resources are efficiently and effectively being employed. A few of these practices for employees include:

- Contemporary salary administration policies and compensation programs are established and utilized.
- Employee salaries and benefits reflect the market and are sufficiently competitive to attract and retain talented staff.
- Position descriptions have been written, based upon thorough job analyses. They link to plans and are regularly updated.
- Employee policies and practices are in full compliance with the letter and spirit of the law and are documented in a policy manual and distributed to staff.
- Policies are regularly reviewed and updated and cover key activity such as recruitment, hiring, termination, work rules, training, performance and compliance with government regulations.
- Individual staff performance is evaluated periodically, at least annually, against predetermined performance standards, and procedures are established to ensure individual understanding of these standards as they apply to each staff member. Changes in compensation are reflective of these evaluations.
- The association has a training plan linked to strategy and required organizational competencies, and allocates financial resources for professional and skill development of staff.

The good news is that positive changes are occurring in the development of HR Policy Manuals. Through my involvement with the Association Management Education program, I have noticed increased activity by associations in this area. There is a move to improve manuals and make policies more inclusive, and more frequent reviews are occurring to ensure new legislation is captured and HR policies are consistent with organizations' intended strategic directions. Improvements are not only for employees but also for volunteers. Is it perhaps time to establish or update a Human Resources Policy Manual in your association?

This column features innovation and practical solutions applied to challenges, trends, issues, and opportunities for the association community. Column editor Jim Pealow, MBA, CMA, CAE is a consultant and the Association Management Education Program Lead Instructor/Coach for CSAE. He can be reached at jim@amces.com.