New Dynamics

Policies and practice

Employee handbook: an adaptable framework

Organise an employee handbook around the questions people need answered at work.

Practical guidance · Worked examples · Printable worksheet

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Inside this guide

Read in order for the full approach, or use the linked contents to find a section. The final worksheet gives you space to record decisions and next steps.

Organise an employee handbook around the questions people need answered at work. This practical guide to employee handbook brings together a step-by-step approach, illustrative examples, a reusable worksheet and answers to common questions. Start with the section closest to your current challenge, then use the working session to turn the guidance into a clear next action.

Give employees a reliable starting point

An employee handbook brings together everyday information and the routes to approved policies. Its purpose is to make the organisation easier to navigate. It should tell people where to find a current answer and who can help when their situation does not fit the usual pattern.

This is an adaptable framework. Local employment rules, contractual arrangements and consultation requirements need review before a handbook is adopted. Do not describe terms as contractual or non-contractual without confirming the organisation’s intended legal position.

Build the handbook around employee questions

Getting started: describe induction, essential contacts, equipment and access. Link to the approved process for correcting personal information.

Working arrangements: explain where employees find working hours, attendance, remote-work arrangements and time-off procedures. Keep amounts, eligibility and local variations in approved policies rather than copying inconsistent summaries.

Pay and development: show the route for payroll questions, performance conversations, learning opportunities and internal moves. State which team owns each process.

Respect and support: link conduct expectations, equal opportunity, anti-harassment, grievance and whistleblowing routes. Include an alternative contact where the usual manager is involved in a concern.

Changing or leaving: explain where to find role-change, notice, return-of-equipment and access-closure information without inventing universal notice periods.

Use plain instructions and controlled links

For each topic, write what the employee needs to do, where to start and what happens next. “Submit a request through the approved leave system before making arrangements” is more useful than a paragraph describing the organisation’s commitment to leave administration.

Use descriptive links and accessible formats. Check that employees without a desk or company laptop can reach the handbook. Provide a version owner and an effective date. Keep a record of superseded versions without leaving them as competing current copies.

Worked example: a leave question

Illustrative scenario: a new starter wants to request leave but finds three different documents. The handbook contains one short explanation and a link to the approved local leave policy. That policy owns eligibility and entitlements; the handbook owns navigation.

The employee can see where to submit a request, who approves it and where to raise a question. When the policy changes, one authoritative document is updated and the handbook link remains valid.

Handbook completion checklist

- Confirm the operating entity, covered population and local appendices.
- Add actual service contacts and accessible reporting alternatives.
- Link each topic to its approved policy or system.
- Check working arrangements, pay, leave and local terms with the right reviewers.
- Remove outdated pandemic-specific wording unless it still applies.
- Test common employee questions with a new starter and a manager.
- Record approval, communication and the next scheduled review.

A receipt acknowledgement confirms that a document was provided. It should not be treated as proof that every employee understands every policy or as a substitute for required agreement.

Keep the handbook current

Assign topic owners and a central editor. Review when laws, systems or working arrangements change as well as on a routine schedule. Tell employees what changed in language they can understand.

Use the handbook writing guide for the drafting and approval workflow, and the code of conduct framework for practical behaviour examples.

Put the guide into practice

Set aside a working session with the people who own this process and one or two people who experience it. Use a fictional or appropriately authorised case, so the discussion can be specific without sharing unnecessary personal information. The purpose is to leave with a usable decision or document, not just agreement that the topic matters.

Prepare the case

Ask a new starter to find answers to three common questions: how to request leave, where to report an access problem and how to raise a sensitive concern. Observe the route without coaching. Note whether the handbook supplies a next action or merely states a broad organisational commitment.

Write the starting assumptions down before discussing solutions. If the group disagrees on what happened, identify the information needed to resolve that difference rather than building a plan on an untested story.

Work through the decision

Choose one section and identify the authoritative policy behind it. Rewrite the handbook text as a short explanation with a clear link and contact. Check that eligibility, amounts and local conditions are not duplicated in conflicting versions. Confirm whether the topic belongs in a common handbook or a local appendix.

Ask each participant to explain the proposed decision in their own words. Differences in interpretation often reveal an unclear criterion, a missing responsibility or an instruction that will be difficult to follow.

Test an exception

Test the document for an employee without a desk, someone using assistive technology and someone whose manager is involved in a concern. Check accessible formats and alternative contacts. A handbook that works only for employees with standard system access leaves an important part of the audience unsupported.

Record what changes in this situation and what remains the same. An exception should lead to a clear next step, with an owner, rather than an informal workaround that nobody can explain later.

Agree the handoff

Give the central editor a list of topic owners, approved links and review triggers. Confirm who communicates updates and where old versions are retained. The published handbook should make it easy to identify the current version without asking employees to compare several similarly named files.

Finish by confirming the owner, the next action and the date when the result will be reviewed. Give the person receiving the work enough context to continue without repeating the whole discussion.

Frequently asked questions

What should an employee handbook include?

Include practical information about starting work, everyday arrangements, pay questions, development, conduct, support and changes or departure. The exact contents depend on the organisation and local requirements. Link to approved detailed policies instead of copying every rule into one document. Prioritise the questions employees need to answer and make the route to individual advice clear.

Is an employee handbook legally binding?

That depends on its wording, the employment arrangements and applicable law. Do not assume a generic label settles the question. Have the appropriate local reviewer confirm how the handbook relates to contracts and which changes require consultation or agreement. This guide provides a content framework, not a legal determination of an organisation’s handbook or employment terms.

How often should a handbook be updated?

Use a regular review schedule and update when an authoritative policy, system, contact or legal requirement changes. Assign topic owners so the central editor hears about those changes. Check links and contacts between major revisions. Communicate material updates in plain language, and keep approval and version records so the organisation can identify what employees were given at a particular time.

Review the first cycle

Test the published handbook with employees who were not involved in drafting it. Check whether they can find the correct policy and explain the next step. Use repeated questions as evidence that a section needs improving. Retire obsolete copies from ordinary access while preserving the required version history.

Keep a brief record of what was tried, what participants found useful and what needs to change. Compare the result with the original problem rather than judging success only by completion. If the process created extra work without improving clarity, quality or support, simplify it and test again. Share the agreed change with the people who will use it, and name the person responsible for keeping the guidance current.

About New Dynamics

New Dynamics connects goals, feedback, recognition and reviews around the way organisations work. This guide is published by the New Dynamics Editorial Team as part of our practical library for HR leaders, managers and People teams.

Use the examples and worksheets to structure your own discussions and adapt them to your organisation. Illustrative scenarios are not customer case studies. Policy and employment guidance needs appropriate local review before adoption.

For questions about this guide, corrections or a conversation about your performance management process, email contact@new-dynamics.com. Explore the complete guide library for related resources.

Your working worksheet

Use the prompts from this guide to prepare one real conversation or decision. Keep personal or sensitive information in your organisation’s approved records. This page is for your own working notes.

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Link each topic to its approved policy or system.

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Record approval, communication and the next scheduled review.

Discuss your next step with New Dynamics: contact@new-dynamics.com