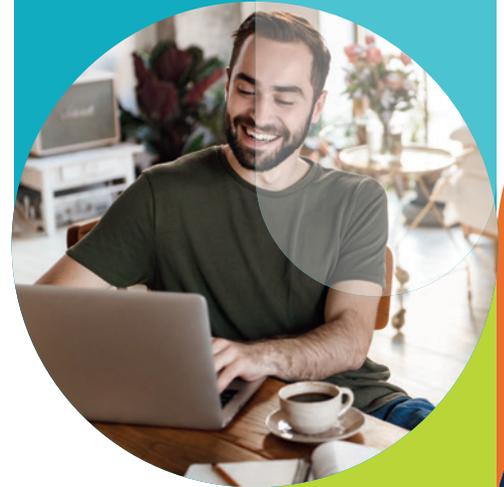


Designing an Employee Handbook for a Remote or Hybrid Workforce



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A sizable portion of the workforce learned how to be remote during the pandemic and loved the freedom and flexibility. And in response, organizations are adapting to these new ways of working, allowing workers to remain home-based, offering hybrid work policies or making new positions remote. But when an organization is hybrid or fully remote, getting the employee handbook right presents a new challenge.

A fully remote or hybrid organization likely does not have the same kind of workplace culture as a traditional in-person workplace. Meeting up with the team for happy hour or dropping by a colleague's cube are not options when everyone is in a box on a screen. But the remote- or hybrid-focused handbook should still embody the culture of the organization. It should still outline expectations the employer has of its employees and how they should treat each other. The handbook must still lay out employee rights and responsibilities.

As you look to adapt your organization's handbook to meet the needs of remote or hybrid employees, consider these questions:

What new policies do you need?

Perhaps the most important policy you'll include will originate not from HR, but from IT: the data security policy. Work with IT to draft a new policy or expand an existing policy to include the security measures remote employees need to take to protect company data at home and in public spaces. This policy can live both in the handbook and as a standalone policy, or you may have a brief reference to it in the handbook that links to the actual policy. Provided employees are well aware of and understand the expectations, the policy will be effective.

You'll also want to include a [remote work](#) or [hybrid work](#) policy. Here are some do's and don'ts.

DO:

- Define what remote or hybrid work is for your organization. Is it the ability to work anywhere at any time or are there parameters like defined business hours or a requirement that employees be within a certain country or jurisdiction? Will employees be expected to meet face-to-face at certain times?
- If offering a hybrid model, define what hybrid means. Who decides which day(s) employees will need to be in the office? The team? The division? The individual employee?
- Consider defining what roles are remote versus hybrid, if applicable (e.g., if IT roles can be fully remote, but salespeople follow a hybrid model, define this). Not only should this be in individual job descriptions, but the definition should also be in the handbook along with a description of the general types of roles that can be remote or hybrid. It is possible that some employees whose role cannot be remote will want to be promoted or transfer, so give

those employees a heads-up in the handbook.

- Define what services the employee must have access to in order to work remotely—for instance, reliable power, internet or a dedicated workspace.
- Remind employees of their obligations to follow IT rules concerning data security, protected or confidential information, and use of public Wi-Fi, for example.

DON'T:

- Do not include language that states that if an employee's performance drops off, they will be required to return to the office. That's an issue for the manager to address with the employee on an individual basis.
- Do not include language relating to dress codes or family member care responsibilities. The individuals you hire should be responsible to know what is expected of them. Including these items demonstrates a lack of trust.

Keep in mind that remote employees are generally subject to the employment laws of the locality and state where they perform their work. For this reason, it's critical for employers to be familiar with and comply with the state and local employment laws in effect where their remote employees are physically located and the work is being performed. So determine which state and local employment laws apply—for instance, wage and hour laws, leave laws and posting requirements—and then choose the best approach for including any related policies in the handbook.

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What policies need tweaking?

Many of the policies found in a handbook for a traditional, in-person workforce will also appear in a remote or hybrid workforce handbook—with tweaks. Here are some examples:

- **Harassment:** In a handbook for remote workers, the definitions of what is harassment will likely stay the same, but examples will include various communication channels, like instant messaging, Slack, Teams, social media. These other means of communication could be the primary source of harassment in a remote setting.
- **Attendance:** In a remote world, attendance likely looks different than “you need to be in the building promptly at 9 am.” This policy should accurately reflect what is expected. Does the organization have “business hours” when everyone is expected to be available or working regardless of where they are located? If so, then the attendance policy should reflect that.
- **Paid Time Off (or sick leave and vacation):** The procedures for requesting time away from work are also likely different in a remote setting. Some organizations might not want to track this time as long as the work is getting done. Others might have a more formalized process for requesting and taking time off. This information should be clearly explained.
- **Confidentiality:** Protecting an organization’s information becomes trickier when everyone is in their homes. Their families, friends and even household workers or repair people might come into contact with the organization’s information. It is critical for remote employees to understand their role in protecting company information while in the comfort of their own homes or other non-work locations. Ensure your confidentiality policy describes employee responsibilities. This is likely to dovetail with data security policies, so cross reference those policies in the confidentiality policy, too.
- **Leaves:** The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) may not apply to some employers with more than 50 employees if those employees are spread throughout the country with no central location. So if the FMLA doesn’t apply, will the organization still offer some FMLA-like (but not actual FMLA) leave? And, because leave requirements vary from state to state, consider whether your organization should offer to all employees across all jurisdictions uniform leave benefits that match the most generous state or local requirements. Doing so will ease the administrative burden and help create a more cohesive organizational culture.
- **Wage and Hour:** If nonexempt employees are working from home, tracking their work hours to make sure they are paid correctly becomes more challenging. The policy should explain what the organization expects, specifically how to accurately report time and why off-the-clock work is not permitted.
- **Multi-State Issues:** With employees located in different states, keeping track of notices, protected classes and state-specific employee rights seems like a full-time job. Consider adding all the state-specific notices to the main section of the handbook with any state-specific benefits listed in an addendum. It is not unusual for a handbook to have addendums, but the goal is to include in the addendums those policies that address compliance with what each state requires of the organization (based on the number of employees, physical operations, etc.).

It is critical for remote employees to understand their role in protecting company information while in the comfort of their own homes or other non-work locations.

Where will the handbook live?

Once the handbook is complete, the next decision is where and how will employees access it. There are many options within some HR technology solutions, for instance, within an HR app on the employee's phone or in the timekeeping system (if different). HR's site on the intranet is also a popular place to keep it. The trick is to make the handbook as easy to find as possible. Hiding the policy away or only providing paper copies will mean employees cannot get to the information they need when they need it.

Consider posting your handbook as a single, complete document with hyperlinks to specific policies, to make it easier for employees to navigate. They won't have to comb through all the wage and hour policies to get to the FMLA policy they need.

How will handbook acknowledgements be kept?

During onboarding, most employers require employees to sign off on their receipt and acknowledgement of the handbook. This is no different in a remote or hybrid setting even though it may all be done online using digital signatures. The trick is to make sure the acknowledgement still makes it to the employee's personnel file.

Conclusion

A handbook tailored to a remote or hybrid workforce is tricky. It can be a real challenge to cover the unique situations remote work presents as well as the additional jurisdictions. Focus on building a handbook that views employees as trustworthy, notifies them of their rights, and is easy for them to find and understand when they need it.

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