

Using Your Employee Handbook to Attract Talent



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Yes, you can use your handbook to attract talent. It may surprise you, but it's true. Handbooks are a reflection of an organization and can be used by candidates to determine whether a recruiter's sales pitch is a bait and switch or the real deal. Not only do the policies contained in the handbook make a difference, but the organization's willingness to share its policies with candidates can be seen as an indicator of how transparent the organization is, how it communicates with employees and ultimately whether it is a great or not-so-great place to work. With that in mind, read on for tips on using the handbook to recruit the best talent.



Put It Out There

Handbooks have often been seen as secret business information. Organizations have gone out of their way to keep handbooks out of their competitors' hands, even occasionally copyrighting them. But what about the handbook is truly secret? No handbook contains the secret recipe, the master growth plan or any real financials, so why keep it hidden only to be seen once the offer letter is accepted?

Want to really attract top talent? Put the handbook out in the world, on social media, on the Careers web page, and use it to promote who the organization is as an employer and why it's a great place to work.

Candidates want to make wise decisions when finding a new employer. They want to know what to expect. A prospective employer's handbook can give them a good indication of what the work environment is like and prepare them for their future career. So why not provide your handbook to candidates who want to do additional research on their prospective employer?

One concern may be that some other organization will steal the handbook or policies from it. Business leaders may be particularly worried about this. In evaluating any risk, look at what the potential harm could be and determine if that harm outweighs the benefit. If the competition decides to offer the same policies, what does that mean for the organization's bottom line? Policies alone are not going to make or break an organization, but the ability to recruit and retain top talent could.

Additionally, transparency is more than a trend. As more and more states and localities require organizations to

share their pay scales in job announcements, employers should take these new laws as signs that being upfront and transparent about the terms and conditions of employment early in the employment relationship is a good thing. Candidates deserve to know what to expect and the handbook can give them a really good sense of what working for the organization might be like.

Explain Who the Organization Is and Who It Wants to Be

Organizations that have taken the time to define their mission and values have an advantage when it comes to putting their handbooks out into the world. A well-described mission and values statement can draw candidates into the organization. While this is especially true for organizations that serve the public or the greater good, any company can leverage a strong mission and values statement to lure great candidates. The statement should be prominent in the handbook, ideally some of the first words an employee or candidate reads.

A true test of the organization's adherence to the mission and values is whether they are reflected in the organization's policies. The values may be reflected in handbook policies that address diversity and inclusion, antidiscrimination, giving back to the community, educational assistance, or leave for family care, bereavement and other life needs that may go beyond what is required by law.

For example, if the organization truly values diversity, the antidiscrimination policy will reflect this value. The policy might read:

Every team member is valued for who they are and what they bring to the team. Every team member's life experiences help us be a better company, and team members should feel comfortable sharing their ideas and concerns. We strive to make our workplace one where everyone is encouraged to share and does share. No one will be treated differently or discriminated against based on their [insert list of protected characteristics] ...

Candidates want to make wise decisions when finding a new employer. They want to know what to expect.

A value of diversity can also be seen in the time and attendance policy. For example, the policy might read:

We understand that a variety of life expectations, including family or pet care, may interrupt a traditional 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. workday or Monday to Friday workweek. All team members are encouraged to be available for meetings and calls between the hours of 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., but you may complete your work at times that best work for you provided you are able to complete the work to best serve our clients. Nonexempt team members will be expected to accurately complete all time records regardless of when you work.

Acknowledging life challenges with flexibility is a hallmark of diversity, and candidates will recognize this and likely be drawn to it. Although the recruiter may have already explained this to candidates, it will become real when they see it for themselves in the policy.

The mission and values of an organization are often aspirational and, hopefully, inspiring to employees and candidates alike. Many HR professionals and recruiters are adept at describing how the organization's mission and values make it an appealing place to work, but it can be difficult for a job candidate to determine if the recruiter's words will be true in practice. Well-written, thoughtful policies can underscore for candidates the employer's commitment to its mission and values.

Make Policies That Work for the Whole Employee

Prospective employees want to work for employers that understand that no employee is their work. Employees are so much more and want to be valued as such. Policies that recognize and support this concept are more likely to attract talent, especially when those policies are documented in the handbook.

Leave is a great example. While some states are implementing statewide paid leave programs, in states where no such benefit exists, a candidate may be looking

for an employer who is supportive of employees who care for family members. The handbook policy could read in part:

We encourage employees to take care of those important to them. If you need time off to build a family or take care of a family member, you will receive up to XX weeks of paid time off.

Another example are policies aimed at preventing burnout, like paid time off. The employer's attitude toward paid time off – regardless of whether it is unlimited or accrued in a more traditional way – could sway an applicant to join the team. A policy may read:

We take time off seriously. Your manager will require you to take time off to rest or handle personal matters at least one day a month.

Along with leave and PTO, policies that support [flexible work arrangements](#) – working from home, compressed workweeks, flextime – make it clear the employer is serious about encouraging work-life balance and may prove very attractive to candidates in an increasingly competitive market for talent.

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Be Inclusive

Most candidates are looking for workplaces that celebrate and honor inclusivity – where employees feel like they belong regardless of their protected class and where different perspectives and life experiences are valued. Candidates will look for inclusivity in an employee handbook. But while many organizations advertise their workplaces as diverse and inclusive, their handbooks may instead reveal that they are behind the times.

For instance, terms like “he or she” and “s/he” are going to be red flags for some candidates who will interpret it to mean that the employer is not sensitive to differences in gender identity or welcoming to candidates of all gender identities. Instead, consider using the singular “they”. In addition, be sure any graphics in the handbook reflect the organization’s diverse workforce.

Making sure people can read, understand and access the handbook also demonstrates the organization’s inclusivity. If English is not the main language of most employees and candidates, provide a translation of the handbook. What graphics might be helpful in explaining a policy? Can colorful examples best describe a dress code where uniforms or safety equipment is important? If you make your handbook available online, consider including a video (with closed captioning) showing leadership’s commitment to a workplace free of discrimination.

These days, no candidate goes into a new workplace without first gaining some knowledge of the employer’s work environment and culture. Candidates ask around, they network, they do due diligence on potential employers. They want to know what to expect, what the organization’s values are, and how the organization stays true to those values. Weaving this important information into policies and sharing them during the recruiting process allows the employer to promote its culture and values, show why it’s a great place to work and, in the process, attract great talent.

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