



KEEP YOUR DENTAL PRACTICE ON THE SAME PAGE WITH AN EMPLOYEE HANDBOOK



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As a provider of quality patient care, you understand how important staff retention is to the growth and success of your dental practice. To keep your key staff members on the same page and reduce the high cost of employee turnover, it is important to show them respect and make sure that you and your office manager treat them fairly and with consistency across the board.

Why Is An Employee Handbook Important?

An employee handbook documents your dental practice's policies and procedures in writing, creating a framework for uniformity, which is essential. Also referred to as an employee manual or employee policy manual, an employee handbook educates your staff members about why they should work for your practice, what they can expect from you and what you expect from them.

While some might argue that having an employee handbook will hold you liable in certain legal situations, the truth is that without written policies, your past and present conduct will, in essence, become "policy." So, you are not off the hook simply because you did not document policies and procedures in writing; you are at greater risk without written policies. Without an employee handbook to guide you and your staff, your past behaviors will more likely be inconsistent – and cause for liability in suits claiming unfair or disparate treatment.

Do All Practices Need One?

In some states, certain employment-related laws apply to organizations that have as few as two employees. So, if you have a small dental practice, it would be wise to document general policies and procedures, even if they are noted in the form of several office memorandums.

How Do You Begin to Develop One?

Deciding what to include in your employee handbook can be a challenge, but it is important to remember that your handbook does not need to consume volumes of paper or fill a large three-ring binder. In fact, there is no set format for employee handbooks, so you can design yours as you would like. However, simple language and ease of use are essential; written policies and procedures should be clear, concise and organized for management and staff to refer to easily.

Since there are many resources available today, you also don't need to start your employee handbook from scratch. Consider asking a colleague with a similar-size dental practice as well as friends, family members or suppliers for a copy of their employee handbook that you can tailor to the needs of your own practice. Dental societies, professional associations and even some chambers of commerce offer employee handbook samples, templates and/or guidelines as a service to their members. There are also companies that specialize in developing employee handbooks, many with Web sites offering everything from electronic templates to customization services starting at under \$100.

What Should Your Handbook Include?

While your employee handbook should be unique to your dental practice, there are some fundamental guidelines and suggestions for what the basic content should include. To set a positive tone and communicate the culture of your practice, begin with an introductory overview that welcomes your staff to your organization. In this section, you would share your practice's mission statement, history, goals, management philosophy, etc.

Next, include brief descriptions on such subjects as equal opportunity, work hours, pay and performance issues, termination, benefits, standards of conduct, vacation, leaves, etc. as they apply to your dental practice:

- Disclaimer clearly stating that the employee handbook is not an employment contract
- Equal opportunity employment
- Confidentiality
- HIPAA privacy and security
- Use of computers and other office property and supplies
- Standards of conduct
 - Safety/hygiene
 - Dress code
 - Timeliness
 - Smoking
 - Substance abuse
 - Discrimination and sexual harassment
- At-will employment/termination
- Employment categories/job descriptions
- Performance reviews
- Grievance procedures
- Compensation and benefits
 - Payroll
 - Work schedules and reporting
 - Holidays
 - Vacation/time off/paid time off (PTO)
 - Sick leave
 - Family and medical leave
 - Bereavement
 - Jury duty
 - Military leave
 - Leave of absence
 - Inclement weather
 - Absences
 - Group health insurance and other benefits

Who Should Review It?

Once you have completed a good working draft, share it with all dentists in your practice as well as your manager and select staff members for their review and feedback – and to confirm it passes the litmus test for clarity, accuracy and relevance. Before it is finalized, make certain your attorney reviews the latest draft to ensure your employee handbook complies with local, state and federal law requirements.



How Should You Use It?

When you release the final version of your employee handbook, give all members of your dental practice an opportunity to read it. They should also sign and date an acknowledgment form confirming they have read and understand the policies of your practice and that they understand that they will be bound by these policies. Keep at least one bound copy of your employee handbook in each office for general reference, and, if possible, maintain an electronic copy on a shared drive or intranet that all employees can access regularly. Remember, that simply *having* an employee handbook is not as important as making sure everyone is actually *using* it *and that the policies are being followed*. Make the handbook part of your new employee orientation process, update it as the needs of your practice change and be sure to have a qualified attorney review it annually to maintain legal compliance.

By developing well-written policies that everyone is required to follow, your practice can expect dentists, managers and supervisors to take approximately the same course of action when dealing with employees in similar circumstances – keeping everyone on the same page and providing fair treatment to all.

About Cowan, Guteski & Co., P.A.

As a diversified certified public accounting firm, Cowan, Guteski & Co., is committed to being an active partner in its clients' growth by delivering value beyond accounting, innovative solutions and consistent exceptional service. For more information, contact Michael S. Lewis, Director – Dental Consulting Division/Healthcare Services Group, at 732-349-6880 extension 147 or mlewis@cowanguteski.com or Deborah M. Cordivari, Supervisor – Dental Consulting Division/Healthcare Services Group at 732-349-6880 extension 133 or dcordivari@cowanguteski.com. Also visit our Web site www.cowanguteski.com for more information on the services available to meet the unique needs of dental practices.

