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Have handbook policies checked by a pro

Jacksonville Business Journal - by [Dolly Penland](#) Correspondent

Some human resources experts are noticing an interesting new trend: small-business owners wanting employee handbooks.

Dynamic Corporate Solutions Inc. reports a 267 percent increase over last year in new clients asking for human resources infrastructure services, with an emphasis on employee handbooks.

"Some of it is new leadership where they have more corporate experience and are aware of compliancy issues; some of it is just business owners wanting things to be formalized in their workplace," said Suzi Lemen, CEO of Dynamic Corporate Solutions.

McKenzieHR is seeing a similar increase. "We have had quite a few who wanted us to review their handbooks," said Bob McKenzie, president. "I have looked at five in just the past two weeks."

Power Challenge Fitness, which now has 11 employees, recently had Dynamic Corporate Solutions create its employee handbook.

"Basically, we doubled in revenue in 2007," said Jill Pearson, who co-owns Power Challenge Fitness with her husband, Gabe. "That's a huge shift. You're not a three-man show anymore where you grew up with certain employees. You're now dealing with employees you don't know. So, these policies are necessary to continue to move the company forward."

An employee handbook is a good reference for both the business owner and employees. An employee handbook should include a welcome statement, a brief company history and the mission and vision statements. Most importantly, the handbook contains all the employee-related policies, including a summary of benefits, an explanation of workplace policies and procedures and the consequences of violating these policies.

"There should be summaries of the group benefits, medical, dental, life, if they have paid time off and a military leave policy," McKenzie said. "There should be an 'employment at will' statement, a drug-free workplace policy, and one other is [a statement on] violence in the workplace."

The handbook helps business owners avoid potential conflicts because all the decisions have already been made and all information is laid out.

"Having a policy in writing really does help guide management," Lemen said. "It helps them to decide before any issues come up. Am I going to pay someone funeral leave? If so, how many days off? It's the same with any paid time off, sick time, vacation, holidays. Are we going to have paid holidays? What are they? What about a dress code? And there's compliancy reasons to have a handbook, for example a harassment policy."

The harassment policy should clearly state that the company will in no way tolerate harassment of any kind, be it sexual, racial, ethnic, etc. Also, employers should have an equal employment

opportunity policy that clearly states the company does not discriminate against anyone, regardless of race, color, religion or gender.

“We had to make sure we did drug testing and background checks,” Jill Pearson said, noting these are policies in the handbook. “Payroll, safety and training, appearance and professional standards, attendance and punctuality. They can’t do their own thing,” because they represent the company.

All employees receive their own copy and they should also sign a statement that they have received, read and understood the handbook and its policies. Those receipts should be kept in the employees’ personnel files.

Successful employee handbooks are clearly written and easy for employees to comprehend.

“They should be no more than about 30 pages, which I don’t think is onerous,” McKenzie said. “And business owners should never try to write their own handbook. It’s better not to have one, than a bad one. What a lot of clients do is copy somebody else’s, not knowing the ramifications. They have a real nice handbook that is not applicable to their business, or they may have illegal stuff in there.”

McKenzie recalled a company with an unnecessary federal Family and Medical Leave Act policy.

“If you have fewer than 50 employees, it shouldn’t even be in there,” he said. “There are other things we see, for example, ‘Anyone who works unauthorized overtime will not be paid that overtime.’ They can’t do that. If they work it, you have to pay it regardless of whether it was authorized.”

Lemen agreed and said it’s best to have the handbook vetted by a human resources expert or attorney. “A lot of times we see, and I’m sure the labor attorneys see, where they got it from someone else and copied it, but things change so often, you’re better off not having one, unless it’s written by a labor expert.”