

# Practice Management

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[network.aia.org/blogs/muriel-watkins1/2019/07/12/promote-your-culture-with-your-employee-handbook](https://network.aia.org/blogs/muriel-watkins1/2019/07/12/promote-your-culture-with-your-employee-handbook)

Below is an excerpt from the book *FUSION: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies*. by Denise Lee Yohn. My thanks to Denise for allowing us to share this chapter of her book with this community! - Muriel Watkins



## Promote your culture with your employee handbook

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Started as a single deli over thirty-five years ago in Ann Arbor, Michigan, today Zingerman's is a \$64 million "Community of Businesses" that spans fourteen operating specialty food units. *Inc. magazine* has called it "The Coolest Small Company in America" and it counts the editors of *Bon Appetit*, Alton Brown from the Food Network, and even Oprah among its fans.

Well-known for its playful, down-to-earth brand identity (its catalogs and website feature hand-drawn images and folksy language), Zingerman's infuses its fun and funky brand and culture into every aspect of its business, including its Staff Guide. Besides offering specific details on procedures like knife cleaning, the guide, of course, includes the company's policies on harassment, disabilities, and other legally-required subjects. But even those are written in such plain and clear language and presented in such a visually-attractive manner that any employee who takes the time to read them might actually understand and value these policies.

Zingerman's Staff Guide used to be like so many other companies': a dry manual that gathered dust on the shelf. But when co-founder Ari Weinzweig and his colleagues asked

themselves why their product catalogs and other external communications were “colorful, engaging, and informing” but their internal materials weren’t, they decided to “apply what we do for the consumer to the staff,” Weinzweig told me.

Today, the Staff Guide is designed in the same creative style as the company’s external communications. Its content is also more engaging than most. Alongside explanations of the company’s systems, measurements of success, “5 Key Areas that Make Us Different,” and information on its extensive training and education offerings are puzzles, pithy quips, and humorous anecdotes. These additions draw employees into the guide and facilitate their personal experience with it.

But perhaps the best explanation for why the Staff Guide is actually used by employees comes from Weinzweig. He explained to me how, in keeping with the organization’s culture of empowerment, the information in the guide is differentiated between standard operating procedures (SOPs) and what he calls “recipes”—general guidelines for how Zingerman’s leadership wants an employee to do something. “An SOP tells people the way you do something; there’s no creative application,” Weinzweig said. “But recipes require creativity.” Their “Service Recipe,” for example, outlines three ingredients: (1) find out what the guest wants; (2) get it for them accurately, politely, and enthusiastically; and (3) go the extra mile—that is, “do something that’s small but blows the customer’s mind.” It’s up to the individual employee, Weinzweig explained, to figure out what that something extra should be— even if they have to do it on their very first day of work.

These recipes are so powerful that many employees cite them as one of the reasons why they like working for the company. Recipes assume employees are capable of using their judgment and creativity to do things in keeping with the company’s culture—and with the intent of delivering on the brand promise. Employees, in turn, appreciate being trusted to contribute in their unique way. “You treated me like I was smart from the beginning,” employees have told Weinzweig. For him, recipes are a way to “honor people’s integrity, intelligence, and creative ability and require them to put them to use.”

“A handbook is one of the top materials a leader can develop,” he says. “It’s an essential communications tool.”

Here are the steps involved in developing your employee handbook:

## **Step 1: Establish Policies and Procedures that Align with Your Culture**

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First, establish policies (decisions and behavioral norms and guidelines) and procedures (plans of action required to carry out or implement policies) that are right for your organization and that reflect the uniqueness of your culture. Start with the overarching

purpose of your organization. What strategies have you set to pursue it? And which of the company's core values would support those strategies? Once you've identified these strategies, you can create guidelines and procedures to achieve them and support your values.

For example, Google's original purpose ("to organize the world's information and make it universally useful and accessible to everyone") and business strategies (pioneering new offerings that attract audiences to use its search engine more often) required a highly empowered workforce and core values that promote innovation. As a result, the company instituted a policy allowing employees to use 20 percent of their time to work on what they think will most benefit the company.

For each policy you establish, Nancy Flynn of the ePolicy Institute recommends asking yourself a series of questions:

- Who is the intended audience for this policy?
- Why does this particular situation or behavior merit a formal rule?
- What do we hope to accomplish with this policy?
- What benefits will this policy deliver to our organization and our employees?
- Are employees likely to respond positively or negatively to this policy?

Craft each policy by answering these questions in a way that conveys and cultivates your desired culture. And remember to articulate each policy so that it is clear, relevant, and accessible to employees.

The following are some of the policies and procedures you should consider establishing or revamping:

- Employee benefits (beyond holidays and insurance)
- Attendance and working days/hours/locations
- Pay periods, days, methods
- Paid time off: vacation, sabbaticals, sick days, and other personal days
- Family and medical leave
- Use of supplies, technology, equipment, and vehicles
- Dress code
- Approvals of budgets, expenses, people decisions,
- Customer service standards
- Training and education
- Office visitors
- Recycling and other sustainability practices
- Use of social media
- Communications
- Office decor

- Discipline and termination
- Health and wellness
- Performance planning and reviews

As you look through these, remember that many policies and procedures must be in place for legal or regulatory reasons and they often must follow specific laws—they're an important and necessary part of organizational life. But your company policies and procedures should serve a purpose beyond legal compliance. If you develop your employee handbook for legal reasons only, you will likely set a tone of defensiveness and give the appearance that the company considers employees variables that need to be controlled rather than partners in creating something special.

But if you think of your policies and procedures as the foundation for the relationship between your employees and your organization, you can use them to express its unique core values, show employees how to work together to fulfill its overarching purpose, and convey its distinctive personality.

## **Step 2: Design a Compelling Employee Handbook or Guide**

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The next step is to codify your policies and procedures into a guide or handbook that is designed as if it were a communications piece for an external audience. If your guide is high-quality and designed to engage, employees will be more likely to read and regularly refer to it.

Be sure the tone and manner of the guide or handbook aligns with your brand identity, so that even in the styles used to communicate your policies and procedures, you create a mutually reinforcing relationship between your external brand and internal workplace.

## **Step 3: Engage Employees with Your Guide**

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Developing and publishing your policies and procedures is only the beginning. You must then disseminate the guide and train employees on the policies and procedures in it. Engage new employees with your guide right from the beginning during their on-boarding process. At Zingerman's, Weinzweig and Saginaw personally conduct orientations for all new employees even though the company has grown to over 500 employees. In these "Welcome to Zingerman's Community of Businesses" classes, they convey "the intellectual, emotional, historical, and ethical story of Zingerman's, and some of the key ways we work to make it all happen," Weinzweig writes in his latest [book](#). They review material from the Staff Guide in the class, but he believes offering both the class and the guide are important because different people learn in different ways.

When new employees experience the company's founders' personal involvement with the guide, they sense the importance of the policies and procedures outlined in it—and are more likely to absorb and use them. Weinzwieg considers teaching the class so critical to the company's culture-building efforts that, he writes, doing so is “one of the last things we'll give up in the steady and sustainable march of our organizational progress.”

You should also engage your employees with your guide by keeping it up-to-date. University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Professor Michael Griffin says an employee guide should be a “living document”—very much dynamic—subject to change.” He explains, “Existing policies need to be expanded, supplemented, and revised as business conditions change, as business process reengineering takes place, as an organization downsizes, and as quality improvement initiatives are implemented.” Whenever you make policy changes, use the occasion to renew employees' attention to your guide.

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Like the Zingerman's Staff Guide, your handbook should be specific and prescriptive when it needs to be, but otherwise consider it a living collection of culture-building information, insights, inspiration, and examples that help employees understand what the company is all about.

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**Denise Lee Yohn** is the go-to expert on brand leadership for national media outlets, an in-demand speaker and consultant, and the author of the new bestselling book, *FUSION: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies*.

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