

Dairy Farm Employee Management: Do We Need an Employee Handbook?

Whether your dairy farm has two employees or twenty-five, it is important to be consistent in communications with workers about expectations and conditions of employment. One tool that can assist in this task is a written employee handbook or policy document. Such a written document can be short and simple or highly detailed, depending on your needs. What could an employee handbook do for your farm operation?

Provide background information about your farm.

An employee handbook can be a tool to share information with your work team about your farm's history and background, as well as your values and vision for the farm. When employees know a little about the history of the farming operation, it helps them to understand the organization that they have joined. Hopefully, you have given some thought to your core values and vision for the future of your farm.

Writing a farm mission statement could be the entire topic for another article – but, here's an example: *We are a family-owned and -operated dairy farm. We value rural life and are committed to keeping our rural community vital. We strive to care for the environment, use good animal care practices, and produce the highest quality milk for dairy consumers.*

This kind of a statement helps your workers to understand what is important to you in your farming operation. Whatever your farm vision, share it with your employees.

Outline work rules, standards of conduct, and other information that lets employees know what is expected of them.

Most of us like to know what is expected of us. New employees have questions as basic as what to wear, where to park, where to eat lunch, and the location of restrooms. Workers like to know what their work schedule will be or where it will be regularly posted. Basic information about safety policies and training can be outlined in an employee handbook. Do you have other policies, such as “no smoking”? Think about some of the most “frequently-asked-questions” on your farm – and that information might well be outlined in an employee handbook document.

Provide information about pay and benefits of working at your farm.

Workers like to know when and how often they will be paid. They may wonder if they will have the opportunity to earn a raise or bonus. If you offer any benefits, the employee handbook is the place to outline those details. Even benefits such as the opportunity to obtain farm-raised meat could be mentioned in the employee handbook. Employees like to know how and when their work will be evaluated and the employee handbook is a good place to share this information.

Confirm information about the legal relationship with the employee.

The law in Iowa (as in most states) is that the employment relationship is “at-will.” Be sure that your employee handbook does not create a contract with the employees. In fact, it is recommended that employee handbooks contain clear a clear statement that employment at will is the policy of your farm.

Here is a sample statement:

Our Farm does not offer guaranteed employment. Either the Farm or the employee can terminate the employment relationship at any time, with or without cause, with or without notice. This is known as “employment at will.” This employment at will relationship exists regardless of any other written statements or policies contained in this Handbook or any other documents or verbal statements. Also, while we may choose to discipline employees in an attempt to improve work performance when necessary, the Farm is not obligated to do so.

While you can use posters to provide certain information that may be required by law, an employee handbook is another good place to do this. Have employees sign a simple document stating that they have received the employee handbook and reviewed all the policies contained in it. Then keep the document on file, just in case you ever need to prove that the employee received the written policy document.

Do not use the employee handbook to replace good communication practices.

Remember that nothing can take the place of good interpersonal communication in the workplace. New employees need orientation and training, and seasoned employees need updated training, motivation and feedback.

An employee handbook is a good reference tool and guideline. But it should not take the place of regular farm meetings, training and face-to-face feedback – both positive and constructive.

Looking for more information on farm employee handbooks?

If you are considering writing or updating an employee handbook or policy document, resources are available.

Go to the AgDecision Maker website and print a copy of File C6-58: Checklist for Iowa Agricultural Employers – available at:

www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/wholefarm/html/c6-58.html

A list of links and resources can be found there which include discussions and templates for farm employee handbooks. Have your document reviewed by a legal professional who is experienced in employment law.

Future articles will continue to address other farm employee management issues. In the meantime, feel free to contact me with any of your farm employee management questions.

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