

## 8 Simple Rules For Avoiding Common HR Pitfalls

by Jill Babchak with Natalie Dodson, SPHR

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Savvy business people sometimes make unfortunate mistakes. Don't we all! When it comes to human resources, important employer rights can be waived and dangerous assumptions made in one quick sweep. This can hurt startup businesses and established enterprises alike.

HR blunders often pass completely unnoticed until they have compounded themselves into complex situations with no clear resolution. Like landmines, they can remain innocuous until they are triggered by a later misstep.

8 Simple Rules:

1. Don't ignore employees' legal rights.

All employees have basic rights that employers are obligated to follow in areas such as disability, discrimination and wrongful termination to wages, taxation, and workplace safety. Ignorance of employment laws won't help you in court. Remember legal rights by definition can't be waived.

2. Don't make dangerous assumptions.

Listen to your employees, get the facts and confirm those facts whenever possible. Letting your assumptions take precedence over objective listening and decision-making can easily land you in hot water.

3. Don't rely on your business instincts and experience to make important decisions.

Relying on instinct and experience to make business decisions can lead to lucrative outcomes but this approach is unsuitable in HR matters. Be cautious and carefully objective when dealing with your employees.

4. Observe professional boundaries.

In the early stages of a business, staff members are commonly regarded as family. As a business and its employee population grow, it can be increasingly dangerous for the owner not to have professional boundaries in place. Nepotism, favoritism, discrimination—all of these can be perceived, which matters from a legal standpoint.

5. Don't make verbal contracts.

Be careful what you say and how you say it. Take this seemingly benign statement: "You'll have a job here as long as we're in business." It has a different impact in writing, where it's rarely ever put (but may as well be once it's uttered). Perceived verbal contracts carry weight and feelings of entitlement can turn to litigious outrage in a blink.

6. Don't brush aside the need for government compliance.

Business leaders might disregard the need for government compliance if there is a cost involved. In fact, many small business owners do exactly this, taking a "head in the sand" approach to potential compliance fines. They might ignore the possibility that someone from their "happy family" of employees could slap them with a lawsuit.

7. Do stay updated on employment law, regulations and compliance.

Be sure you, someone on your staff, or a trusted advisor remains current with employment rules and regulations, consistently ensuring that your business is compliant. Major regulations governing employment include:

ADA, ADEA, COBRA, EEO, ERISA, FMLA, FLSA, HIPPA, OSHA, PPACA and USERRA

8. Do know how to properly implement HR policies.

It's important to have workplace policies and procedures in place to facilitate a professional, organized and safe working environment. If not, less desirable practices may establish themselves by default, becoming de-facto policies from a legal standpoint. It's important to be deliberate and thoughtful. Follow these steps when implementing your HR policies:

\*Determine what you want to achieve.

\*Clearly define policies in writing.

\*Have an HR professional review your draft.

\*Communicate to employees why you're implementing the policy and what's expected of them.

\*Have employees sign the policies acknowledging their receipt and understanding.

With All These Don'ts, What's To Do?

Where's the happy medium between caution-induced decisional paralysis and come-what-may risk-taking? Each time an unfamiliar situation arises, however inconsequential its resolution might seem, do a little research into what other business owners have done in similar cases. Get a sense of what to avoid, and some established best practices you could follow.

Remember, each decision you make with regard to your people resources sets a precedent that can speak as loudly as policy. Don't contradict your policies at any level of the company, and know that practice is just as important as what's in writing. Be thoughtful and consistent while practices are established.

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