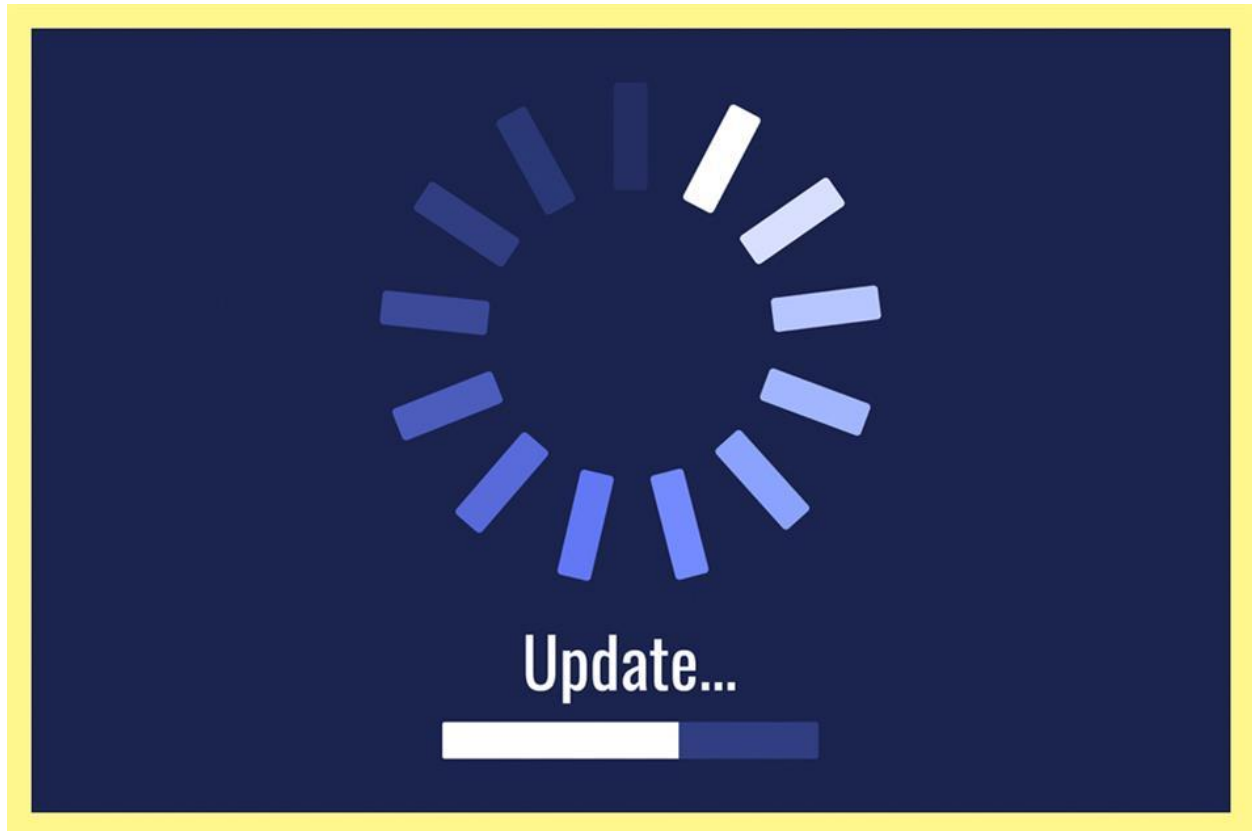


Updating Employee Handbooks to Keep Pace with Staff Expectations

People Management | Rena Christou | May 25, 2023

By including less traditional policies on areas such as gender identity and menopause, businesses can show they are progressive and focused on inclusivity, says Rena Christou.



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On average, surveys suggest 60 per cent of employees won't read an employee handbook. Employers could be missing a valuable opportunity to communicate their culture, their approach to inclusivity and the policies they have to support employees, both emotionally and personally, throughout the employment journey.

Most handbooks include the usual suspects – policies for resolving challenges, family-friendly leave, performance and the like. But showcasing less 'traditional' policies helps organisations demonstrate that they're forward thinking and inclusive, and have a finger on the pulse of current employment expectations. What might those policies look like?

Gender identity

Setting out how the organisation champions a workplace environment where everyone feels included with the freedom to express themselves is essential. A policy should cover a commitment to ensuring all employees are treated equally regardless of how they identify, how employees will be supported including if they undergo medical changes relating to their gender identity, and how employees can keep control of any communications and updates to employment records.

Domestic abuse

Three quarters of those experiencing domestic abuse are targeted at work (threatening calls or unannounced visits, for example). Employers can sensitively support their people to stay safe by outlining how they will confidentially handle any disclosures, create safe spaces and provide private equipment to access external support. A policy can also explain further proactive steps available to assist employees, such as changes to working patterns and diverting pay into an alternative, secure bank account.

Separation leave

Some 95 per cent of employees who have experienced relationship separation said it negatively impacted their mental wellbeing at work, but only 9 per cent said their employer had a specific policy in place. A dedicated policy can help to encourage employees to talk openly with their manager so they can better understand any specific challenges and the support required. It can also explain how employees can discuss flexible working arrangements; for example, if their separation means they need to balance their work with childcare or relocation.

Menopause

One in 10 women are likely to leave their job because of menopause symptoms. A policy is the starting point for most organisations to proactively build a more open culture of understanding around menopause. It should explain who can be affected and how symptoms can vary, encourage open dialogue, and detail how employees can request flexibility to manage their symptoms (increased home working, for example).

These suggestions are just the beginning. Employees are expecting more from their employer in terms of how they're supported personally and emotionally. Proactivity is needed to ensure policies and handbooks are working hard to keep pace.

While content is clearly king, organisations should also think about the delivery of their policies and handbook to further maximise impact. The language, tone, visuals and layout of a handbook all feed in to securing employees' engagement, communicating key information effectively, and embedding business values.

Straight-talking, engaging language will immediately create a more accessible read. Illustrating processes with flowcharts and images can break up a text-heavy document. Removing gendered language ensures inclusivity. Setting out policies to align with the employment journey will make it easier to navigate.

Technology also provides interesting opportunities to do something unique. Whether that's as simple as hosting electronically in an easy-to-access intranet, incorporating video-based content to deliver key messages, or building something interactive and tactile employees need to engage with more directly.

Don't overlook training – coupling any new policies with manager training ensures confidence and knowledge to put them into practice. The more businesses can do to embed their handbook and policies, the better chance of maximising impact and landing inclusivity aims and cultural messages.