



# Best Practices for Workplace Documentation

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Documenting workplace issues is a best practice for people management as it:

- Informs employees of expectations and the consequences of failure to meet them
- Provides opportunities for employees to improve performance or change behavior, ensuring fair treatment of staff
- Records the reasons for employment actions
- Positions the organization to defend employment claims

Conversely, failure to create proper documentation means:

- Performance or behavior may not improve and morale issues may develop
- Others will be free to make up their own version of the events that should have been recorded
- Third-party decision makers such as judges, juries, arbitrators, impartial hearing officers, boards, and commissions will view the absence of documentation unfavorably

Any employment-related event that involves legal compliance, that could affect future decisions, or could involve a claim against the organization should be documented. Examples include:

- Performance-related events such as reviews, coaching, improvement plans, corrective action
- Compensation decisions
- Employee status changes like promotions, demotions, transfers, change in duties
- Training
- Violations of policy or law

Documenting performance is one of the more crucial aspects of workplace documentation. Discussions with employees concerning performance problems should always outline performance expectations, how the employee failed to meet them, a summary of prior counseling or corrective action, clear expectations for improvement moving forward, and the consequences for failure to make the needed improvement. Documentation of these discussions is a must and should reflect the substance of the conversation.

Knowing how to document properly is just as important as keeping documentation. It might be more important because it is difficult to explain away inflammatory, disrespectful, or unlawful statements. False, incomplete, inaccurate, vague, or otherwise deficient recordings can cause more harm when

defending employment actions as they are often used to support a disgruntled employee's argument that a wrongful employment action occurred.

Well-written documentation should explain the organization's position in the matter at issue and show why the decision was appropriate. The focus is on truthfully recording situations that occur and avoiding language or inferences that could cause legal problems.

Accuracy is perhaps the most important requirement. To ensure correctness, the person who is documenting must verify all facts before finalizing a document, correctly attribute statements and information to the source, date documents when written and never backdate, and include a reason for any delay in recording the event at issue.

Documentation should be factual and professional, rather than subjective and disparaging. Moreover, documents are only effective when specific and thorough. Avoid labeling an employee's behavior or speculating as to the cause of the behavior or the employee's intent; rather, describe the facts concerning what the employee actually said and did, or did not say or do.

Other common mistakes to avoid include:

- Use of inflammatory or imprecise language
- Words that imply bias
- Name-calling, denigrating labels
- Absolute terms like “always” or “never”
- Documentation that contradicts itself
- Over documenting, otherwise known as “papering the file”

Use these questions to assess the text of any workplace document:

- Is this a fair and accurate account of the events in question?
- Would I feel comfortable having this read back to me in a courtroom?

Never document when emotions are high, as this is a key driver of poor writing. Let anger, pride, and hurt feelings subside. Walk away before finalizing the document or hitting send on email so that more reasonable thoughts prevail. Allow a trusted advisor to read over the document and/or read the document out loud before completing it.

Encourage managers to record positive events, performance, and behavior as well. The same principles outlined above apply, and managers should be generous with such documentation.

Train managers how to document as they are the front line in dealing with employment-related situations and decisions. Good documentation improves employee relations and postures the organization well to defend employment decisions. It should be a regular part of supervisory duties and deemed a core competency against which the organization assesses their performance.



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