

Mistakes to Avoid when Building Your Volunteer Handbook

These simple rules can improve your volunteers' performance – and save you from a devastating lawsuit.

By Shawn Kendrick

Lawsuits against nonprofit organizations grow more common every year. Most of these suits are brought by employees.

That's why you need to put virtually everything involving your employees in writing. And, of course, your employees include your volunteers.

To avoid legal problems, it's best to present your policies in the form of a handbook. Developing or updating your volunteer manual can seem daunting. To make it easier and keep you on track, here are some pitfalls to look out for:

Mistake #1: Thinking "They're Just Volunteers"

The number-one error you can make is to think that the volunteer guidebook isn't as important as the one for paid employees. You'll be doing yourself and your volunteers a favor if you put serious effort into the document.

Volunteers sense when there's a lack of resources directed at their program. They won't stick around if this is the case. Handing a poorly-designed handbook to a new recruit doesn't set a good tone during volunteer orientation.

Think of volunteers as employees who happen to work for free. They can produce as many benefits and create as much risk as regular employees and should be treated as such. Make sure you put in plenty of language regarding expectations and the consequences for not meeting them.

As nonprofit consultant Tobi Johnson points out in her blog (tobitjohnson.blog.com), you want to make sure volunteers actually read the manual. So follow these guidelines:

- **Keep the writing** conversant, clear, and simple.
- **Live n up** the manual with photos and short testimonials from current volunteers.
- **Avoid** industry jargon.
- **Enlist the help** of seasoned volunteers in writing the manual.

Mistake #2: Getting Sidetracked onto a Meandering Path

When planning the specifics of the handbook, it's not uncommon to get sidetracked from your original goals. Your handbook should answer three critical questions your new recruits are asking themselves:

- **Does this organization** have the capacity to make a difference in the world?
- **Can I** make a difference here?
- **Will I** fit in?

One way to avoid losing sight of your original goals is to create an outline or checklist of what your document needs to have. Do this in the beginning of the project and keep it at the forefront as your guide throughout the process.

If you're having trouble deciding exactly what you should have in your handbook, the Resource Center of the Corporation for National and Community Service has an outline you can follow (nationalserviceresources.org/practices/17451).

Experts say that your handbook should have the following elements at a minimum:

- **organizational information:** purpose and history of the organization, as well as an organizational chart
- **expectations of the volunteer:** ethical, performance, legal, training, and safety requirements the volunteer must follow

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- **expectations of the organization:** support, training, and safety measures that the organization will provide for the volunteer
- **separation requirements:** an explanation of when and how the organization and volunteer may terminate their relationship
- **essential forms:** documents for volunteers to sign acknowledging they understand and agree to the material in the guidebook, plus any other forms required for reporting purposes.


These can and should be broken down into more detailed information specific to your organization.

Mistake #3: Not Seeking Legal Advice

After creating your document, there's one last – and important – pitfall to avoid: lack of legal advice. Have an attorney or human resources expert take a look at what you've created.

What seems like common sense on the surface may be completely illegal in your area. With this understanding, it makes sense to bring in a qualified set of eyes. It may cost a little bit of money for a review, but the peace of mind and insulation against future litigation will be worth it.

A Vital Part of Risk Management

The volunteer manual is a document that's often overlooked. However, savvy nonprofit managers understand that, when properly crafted, this document is an important part of risk management and can serve as a great road map for both the volunteer and the organization. 

Shawn Kendrick holds an MBA from Ohio Dominican University and has over a decade's experience in the nonprofit and business sectors. He enjoys researching and blogging for VolunteerHub (volunteerhub.com), a cloud-based volunteer management software that offers online registration, e-mail and text messaging, and report generation.

Boost Performance & Reduce Risk

Use these articles (at NonprofitWorld.org/members) to inspire volunteers and minimize risk:

Great Policies & Procedures for Your Organization (Vol. 31, No. 5)

How Jargon Undermines Communication (Vol. 27, No. 2)

Six Ways to Reduce Risk & Comply with the Law (Vol. 25, No. 6)

Don't Let Volunteers Put Your Organization at Risk (Vol. 10, No. 1)

The Most Likely Lawsuits—and How to Protect Yourself (Vol. 19, No. 1)

Free Webinar Recording for Members: Welcome, Adapt, Or Avoid? Responding to Trends in Volunteerism. This webinar offers an overview of key trends and the issues they raise for volunteer engagement.

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