



**HOW TO WRITE AN**

**EMPLOYEE ATTENDANCE POLICY**

**THAT'S FAIR TO EVERYONE**

Running a few minutes behind? Slept through your alarm clock? Got stuck in traffic? It happens to the best of us. In fact, more than 1 in 4 workers admit to showing up late to work at least once a month.

But when it comes to employee attendance, even the small things can begin to add up. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), productivity losses linked to absenteeism cost U.S. employers \$225.8 billion annually, or \$1,685 per employee in 2015. Although it may be an unexpected absence once a month or a shift missed here and there, individual employee attendance can have big implications for your bottom line.

Enter the employee attendance policy. For many small businesses without a formal HR department, an employee attendance policy can seem a bit, well, formal. Shouldn't everyone be aware of their responsibilities? Absolutely. But as your business begins to scale or you take on more workers for the busy season, a fair attendance policy is crucial to protect both you and your employees and keep business running smoothly. Here's how to get started.

### *1. Take into account your current work culture.*

Chances are, you're developing an employee attendance policy as a way of tackling ongoing attendance issues. Your employees may have gotten lax about showing up on time, forget to call in until after their shift starts, or simply take the lack of an attendance policy for granted. Still, it's important to remember that an attendance policy won't change employee behavior overnight, and may require a foundational shift in company culture.

That's right—employee attendance is part of your company culture. And no matter whether your business employees five people or fifty, the way you interact together shapes your team's culture and way of working. Your culture includes values, norms, systems, symbols, language, assumptions, beliefs, and habits—like how often your employees show up on time.

So before you start writing an attendance policy, talk to your managers and shift leads about their current approaches and expectations for employee attendance. If one shift lead is fine with a slow start and another expects everyone on the floor right on the hour, it sends a mixed message. Employees who clock in during slower shifts may not see the problem with running five minutes behind compared to staff who are all-hands-on-deck the moment they arrive in the morning. Is there a current baseline or shared expectations, or does the approach to employee attendance vary shift to shift and manager to manager?

There may also be other cultural factors behind the scenes impacting employee attendance: if many of your employees have families and young children, they likely also have to juggle emergencies or family absences, and a zero-tolerance attendance policy would quickly put them out of a job. Or, your new part-time summer staff may be coming in right after school for the next few weeks, and can't make it on the dot with traffic. Attendance could even be a symptom of your workplace's scheduling habits.

Your company culture is as unique as your employees. And while no attendance policy can account for every unique scenario, it should be based in reality and create realistic expectations for your workers.

## *2. Keep things simple.*

On paper, an attendance policy sounds straightforward—not showing up to work is an absence, and everyone needs to be present at work to keep business up and running. But is an “absence” different from a “no-show”? Is it different from “tardiness”? What if an employee shows up an hour late compared to five minutes late? Are they treated the same?

An employee attendance policy can quickly start to spin out of hand, resulting in a binder-size document that's hard to read and even harder to remember. Instead of going scenario-by-scenario, stick to common employee attendance topics and

define expectations for them in plain-language everyone can understand: absences, unscheduled absences, tardiness, no-show's, and sick days.

“**Absence:** manager is notified by employee X days/weeks in advance that employee will be absent from shift.”

“**Unscheduled absence:** manager is notified by employee X hours in advance that employee will be absent from shift, due to emergency or other unexpected cause.”

“**Tardiness:** employee shows up at least X minutes after scheduled shift start.”

“**No-show:** employee fails to show up for shift without notifying management.”

“**Sick days:** employee is absent from shift due to illness or doctor's note.”

Quick note: Why differentiate a “sick day” from an “absence”? It may sound counterintuitive, but building in a separate category for sick days can actually help employee morale and your bottom line, especially if you're in the food service industry.

The CDC estimates that sick food handlers are responsible for 53% of norovirus outbreaks—leading to more employee illness and more time off. Consider building in a separate sick day category in your attendance policy so that you and your staff can remain healthy, and sick employees won't come into work in an effort to avoid a more serious unscheduled absence strike on their performance record. In some states, separate paid sick leave may also be the law.

Whatever attendance categories you choose, their definitions should mean the same thing to all employees and be as objective as possible. A manager should be able to differentiate an absence from a tardiness when they see one, and employees should easily understand where their behavior falls under the attendance policy.

### *3. Include realistic disciplinary actions for each scenario.*

Now that you've defined your attendance policy categories, it's time to define what happens next. For an attendance policy to be fair, it's important that disciplinary actions aren't just based on personal beliefs or individual expectations. It's not fair to good employees to enact a zero-tolerance attendance policy "just because." And while you personally might feel that running five minutes or thirty minutes late is the same degree of unacceptable employee behavior, the actual impacts on your business may not be so equal.

Instead, take a look at two things: the effect different attendance behaviors currently have on your business, and attendance averages for your industry. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, full-time employees had an overall absence rate of 2.8, or almost three absence "instances" per year in 2017. The average absence rate for service occupations was even higher, at 3.4 absences per year. So if you're guesstimating 3-4 unscheduled absences per year as an acceptable range, you're not far off the mark.

Once you've done some benchmarking, tie your attendance policy's disciplinary components to business impact. If every minute counts in a high-volume shift, 30 minutes could have the same impact as an absence. If an employee has to miss work unexpectedly and can't find a fill-in, their absence may have the same severity as a no-show. In that case, your attendance policy could state:

**"Tardiness:** employee shows up at least 5 minutes after scheduled shift start."

- If employee shows up later than 30 minutes after shift start time, tardiness will be counted as a "no-show".
- After 3 tardies, employee will be subject to disciplinary action.

**"Unscheduled absence:** manager is notified by employee X hours in advance that employee will be absent from shift, due to emergency or other unexpected cause."

- Employee is responsible for notifying supervisor and finding a fill-in for shift. If employee cannot find a fill-in, absence will be counted as a “no-show”.
- After 3 unscheduled absences, employee will be subject to disciplinary action.

#### *4. Get employee sign-off.*

Once you’ve put together a first draft of your attendance policy, it’s time to revisit step #1: share it with your employees and get their buy-in. Depending on the size of your team, you may want to only loop in leadership or give all employees a chance to add input. Even a simple gutcheck will do—does anything sound out of place to your managers? Anyone feel that certain categories are unrealistic? Does it seem objective?

An attendance policy is meant to help keep your business running smoothly day-to-day, not trigger more chaos. Although there may be some resistance to change (especially if there wasn’t a formal policy in place already), good attendance should feel like a team effort and a way to help everyone work better. If your employees immediately react poorly, feel called out, or think any disciplinary measures are too aggressive, listen to their feedback. Pay attention to similar responses—if more than one employee thinks you should be more flexible in certain areas, see if you can reach a compromise and go back to the drawing board together.

More importantly, incorporating employee feedback into your attendance policy also increases its chances of success. When asked what motivates them to go above and beyond at work, employees ranked “camaraderie and peer motivation” first. Peers, not money, were found to be the main source of influence on employee performance and behavior. Knowing their coworkers, not just their managers, helped develop the attendance policy can go a long way in getting employees on board and keeping each other accountable.

## *5. Treat others how you would want to be treated.*

At the end of the day, a fair employee attendance policy should be one you'd be content to work under yourself. Don't shy away from the hard questions: how often do you personally show up to work later than you planned? Are you always able to call ahead and let your employees know you won't arrive within the policy timeline? How many emergencies pop up throughout the week that pull you away from work? Can you always notify your team a week in advance that you'll need to be out of the office for a day?

As you're putting together your new employee attendance policy, don't forget the most important factor: empathy. If you can't comply with your business's attendance policy, it's not fair to expect your employees to either. And although employee absences and poor attendance can be frustrating, it's not possible to predict emergencies. Sometimes, the unexpected just happens, no matter how well you plan. The alarm clock doesn't go off. Traffic is worse than usual. The babysitter calls in sick. You can't find your keys. You catch the bug that's going around at work.

Ideally, a fair employee attendance policy allows for some wiggle room—within reason. As you build your policy, you can assign different degrees of seriousness depending on your workplace culture and what makes sense for your business. Not all absences (and not all attendance policies) are equal. Instead, a fair policy creates a standard to track performance and reinforces one of the most important workplace values: respect for each other, and each other's time.

# Sample Employee Attendance Policy

At [NAME OF BUSINESS], good workplace attendance is a base expectation and the responsibility of all employees. Employees are expected to arrive on time and work the full duration of all scheduled shifts. Leaving work early, late arrivals, and absences must all be arranged in advance with supervisors on a case-by-case basis in order not to initiate disciplinary procedures. Arranging “fill-in’s” or coverage for missed shifts is the sole responsibility of the employee.

**Absence:** supervisor is notified by employee at least 1 week in advance that employee will be absent from assigned shift.

- Employees must notify supervisor 1 week in advance for 1-day absence.
- Employees must notify supervisor 1 month in advance for 1-week absence.

**Unscheduled absence:** supervisor is notified by employee immediately before shift start that employee will be absent from shift, due to emergency or other unexpected cause.

- Employee is responsible for notifying supervisor and finding a fill-in for shift. If employee cannot find a fill-in, absence will be counted as a “no-show”.
- After 3 unscheduled absences, employee will be subject to disciplinary action.

**Tardiness:** employee arrives at work at least 5 minutes after scheduled shift start.

- If employee shows up later than 30 minutes after shift start time, tardiness will be counted as a “no-show”.
- After 3 tardies, employee will be subject to disciplinary action.

**No-show:** employee fails to show up for shift without notifying supervisor.

- After 1 no-show, employee will be subject to disciplinary action.
- After 3 consecutive no-show’s, employee will be terminated.

**Sick days:** employee is absent from shift due to illness or doctor’s note.

- Employee is responsible for notifying supervisor in case of illness or medical emergency, otherwise absence will be counted as a “no-show.”