

BUSINESS SENSE

Next Level Tools for Entrepreneurs & Small Business Owners



HUMAN RESOURCES SERIES

Overview

Why is this important?

Effective Human Resources (HR) is essential to the success of a business, regardless of its size. Your human resource practices and policies should align with your company's values and positively impact your company culture, as well as your bottom line.

From improving company morale and developing methods to ensure high performance standards to resolving conflicts among employees and ensuring a company stays within its compensation budget, there are many reasons why HR is important for business success.

Your employees are your most valuable resource—holistically caring for their employment experience, and taking care of their well-being, must be a top priority.



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As a small business owner you find yourself wearing many hats. Not only are you responsible for strategic direction, oversight and leadership of your business, you're also heavily involved in day-to-day tasks, especially when it comes to caring for the organization's valuable human resources.

The scope of HR (human resources) functions, even for a small business, is vast. Human Resources encompass the processes, policies, and practices that support and manage an organization's employees to effectively meet an organization's goals. The HR function can quickly overwhelm your time and derail your focus from business development and growth to handling employee relations needs to myriad administrative tasks.

That's why the need to identify and delegate your organization's HR needs—either to another person, a team within your organization or to an outside resource—inevitably arises.

But how do you know when it's the right time to do this? And how do you set up a dedicated HR person or team, or find a more cost-effective outsourcing option?

Whatever your structure/approach, an HR team is ultimately responsible for all aspects of the employee lifecycle, from hiring through separation of employment—and everything in between.

The **Human Resources Series** addresses the following topics and the key role they have on your business success.

- **The Importance of Recruitment**
- **Compensation and Benefits Management**
- **Employment Laws and Employee Policies**
- **Workplace Culture**
- **Leading at the Speed of Effective Communications**

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When is the right time for a dedicated HR professional?

The right time largely depends on your business' circumstances, including budget, projected growth, and size.

Many HR pros suggest formalizing, and delegating HR functions when your organization grows to more than 10 employees. At this point, managing HR can become too much for a small business owner, especially where administration and compliance are concerned, due to the time and complexity involved. Understanding the current state of HR within your organization helps you identify needs and provides a framework for building an HR function, whether wholly in-house or outsourced.

It's important to note that a significant component of HR is record keeping for compliance and audit purposes (i.e., payroll information, training records, recruitment documents, employment eligibility forms, performance

improvement plans (PIPs), disciplinary action, and termination records). As such, selecting software to automate daily tasks and streamline HR processes is essential.

Whether you have an internal HR resource, or use an external professional service, key performance indicators (KPIs) are essential to measuring effectiveness of your HR functions. HR KPIs include time to fill a position; employee satisfaction; employee training costs; workforce productivity, absenteeism or turnover; and internal promotion rates.

Setting KPIs helps you review the performance of your HR person or team and their contribution to your overall business strategy. In the



meantime, KPIs can also guide HR decision-making and problem-solving.

Finally, HR decision-making is guided by your budget. Allocating financial resources to your HR team, whether internal or outsourced, helps prioritize spending and ensure HR functions run efficiently and effectively. Your HR budget needs to cover essential functions such as wages, benefits, diversity, equity and inclusion training, employee safety and well-being, as well as recruitment, HR technology, and other training and professional development.

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The Importance of Recruitment: Staffing Your Business

Why is this important?

Attracting, hiring, and retaining the right people is key to any organization's success. Having employees with the right skills, abilities, interests, values, and temperament helps ensure that quality services and products are created and delivered, and makes a positive contribution to the company culture. Done well, a hiring process allows business owners and their leaders (supervisors, shift leads, managers) to focus their time on activities that help strengthen and grow the business, and support and develop their employees, instead of addressing problems related to behavior, performance, safety, or quality.

Quality hiring practices take time and money to develop and put in place, and skilled, caring supervisors to consistently follow and help improve. Key activities include preparing job descriptions, creating and managing a process for sourcing, vetting, and selecting candidates through interviews, reference checks, and hiring decisions, and designing and implementing a new employee onboarding process, all in compliance with relevant laws and aligned with your culture. This document outlines strategies, tools, and resources aimed at getting the right people into your organization, and in the right roles.



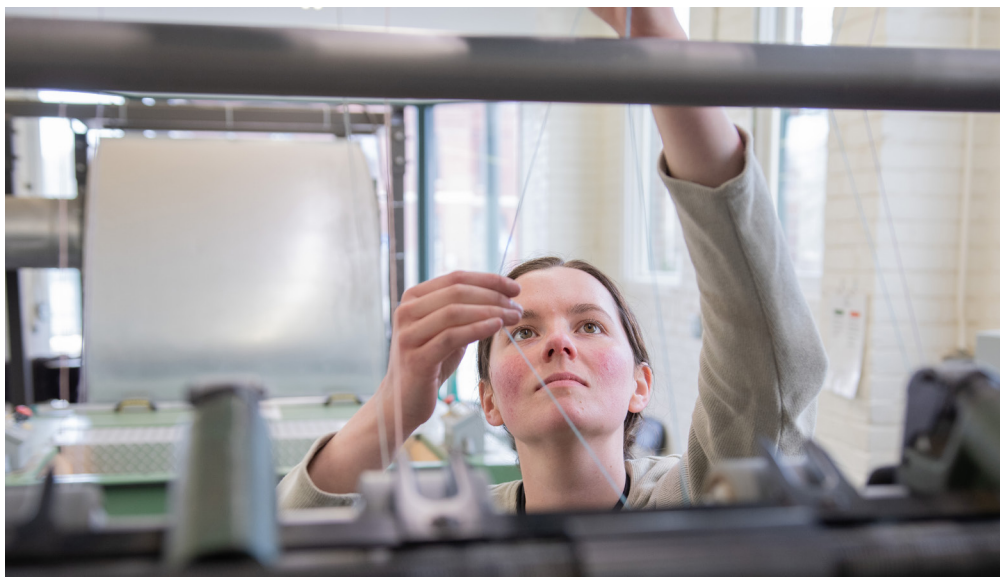
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Who Do You Need and When Do You Need Them?

A new business may initially employ friends and family (i.e., as the initial approach) to perform the necessary duties to get the business underway. Even if you only have a few employees, it's important to clearly define what work needs to be done, where that work fits into the organization's structure, and how it relates to and interacts with the work of others. You may find that one or more people will wear several hats until the organization is large enough to have more narrowly focused positions.

As your business grows or employees leave, a formal staffing plan can help you maximize efficiency and allocate resources appropriately, ensuring your company has the right number of people with the skills you need to meet your goals. The benefits of creating a strategic staffing plan include:

- Targeted recruitment efforts: By identifying your company's immediate and future staffing needs, you can focus on recruiting the right people at the right time.
- Staff retention: Hiring employees into positions where they can thrive and use their skills well increases the likelihood that they will want to stay.
- Succession planning: Forecasting changes in staffing needs gives you a method of identifying prime candidates, whether high potential or high performance, to move into higher-level positions as others leave or you need more managers or higher-levels of subject matter expertise.
- Productivity: Anticipating changes in the workforce helps you anticipate hiring needs and can minimize downtime due to an insufficient number or kind of employees. This allows you to get someone new into the position quickly to keep workplace productivity high.



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Developing a Strategic Staffing Plan

Step one in creating a staffing plan is to review your business goals and evaluate how these objectives might affect your workforce demands, including the need for more employees or new skills required to help reach those goals. Then consider any factors that influence your staffing plan – internal, external, positive or negative – that could affect your plan and that your business has no control over. For example, a shortage of workers overall in the economy, competition for like-type skills, third shift scheduling, etc.

Next, evaluate your current staffing environment, such as the age of your

workforce and turnover rates, total number of employees and their skills and competencies, and potential workers or managers seeking advancement. After evaluating your current staffing environment, you are ready to make predictions about your future staffing needs which will inform your staffing plan.

Crucial information for your staffing plan includes an outline of the personnel needed for your business with job titles and job descriptions; time schedule and location relative to the position; budgetary considerations (base wage or salary, incentive compensation, taxes, insurance, etc.); recommended or required training and/or

certifications; the need for seasonal or part time personnel; and criteria for promotions.

The development of staffing plans often falls to the person or department responsible for HR, but getting involvement from different departments or other parts of the organization can elicit important insights and needs. Current employees can give insight into staffing concerns and the support they need to improve their performance. Managers might have information about upcoming projects or staffing changes they anticipate on their teams.



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The Importance of Recruitment: Attracting the Right Candidates

Why is this important?

Attracting, hiring, and retaining the right people is key to any organization's success. Having employees with the right skills, abilities, interests, values, and temperament helps ensure that quality services and products are created and delivered, and makes a positive contribution to the company culture. Done well, a hiring process allows business owners and their leaders (supervisors, shift leads, managers) to focus their time on activities that help strengthen and grow the business, and support and develop their employees, instead of addressing problems related to behavior, performance, safety, or quality.

Quality hiring practices take time and money to develop and put in place, and skilled, caring supervisors to consistently follow and help improve. Key activities include preparing job descriptions, creating and managing a process for sourcing, vetting, and selecting candidates through interviews, reference checks, and hiring decisions, and designing and implementing a new employee onboarding process, all in compliance with relevant laws and aligned with your culture. This document outlines strategies, tools, and resources aimed at getting the right people into your organization, and in the right roles.



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Attracting the Right Candidates

Before posting the position, you will want to develop a detailed job description as well as abbreviated job posting content to advertise your opening. Key components of the job description include:

Job Title | Hourly or Salaried Designation | Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) Employee Classification (e.g., ..., ...) | Summary of Responsibilities | List of Essential Duties and Responsibilities | Qualifications* | Physical Requirements | Location and Work Hours/Days/Shift | Special requirements like carrying a beeper, mandatory overtime, and/or travel.

***Qualifications:** A helpful way to identify and organize qualifications is by using the acronym KESA, which stands for **Knowledge, Experience, Skills, and Attributes**.



When defining position qualifications, it's important to carefully consider what an employee must be able to do on day one, and what they can learn through either OTJ (On the Job Training) or formal instruction. In a tight job market, and when competing for specialized talent, it's helpful to think about a range of candidates you might consider, and how you would describe their qualifications. For example: If you're seeking a web application developer, do they need to know a specific coding language, or do they need to have demonstrated the interest and ability to learn coding languages in general?

Knowledge - What do employees in this role need to know in order to carry out their responsibilities? This could include knowledge developed on the job, as part of a hobby, self-guided learning, and/or formal education. If secondary education or an advanced degree is not essential for success, you may increase your candidate pool by omitting any educational requirement.

Experience - What do employees need to have done in the past in order to safely and effectively carry out their responsibilities? Could they have gained that experience outside the workplace through volunteering and/or household or parenting/elder care responsibilities?

Skills - What soft skills (e.g., ..., ...), technical skills (tools, technology, design, engineering), organizational, planning, and communication skills are needed to carry out key responsibilities?

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Attributes - What qualities should someone exhibit for success in this role? Are there qualities you look for in all employees that you want to include in every job description? Once you've created a job description, you can develop a job posting that includes the title, summary of key responsibilities, and any must-have qualifications. It is also helpful to include either a starting hourly wage/salary, a hiring range, or at least the bottom of the hiring range; doing so can help ensure that only candidates who can consider your level of pay will apply, reducing the chances of investing time interviewing someone who will not be able to accept an offer. This level of pay transparency is increasingly being mandated by state law to promote fairness and reduce pay disparities based on protected factors like gender, race, age, or ethnicity. Determining what to pay for a job can be done through market-based evaluation of what

other employers are paying for similar roles and qualifications, or by using a more involved "point factor analysis" combined with a market review. The Vermont Department of Labor tracks wage data and makes it available to employers at <http://www.vtlni.info/wageincome.cfm>.

In addition to job-specific information, prospective candidates will want to know about your organization. This part of your ad content can draw from a mission



statement and values that guide how your organization operates, the workplace culture you strive to provide, and highlight any recognition you've received as a good employer. Reinforcing the "why" of your business differentiates you from your competition and enables you to attract top talent who seek meaningful work in a rewarding environment. Ultimately, compelling ad content is a tool for attracting people who can do the job in a way that aligns with and supports your company's values.

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The Importance of Recruitment: Effective Hiring Processes

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What is an Effective Hiring Process?

Hiring employees takes time and care to ensure you hire people with the knowledge, skills, and experience needed to perform key functions in your business. While the hiring process for entry-level positions may be fairly quick and simple compared to executive-level roles, both can benefit from a structured process that may include some or all of the following:

1. Application process: This can be as simple as having a paper application at the front desk of your business or on your website, or as complex as directing applicants to submit a cover letter and resume online, via an on-line form or via email. Some employers may wish to avoid business disruption from walk-in job seekers while others may opt to post open positions where prospective employees (who may be

customers in your place of business, or follow you online) can see them and apply on the spot.

2. Vetting process: Most hiring efforts involve one or more of the following activities:

Resume/application review and screening call or initial interview -

After reading over a prospective candidate's resume or application, it can be helpful to start with a 15-30 minute phone conversation to discern the candidate's level of interest. You can ask some initial questions to find out if they possess the minimum qualifications, and to confirm they are amenable to the starting hourly rate or salary, or the hiring range, as well as specifics such as mandatory overtime, work schedule (hours/days of the week), location, beeper and travel requirements, etc.



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Formal interviews - Whether in-person or virtual, these longer conversations delve more deeply into the candidate's ability to do the job, their interest and motivation for exploring employment with your company, and the extent to which they will perform and behave in a way that aligns with your company's values and behavioral norms. Optimally, new employees will make a positive addition to your company culture. The higher-level and more complex the role, the more rounds of interviews are usually involved. Interviews can take many forms ranging from 1:1 with a hiring manager to informal meetings with prospective co-workers aimed at helping the candidate understand a typical day and provide current employees the opportunity to offer their insights about the candidate's qualifications/interests to the hiring manager. Group interviews involving a hiring team of the manager, an HR professional, and an employee with

subject matter expertise needed to properly evaluate candidates' qualifications is another approach. Anyone involved in interviewing prospective candidates should receive training on unconscious bias, as well as, unlawful questions and other topics/questions to avoid that may expose the company to risk.

Interview Techniques and Questions

It's important to think about both what you want to evaluate (based on the job description) and the kinds of questions that will help elicit related insights and information. Things to evaluate may include:

- Hard skills (experience, knowledge, education, and skills)
- Soft skills (interpersonal, oral and written communication, problem-solving, attributes, etc.)
- Interest in your business and mission
- Alignment with your company values

Types of Questions:

- Behavioral-based questions designed to gain insight into how a candidate handled relevant situations in the past.
- Open-ended questions that cannot be answered with a yes or no.
- Close-ended questions that can be answered with a yes or no.
- Scenario-based questions that ask the candidate to describe how they would handle a situation relevant to the job.
- Demonstrations of skills or knowledge through role playing or a pre-assigned presentation.**

To help candidates provide useful insights, consider sending the scenario and/or some or all interview questions in advance of the interview. This practice is helpful to candidates who may be shy, less experienced or comfortable during interviews, and hopefully helps make the best use of everyone's time during the interview.

**** cautionary note:** Unless you are willing to pay the candidate for their time, avoid asking them to do real work that benefits your organization.

Avoid Unconscious Bias When Evaluating Candidates:

Malcom Gladwell pointed out in his first book, "The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference", that we tend to make almost instantaneous decisions in our hiring processes, based on our unconscious biases. To avoid this tendency, focus on evaluating the values and behaviors the candidate demonstrates during the interview



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process, the extent to which they could make a positive contribution to your organization's culture, and their interest in helping advance the company's mission. Optimally, each new employee makes a positive "culture add" to your organization.

References and Background Checks -

References - Before making an offer, it is important to talk with people who know the candidate from a variety of relevant perspectives. While it is prudent to talk with a former manager, you might also consider asking the candidate if you can speak with others who can help round out your knowledge of them. These other individuals could include a former coworker or peer, people who were "customers" of the candidate (e.g. a direct report, an actual customer, or a vendor),

or people with whom the candidate volunteered.

Background Checks - Given the type of position you are hiring for, you may or may not need to conduct a formal background check. Generally, background checks are focused on evaluating one or more of the following: criminal record, credit record, and verification of educational credentials and employment history. Background checks need to comply with the Fair Credit and Reporting Act (FCRA) and Vermont's Fair Employment Practices regarding criminal history records and employment based on credit information. Hiring a reputable background check organization helps ensure compliance with state and federal laws.

Background checks and drug tests or fitness for duty tests should only

be done after a contingent offer of employment is made and with the candidate's consent. It is prudent to seek guidance from an employment attorney before undertaking any of these checks, and to have your offer letter reviewed for legal compliance.

Whatever checks you do run, it is important to treat all final applicants in a consistent manner. Checking for some and not others could invite a claim of discrimination. **You should focus on treating all candidates in a consistent manner throughout each stage of the hiring process.**

3. Making an Offer

Extending an offer of employment is an opportunity to personally express your enthusiasm and interest in having the candidate join your organization. While a nicely written letter is helpful for confirming the terms of the offer (e.g., job title,



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start date, pay, benefits, etc.), making the offer by phone or face to face personalizes the offer to the candidate, after which you can send the offer letter. It is advised that you develop an offer letter template with the kinds of information that will be included in each hire you make and this should be reviewed by an employment attorney so that it complies with employment laws and best practices.

Don't Forget About Candidate Experience

Everyone who interacts with your business and employees is a customer of sorts, whether they are

selling you tools or raw materials, purchasing your products, or applying for a job. As an employer, the way you go about recruiting, interviewing, and either hiring or rejecting candidates creates a reflection of your company in the employment market. Focusing on providing a positive experience for job candidates can reap huge rewards in the form of referrals to other applicants, positive comments on social media, and perhaps even a new customer.

The market for top talent is always competitive, making it critical to close the loop with each candidate,

even if done via a brief, appreciative email. No company wants to create a reputational risk of being known as the black hole of job applications, and just because an applicant isn't right for one role doesn't mean the perfect opportunity isn't right around the corner.

The dynamic nature of HR matters in growing companies means that roles, responsibilities, and reporting structures will change over time. Identifying and discussing these changes, whether they happen by design or organically, helps individuals and teams thrive.

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Compensation and Benefits Management

As a business owner, you, eventually with the help of an HR team, are responsible for determining your total compensation philosophy, strategy, practices, and structure, including base pay and any additional compensation.

Strategy and Design Considerations

When designing a total compensation structure, you need to first be aware of any statutory requirements regarding pay-related considerations, such as federal and Vermont minimum wage and overtime, the federal Equal Pay Act, worker's compensation insurance, and Vermont's Fair Employment Practices Act. There are also some mandated time-off benefits, such as Vermont's paid sick leave law and Parental and Family Leave Act. Even though the latter doesn't require employers to provide paid leave, it is important to consider these benefits as part of the time off an employee may need to take.

For many reasons, employers are moving toward greater transparency and equity in their pay practices. A group of Vermont employers formed [The Leaders for Equity and Equal Pay](#) several years ago, culminating in a free toolkit aimed at providing small employers (those with up to 400 employees) with the tools to conduct in-house, DIY gender and racial pay equity reviews.

It's also helpful to benchmark your pay and benefit offerings to ensure you can effectively compete with employers needing people with similar qualifications. The increase in pay transparency in job ads makes it much easier to know what some employers are doing without running afoul of antitrust laws like

The Sherman Act, which prohibits unreasonable restraint of trade, including setting compensation and benefits provided to employees. To protect your company, it's best to seek data that has been compiled by a third party using median pay rates and aggregated data gathered from various sources, and that does not directly identify survey participants. Examples of third party data sources include benefit brokers/advisors or HR consulting firms, such as Gallagher, Flynn and Company, LLP (see link below), Hickok and Boardman (see link below), and Common Good Vermont (see link below) that conduct annual surveys of area employers, as well as the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and Vermont Department of Labor's Wages and Income Information.

Gallagher, Flynn and Company, LLP's HR Consulting Group conducts an annual salary survey and report: <https://gfc.com/services/hr-consulting/>

Hickok and Boardman's HR Intelligence and Retirement Solutions conducts an annual benefits survey and report: <https://www.hbhriq.com/employee-benefits-survey/>

Common Good Vermont conducts a bi-annual Wages and Benefits Survey and Report of



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nonprofit organizations: <https://commongoodvt.org/jobs/wages-and-benefits-report/>

Employee Benefits

Employee benefits are an important component of your total compensation package; they include both involuntary benefits mandated by federal or state law and voluntary or fringe benefits the employer chooses to offer. Low-cost voluntary benefits can include things such as disability insurance to provide income protection if an employee becomes ill or injured off the job, providing flexible work hours, or a stipend for wellness-related expenses such as a gym membership. As a company grows and can spend more on benefits, the list could include insurance (health, dental, short term/long term disability, life and vision), paid leave, remote/hybrid work, educational benefits, a retirement plan, etc. While manufacturers probably can't offer remote work,

they might be able to offer something unique, such as a discount on products that employees may need and appreciate. Optimally, benefits are a net gain for the employee and an investment in people that can favorably impact business operations, workplace culture and even the company's bottom line, while not negatively impacting a company's bottom line or operations.

Benefits matter to both current and prospective employees. While base pay (hourly wage or salary) is important, according to [Glassdoor's Q3 2015 Employment Confidence Survey](#), nearly four in five (79%) of employees would prefer new or additional benefits over a pay increase. For budgeting purposes, a well-rounded benefits package can account for 30%+ of total compensation.

Another aspect of compensation is payroll and benefits administration, related taxes (including income taxes

on some employer-provided benefits), reporting, employee communications, and annual enrollment. Even for small businesses with only a few employees, these processes can quickly become complex and time-consuming.

Compensation and Benefits Management

Payroll administration, including tax compliance, reporting, and time tracking, are all tasks that need to be taken care of, either by your bookkeeper, yourself or a third party. Once that's handled, factors such as rewards and personal autonomy* can pay huge dividends in employee satisfaction, reduction in staff turnover and a workplace culture that attracts the best talent.

Benefits to the Next Level

There are a number of studies that claim compensation is not the main predictor of workplace satisfaction. From articles in the Harvard Business



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Review to studies noted by critically acclaimed author Daniel Pink in his book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, we are reminded that money is not our prime motivator. These studies urge us to focus on workplace culture where attention is paid to personal autonomy, mastery and purpose. These are the prime motivators once pay is at a base level where people

are not worried about making enough money to survive.

Compensation components that include rewards (think 'employee of the month' with a new spin) that recognize any above and beyond extra efforts made can go a long way towards both instructing new staff on what's encouraged and acknowledging existing staff on their contributions.

These 'rewards' can be as simple as a gift certificate to a local restaurant to something more personalized based on the individual's needs/wants, such as an extra day off with pay.

★ **Footnote:** Autonomy: one's ability to generate results from a place of trust, ability to set own schedule/location, initiate a course of action based on self-knowledge and inner wisdom, as opposed to being micro-managed.



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HUMAN RESOURCES SERIES

Employment Laws and Employee Policies

Why is this important?

Complying with applicable employment laws is important for several reasons, not the least of which is that failure to do so can lead to penalties and other fines, and damages such as back wages that could be due if an employer is not in compliance with the overtime provisions of federal and state wage and hour laws. Another reason is to ensure that you have the proper policies and practices in place to protect and benefit both yourself and employees. Lastly, complying with employment laws can help support risk management, safety, and workplace culture goals. By notifying employees of their rights and responsibilities, you are not only ensuring compliance, but you are building transparency and opening lines of communications for issues that may surface.



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Introduction

Business owners need to be aware of all applicable federal and state labor and employment laws, what they require, and how to comply. While some laws only pertain to businesses in a specific sector, or to businesses that employ more than a particular number of employees, other laws apply to all employers.

An example of a law that doesn't apply to all Vermont employers is Vermont's Parental and Family Leave Act (VPFL). In general terms, the parental leave part (for birth, adoption or foster care) applies to employers with 10 or more employees who work an average of at least 30 hours per week per year, while the family leave portion (for the employee's own serious illness or the serious illness of their child, stepchild, foster child, ward, parent, parent-in-law, or spouse) applies to employers with 15 or more employees. The companion federal Family and Medical

Leave Act (FMLA) does not apply until you have 50 or more employees.

Important laws that apply to all employers, regardless of size, include (but are not limited to) the Vermont Fair Employment Practices Act, wage and hour laws, and Vermont's Earned Sick Time Act.

What to pay attention to

Non-Discrimination

All employers are subject to basic non-discrimination laws, and cannot make any employment decisions on the basis of the following protected characteristics: race, color, religion, national origin, citizenship, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, ancestry, place of birth, age, disability, health coverage status, HIV status, genetic information, veteran or military status, crime victim status, pregnancy or pregnancy-related condition, or any other characteristic protected by law.

State and Federal Laws

It's important to know where state and federal laws differ and/or overlap. The VPFL and FMLA laws are a great example of the importance of understanding and evaluating both laws and creating an appropriate policy for your size of organization. When there is a difference between state and federal regulations, employers must comply with whatever favors or offers the greatest protections to their employees. You can always be more generous than required, e.g., providing paid leave for employee needs that are not already mandated by law.



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How do I know what laws apply?

Fortunately, both the State of Vermont and the Federal government provide a number of valuable resources for employers. A list of key laws and related compliance tools and training resources can be found on the State of [Vermont's Workplaces for All](#) website, organized by the following topic areas and with links to federal resources:

- Wage and Hour (you can also find helpful information in the [Compensation and Benefits Management Business Sense PDF](#))
- Workplace Safety
- Non-Discrimination

Other Helpful Sites For Workplace Safety

- Federal:
 - [Federal mandated training and resources](#)
- Vermont:
 - <https://labor.vermont.gov/vosha/safety-management>
 - <https://labor.vermont.gov/vosha/vosha-resources>
 - Project WorkSAFE: <https://labor.vermont.gov/workplace-safety/project-worksafe>
- For Non-Profit Organizations
 - [Common Good Vermont's HR resources](#).

How do I communicate with employees about applicable employment laws?

There are a number of ways to communicate with employees

about your company's practices and compliance with applicable laws. Key tools include the following:

Employee handbook

Done well, an employee handbook can serve as both a compliance and culture resource, conveying to employees both employer and employee rights and obligations vis-a-vis employment policies, as well as communicating company values and the type of workplace culture management strives to cultivate for the benefit of all. It is important to have an employment attorney review your employee handbook, and/or stand-alone policies, to ensure policies do not create risk for the organization.

Some laws require that you have a written policy outlining employee rights and responsibilities. Business owners that do not feel ready for full handbooks with all of their policies should at least issue basic legally required policies while they develop a complete handbook.

Mandatory employment law posters

Employers are required to prominently post a number of state and federal employment law posters. Some posters must be posted continuously (e.g., for FMLA and Wage and Hour) while others may be provided once. It's also important to understand the differences in posting requirements for 100% on-site, hybrid, and fully remote workforces.

Helpful links:

- [Federal Employment Posters and Related Recordkeeping](#)
- [elaws - FirstStep Poster Advisor \(dol.gov\)](#)
- https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WHD/legacy/files/fab_2020_7.pdf

Training and education

It is important to review your employment policies with all new employees to ensure they understand company expectations, obligations, and intentions, as well as what is expected of employees. Supervisors should be provided additional



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training - both when they start a supervisory role and ongoing - on the important role they play as agents of the company, their responsibilities in helping uphold and reinforce policies, and the personal liability they have in relation to sexual harassment claims.

Day-to-day practices

- **Be aware of employment status.** In Vermont, the default for employment relationships is "at-will employment," which means that either an employee or an employer can terminate the employment relationship at any time and for any reason, provided that the reason is not unlawful. There are a number of ways that at-will status can be modified (through agreements, policies, or verbal promises). Employers should also be mindful that there are various laws that prohibit termination or other retaliation if an employee exercises a protected right, or on the basis of a characteristic protected by law.

- **Strive for consistent employee relations practices**
A common mantra for HR professionals is to treat similarly situated employees in a consistent manner. This approach helps ensure employees encountering similar situations are treated in a fair, consistent, and equitable manner, although not always in the identical manner in terms of actions taken to address a situation.
- **Keep abreast of changes in law and best practices**
Employment laws and regulations are constantly evolving and require diligent monitoring to identify needed changes to policies and practices, and ongoing training and education of employees.
- **Know when to call an employment attorney**
Employment attorneys can play a crucial role in helping employers maintain a proactive approach to risk management related to employee policies, practices,

and relations by reviewing handbooks, providing preventive training in employment law and common day-to-day workplace issues, ensuring all contracts are necessary, well-crafted, and enforceable. Employment attorneys are also critical sounding boards when you need to respond to an employee complaint of potential discrimination or retaliation, you need help handling an investigation of sexual harassment or other discrimination claim, or navigating a sensitive employee relations issue, etc.

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HUMAN RESOURCES SERIES

Leading at the Speed of Effective Communication

Business is nothing more than a series of conversations.

Why is this important?

As reported on [Grammarly's website](#), a 2023 Harris Poll, "The State of Business Communication 2023", representing over 1,000 workers across many industries found that poor communication costs the US approximately \$1.2 trillion, or \$12,506 per employee. That same poll noted that communication is getting worse instead of better. As we come out of the throes of the pandemic and return to in-person office settings, we would have expected to see improvements in communication at work. Instead, "lowered productivity" went from 28% to 43%, compared to 2021.

Effective communication is the process of exchanging ideas, thoughts, opinions, knowledge, and data so that the message is received and understood with clarity and purpose. Effective communication in business can boost employee motivation, increase employee engagement, satisfaction, productivity, and reduce workplace conflicts that can arise based upon the diverse cultures and beliefs of a workforce.

Effective communication is the single most powerful tool a leader has to move a team into constructive action. Whether face-to-face, via email, through video conferencing or in a group meeting, one of the most difficult tasks a leader must perform is providing constructive feedback that allows team members to make difficult adjustments, improve their 'game' and succeed at their job. When communication is valued as a core competency, organizations improve in all areas of performance excellence.



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How to Make Improvements

Here's a list of tools, tips and resources to help you communicate better:

- Run effective meetings people WANT to come to - meetings that matter! Where employees feel heard and respected.
 - Use tools like "[Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most](#)", as created by the Harvard Negotiation Project, to better understand the 9 different conversations that occur during every interaction.
 - Become a Learning Organization, where everyone is encouraged and supported to learn a common effective communication framework. In addition to the one noted above, you might find these to be a better fit for your organization:
 - [Fierce Conversations](#)
 - [Crucial Conversations](#)
 - [Appreciative Inquiry](#)
 - Know how to listen to both what's being said, and what is NOT, and how to bridge the gap.
- Handle emotions more effectively; start by recognizing that they exist, even though they are rarely talked about.
 - Share information more clearly and consistently.
 - Set clear limits and boundaries - though it may sound counter-intuitive, Brené Brown, an award-winning author and expert on leadership notes, in her book, [Rising Strong](#), that "*Compassionate people ask for what they need. They say no when they need to, and when they say yes, they mean it. They're compassionate because their boundaries keep them out of resentment.*"
 - Help others develop and grow - don't wait a whole year to sit down and review an employee's goals, aspirations and motivation. Try to make it happen at least once a season. Do it while taking a walk at least once a year, more often, weather permitting.

Listen [appreciatively](#), Walk your Talk. Be present.



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Tips for Effective Communication in the Workplace

1. Communicate the Right Way

For more effective communication, first, ask these questions.

- **What is the goal?**
- **Who needs to hear this?**
- **How should I pass the message across?**

Ineffective communication often occurs when leaders or managers talk to the wrong employees or share information in the wrong workplace setting. The communication purpose should be directed only to relevant recipient(s) and your method of communication should be appropriate for the employee and the situation. For example, an employee may prefer email, while another opts for a physical interaction, where there's eye contact, and they can read your body language. Generally, it's best to communicate urgent information or instructions, major news or sensitive news such as

a promotion or transfer face-to-face.

2. Prioritize Two-Way Communication

Effective communication in the workplace involves speaking, active listening and feedback. Both parties need to understand each other.

Practice active listening: To avoid missing important information, don't listen to a coworker just so you can reply. Instead, listen to understand them. Maintain eye contact with the speaker, take notes to capture your thoughts while they're speaking, and respond with relevant gestures to show you're actively listening.

Embrace feedback: Ask your team members for feedback on your message and communication style either during meetings or anonymously in suggestion boxes, and note their comments and concerns. When you offer feedback, but do it thoughtfully and in person, not publicly. Adopt constructive feedback by first expressing

appreciation for their work and then pointing out how to improve. Invite employees to share their thoughts on your feedback.

3. Build Your Communication Skills

Be clear: To communicate effectively, be clear about your goal, use easy-to-understand words and avoid incomplete sentences. Also, provide context when communicating with your team. For example, if you're setting expectations for a big push to get things done in what might be considered an unreasonable amount of time, let people know WHY this is important and how it will benefit both the customer and the company. Also, encourage employees to ask questions to minimize errors and maximize productivity.

Remain courteous: Practice respectful communication and work through differences positively. Even during disagreements, try to stay polite, avoiding offensive words. Monitor your body language and facial expressions, and use the right tone, to avoid unintentional cues.

Stay open-minded: Make sure your employees feel comfortable approaching you with ideas or concerns. Consider their thoughts and address them respectfully, even when busy. And if you have concerns about an employee's behavior or performance, discuss it with them directly.

4. Embrace the Uniqueness of Each Employee

Every employee has their own unique communication style. Learn about their preferred communication channels and style - and then tailor



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your methods to their select style. While the sales team seeks endless data analytics, the bookkeeper might not want detailed stories about how to land clients.

5. Make Time for One-on-One Interactions

To improve workplace communication, you need to be intentional about relationships. Schedule one-on-one meetings with your team. These meetings show your employees that you value them and are willing to connect with them more personally. Employees who are more reserved or quiet tend to be more open and share valuable information and feedback in private settings.

6. Schedule Weekly Team Meetings

Routine meetings create space for employees to speak their minds. Team leaders can meet with members to review each week's accomplishments, challenges and concerns, and set goals and tasks

for the future. Document important conversations and share recaps to clarify points and help the team remember recommendations and action points.

7. Invest Time in Team Building

Creating a dynamic working environment enables people to feel safe and confident. By promoting social interactions and casual, collaborative activities, employees feel more connected to one another and understood which improves retention and enhances work culture.

8. Show Appreciation

Businesses with engaged and happy workers make significantly more profits than those with miserable employees. Appreciate employees and show you care. Thank them for their brilliant ideas or for completing a task quickly. Be specific and genuine with your praise so that they can replicate it with their co-workers as future situations warrant.

9. Use Tech - Get a Team Communication App

The pandemic reminded us that absent of good team communication, there will be miscues, especially in remote or hybrid work environments. Consider team communication tools to stay up to date and collaborate on projects. These tools can provide a valuable hub to meet to carry out tasks, share information and discuss upcoming deadlines. Communication apps include project management tools, video conferencing tools and intranet shared drives within a business.

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