

Corporate policy documents have had a long and difficult history within many organisations. While much effort has been put into creating and maintaining them, they are often more ignored than followed.

Policies and procedures now form the core of many corporate intranets, but the question remains: are they really making any difference to the way staff work?

This briefing looks at the role of corporate policies within an organisation, and the need to better communicate their message to staff.

Purpose of policies

In many organisations, the goal has somehow become to *publish policies*, in the hope that merely documenting desired practices will ensure that they occur.

Classic examples of this are the e-mail and web usage policies, typically published in response to legal concerns, but comprehensively ignored by most staff.

The actual goal of creating corporate policies is to ensure a change in the *attitudes or practices of staff*. This goal is only achieved if the policies are understood and followed by staff throughout the organisation.

It is also important to recognise that depending on your legal jurisdiction, simply publishing policies centrally is not enough to protect against legal exposure.

If, for example, a staff member hurts themselves moving boxes in a warehouse, the employer needs to demonstrate that the person was fully aware of (and *understood*) the relevant policies and chose not to follow them.

History of policy documents

Most policy documents (such as HR manuals) were created as loose-leaf ring-bound manuals. These grew in size (and complexity) until they consisted of hundreds of pages, and were several inches thick.

A modest number of these mammoth manuals were published, and distributed to offices and teams throughout the organisation. They were then left on shelves, and used when needed.

Having grown in a semi-structured way, it was often very difficult to find definitive answers in these manuals, and most staff instead relied on ringing up and asking questions.

Recognising that these paper manuals were both costly to produce and ineffective, a decision was made to migrate them to the intranet.

The first step was simply to republish the policy manual as one large Word document or PDF. While this made it easier to obtain the actual document, finding answers was no easier.

Other organisations pursued the direction of publishing each policy as a standalone Word document, displayed in a long alphabetical list of policies on the intranet.

Making policies work

The first step to making policies work is to realise that there's more to do than just ensuring that staff can find the policy documents. Beyond finding documents, staff must be able to *interpret* and *act upon* the information that they find.

To make policies more effective:

- Rewrite the policies in plain and simple language, in a format that is suitable for use in the online environment.
- Ensure that policies are designed to *communicate* to staff in a way that they will understand.
- Cross-link relevant policies so that related information is easily found.
- Eliminate the concept of 'manuals', and replace them with online collections of easily-understood pages ('frequently asked questions' are just one example of this).
- Identify how and when staff are looking for answers, and ensure that the policies are written to support these needs.
- Establish new authoring and maintenance processes for policies that ensures they are kept up to date.

Much more can be said about improving corporate policies, but the key is to focus on doing whatever is necessary to ensure that policies can be read and followed.