The importance of effective documentation

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In today's business environment, writing is a normal part of the job, you may have to prepare a report, proposal, or even an article. But let's face it, many of us fear writing, and are at a loss as to where to begin and what to say! Some may even ask what is so important about writing anyway.

In the fields of human resource management and industrial relations., having well written, well kept documentation can prove extremely beneficial in the future. The need for clear written correspondence has been further compounded by the advent of the Employment Rights Act in Barbados. Documents efficiently and effectively communicate information to persons both inside and outside of the organization and ensure that rules and policies are clearly outlined and accessible to all staff. Well kept documents provide a body of evidence to both support employee advancement, as well as termination or discipline of an employee. Documentation within an organization promotes uniformity and provides a legacy; new employees can easily see what the organization's standards are, as well as logically follow past events within the organization.

Another concern that many persons have is: what do you document? The answer is simple: everything needs to be documented; conversations with employees should be noted somewhere, even if it is a simple note in a diary that you spoke with Mary Smith on X date. Sending emails to follow up and confirm conversations is also a good way to ensure that a document trail is created. Further to this, it should be noted that as a fair employer, you should note both accolades and infractions by employees. Human nature is such that we remember to ensure that all disciplinary matters are noted on an employee's file but fail to keep the same copious records when the employee has exceeded expectations. Document both!

That being said, the question still remains, how do you begin to write?
What are some useful tips and tricks to ensure that any documents that you create within your organization add value to the processes within the company?

1. The first step is to not "reinvent the wheel" You are not the first person to attempt to write a warning letter, a policy handbook, an email or memo. Done correctly, internet searches for sample documents can prove very fruitful. Also, if there are drafts of similar documents, do not discount them entirely, while they may no longer be relevant, they may provide a good basis to get you started.

2. Write for clarity, say exactly what you mean, and do not be afraid to give examples should the concept be a difficult one to grasp.

3. Ensure that there is no ambiguity in your documents, avoid persons having to debate what was meant by the information you produce. Define concepts if you have to, but never leave it open to differing interpretations.

4. Wherever possible minimize the use of slang and jargon in your documents. Depending on your audience, this may be unavoidable, but it is a good practice to avoid.

5. Avoid writing correspondence when angry or frustrated, many managers believe that you need to deal with issues forthwith, however, it is always good to have a cooling off period, and then write to employees who are breaking the rules. Correspondence written when upset bears the writer's tone and makes them more prone to include things which should not have been said. In addition, having put these emotions into your writing may cause you to have to defend your position later.
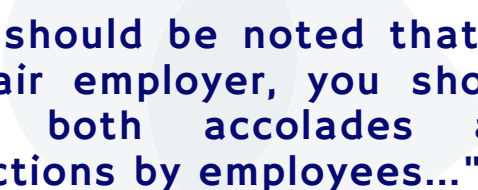
6. Another important thing to remember is to stick to the facts when you are writing, avoid including emotion or opinions. It is about what occurred or will occur.

7. Avoid using too many abbreviations or including "text" or instant messaging language. The time and place for this is not in any form of business correspondence. Acronyms can be used once they are initially written in full.

8. Check and recheck your documents for spelling and grammatical errors, there is nothing more embarrassing than seeing a document you created with these types of errors after they have already been sent out to the staff or client.

9. Always allow a trusted colleague to vet your work, a fresh set of eyes can spot errors which you may not.

Ensuring there is clear and copious documentation provides the framework for accurate and well maintained record-keeping within the organization which would help to eliminate grey areas or clouds of uncertainty about decisions which were made and or any issues which may have arose.

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