

CREATING AN OFFICE PROCEDURES MANUAL

Preface

This handbook is a guide for creating your firm's office procedures manual. All law firms, no matter their size, have certain procedures that enable employees to accomplish their work. While there are no universal procedures, some elements are common to every office. Compiling and stating these procedures in a manual available for all employees can help the firm achieve a more efficient workflow and maintain procedural continuity throughout the office.

Customize this handbook to serve as a reference, developed and approved by your firm. Update it at regular intervals. Expansion of office staff and/or space, purchase of new equipment, promulgation of new court rules, or a change in administration are just a few events that may trigger procedure updates. A current procedures manual is vital to the orientation and training of new employees and as an ongoing reference for existing staff.

KEEP YOUR FIRM'S POLICY MANUAL SEPARATE FROM THE FIRM PROCEDURES MANUAL. The policy manual provides specific policies relating to the administration of the firm, while the procedures manual sets out guidelines to accomplish tasks in the office. They should not be confused.

Does your firm need a procedures manual?

There are many tasks performed by each employee of your firm. The methods to complete these tasks are examples of office procedures. Without written procedures, employees may find themselves lost or confused as to how they can accomplish these tasks. The result is that employees will develop their own methods, and you will soon find everyone in the office performing tasks differently with different results. Important elements may be missed or overlooked, and any consistency will be lost.

The advantages to providing a written procedures manual include:

1. Uniformity of work product;
2. Reduced training time;
3. Fewer disruptions for clarifications;
4. Assignment of responsibility;
5. Continuity; and
6. Clarified expectations.

A properly written procedures manual enables any firm employee to step in and complete or assist with any project. Putting all necessary instructions in writing helps an employee pick up where someone else left off. Should an employee's workload be more than the employee can handle (as often occurs in the practice of law), written procedures allow work to easily be distributed to other employees and completed within the necessary time. This creates a more efficient and productive staff, able to handle all projects in a timely manner. It is an added advantage that the firm's work product will be as uniform as possible, both in accuracy and in style.

Both existing and new employees can use the office procedures manual as a quick reference guide, reducing the time required by administrative personnel and other employees to answer questions. New employees can immediately review all office procedures and instructions on how to complete any task, enhancing or developing the employee's performance and productivity more quickly. Written procedures also promote continuity. When written procedures exist, everyone has the same information and guidelines, and changes in staff or administration

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do not impact continuity.

Written procedures also help pinpoint responsibility. If a particular task is not performed, you can easily identify what caused the failure and correct it. Employees will know exactly what the firm expects in the employee's daily work, and uncertainty and frustration will be reduced.

Getting started

Although reviewing another firm's procedures manual can help you get started, it is not always beneficial to copy that other firm's procedures. Each firm has different administrative and support staff. Not all procedures will work in every firm. Look at your firm's current procedures and start from there. Creating an office procedures manual does not necessarily mean creating new procedures for your office. It can merely be the process of putting all your current procedures in writing.

The office procedures manual should be detailed, complete, and accurate. It should be easy to read, with clear, concise directions and an easy-to-use index. It should also contain examples and/or samples. Remember this is a "how-to" book for employees. It should be an educational tool, as well as an easy reference guide. Keep in mind procedures must have a beginning and an end. Establish a sequence of steps to be followed for each procedure and consider any applicable time limits. Identify by title (not by name) the person responsible for the designated task, and state in clear, concise terms the procedures to be followed. Remember, creating the first procedures manual can be a time-consuming, trial-and-error experience. A final version will not be produced overnight.

If possible, involve staff. Many times, staff can provide practical suggestions as to how to improve procedures so desired goals are achieved without creating unnecessary problems in the process. If you do not reach out and encourage staff to participate, you will find few employees will be willing to make suggestions on their own.

Unwritten procedures can assist in developing written procedures. Start with a list of current firm procedures, even if they are not written down and are simply "understood" procedures of the firm. Start with an outline of topics to be covered and then fill in the topics with step-by-step procedures. Imagine yourself as a new employee and try to include procedures unfamiliar to a new employee. Keep in mind areas where current employees ask frequent questions. Remember, new employees may have to learn procedures that differ from their past work experience. Get input from all personnel. If possible, form a committee with at least one "interested" partner, associate, supervisor, and staff person.

Assign the task of writing the first draft to one person, who should have ultimate responsibility for its completion. Establish a definite time schedule. An index of all topics covered should be included for easy reference. The layout, numbering system, cover, type style, etc. should be determined and used consistently.

Writing it right

This guide includes examples of procedures, and demonstrates how to write clear, concise instructions. The examples are for informational purposes only and demonstrate simple useful procedures and forms. Some procedures may not apply to all firms.

In addition to providing the procedures, specific responsibilities are also assigned. This

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approach enables employees to determine at the outset what their responsibilities are.

Samples of forms should always be included. Most firms already have forms in use, and they should be incorporated as examples in the manual. When possible, include checklists to guide the employee through all procedures necessary to complete the task.

Once the procedures are drafted, circulate the written procedures to a few employees for “testing.” Provide a comment sheet so they can evaluate the written product and suggest changes, improvements, or additions. Sections dealing with specific departments of the firm should be reviewed by the department manager.

The next step is to create an index to make it easy for employees to find specific procedures. If employees cannot find a procedure or answer a question quickly, they will simply ask someone else, thus wasting time for two employees. Keep in mind, while the author may look under “Communication System” for information about routing phone calls, a new employee might just as easily look under “Phone Equipment,” so it is always a good idea to cross-reference all procedures.

The final draft of the procedures manual should then be distributed to all partners and administrative personnel for review and comment. When the final draft has been approved, a meeting should be arranged with all staff to introduce the new procedures manual. Everyone should be instructed to read the manual completely. Let employees know the person to whom questions should be directed. Encourage employees to ask if there is any procedure they do not understand or they find confusing.

All new employees should be given the procedures manual and instructed to review it thoroughly. They should be advised that samples are contained in the manual which should be followed closely. Temporary employees should also review the procedures manual.

Topics to be covered

The following topics are provided for reference. Since the size of a firm may dictate its needed procedures, not all firms will use all the topics contained herein, but keep in mind the basic topics necessary in every law firm, such as docketing, letter and pleading form and style, filing system, etc. Carefully choose which items are important to your firm, keeping in mind that simply because your firm does not have a policy on a particular item now does not mean the firm does not need one.

FILING SYSTEM

- A. Describe the filing system used, i.e., alphabetical, numerical
- B. Storage of files (both active and closed)
- C. Opening a new file
 - 1. Conflict check prior to opening file
 - 2. Client information needed/new client or matter report
 - 3. Fee arrangement letter/retainer agreement
 - 4. File folder and labels (standardized)
 - 5. Input into client information system (database)
 - 6. Input into conflict system
 - 7. Organization of file contents (sub-files)
- D. Revising information on active files
- E. Closing files

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- F. Retrieving closed files
- G. Destruction of closed files
- H. Maintaining miscellaneous files (personal, pro bono, administrative)

DOCKETING SYSTEM

- A. Master calendar
- B. Individual calendars
- C. Docketing forms (See Example)
- D. Notices and reminders

Example:

Incoming pleadings: The paralegal will review all incoming pleadings and make date entries in the calendaring system, and also save the pleading in the document management system. The paralegal will enter any related appearance dates. The assigned attorney will then review every incoming pleading and confirm the paralegal has properly saved the document and correctly entered the dates in the calendaring system.

Outgoing pleadings: The assistant will confirm that a copy of every outgoing pleading is sent to the paralegal for docketing. No pleading is to be placed in a client/matter file until the paralegal has docketed the related appearance dates and saved the pleading in the document management system.

Docket requests: All deposition dates, motion dates, hearing dates, etc. are to be docketed as soon as they are scheduled. The assistant will complete a docket request and send it to the paralegal. The request will then be returned to the assistant.

Daily and weekly docket reviews: The firm paralegal will see that the attorneys receive daily and weekly docket reviews for their assigned cases. On Friday of each week, the paralegal prepares a weekly docket showing the time within which some affirmative action must be taken in active cases. Each attorney in the office is given a copy of the weekly docket.

	<p>Return To: _____</p> <p>Today's Date: _____</p> <p>File No.: _____</p> <p>Client/Matter Name: _____</p> <p>Matter/Event to Docket: _____</p> <p>Date: _____</p> <p>Time: _____</p> <p>Responsible Attorney: _____</p> <p>Date Docketed: _____</p> <p>Docketed By: _____</p>	
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LETTERS

- A. Style (See Example)

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- B. Number of copies
- C. Salutation
- D. Closing
- E. Second page style
- F. Signature in absence of attorney
- G. Use of letterhead and stationery

Example:

All letters sent by the firm shall be typed using the style outlined below. Templates have been developed that conform to this firm style. Consult the computer section on word processing for additional information.

(Left and rights margins are 1")
Date (2.5" from top of page)
Name and Address (begins 3" from top of page)
RE: (Underlined)

Dear (Addressee Name):

The body of the letter is always single spaced, and paragraphs are not indented. Addresses must contain a zip code (preferably 9 digit). If printed, letters must be printed on letterhead stationery.

"Quotes within a letter are single spaced and are indented 0.5" on both the left and right margins."

All letters must contain a reference line. If you are not able to ascertain a proper reference from the file, ask the assigned attorney/dictator.

Very truly yours, (4 returns)

(Full name of signatory)

(Dictator's initials/typist's initials)
Enclosure(s)

c:
bc:

(Bottom margin is 1")

FILING COURT PAPERS

- A. Opposing counsel service
- B. Certified copies and/or notary required
- C. Number of copies
- D. Service of process
- E. Local court rules
- F. Federal court rules

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PREPRINTED FORMS

- A. Use of preprinted forms
- B. Location of preprinted forms
- C. Index of forms
- D. Updating of forms
- E. Ordering of forms
- F. Computerized forms

COMPUTER

- A. Software programs available
 - 1. Word processing
 - a. Saving documents
 - b. Retrieving documents
 - c. Forms
 - d. Backup
 - 2. Other programs
- B. Training
- C. Computer supervisor (duties)

LEGAL RESEARCH

- A. Options for legal research (e.g., Fastcase, LEXIS, Westlaw)
- B. Excerpting published materials
- C. Routing of published materials
- D. Routing of subscription publications

PERMANENT RECORDS

- A. Corporate (minute books, corporate seal, stock certificates)
- B. Wills
- C. Safe
- D. Safe deposit box
- E. Personnel records
- F. Firm administrative files
- G. Financial records

WORD PROCESSING

- A. Equipment (PCs, printers, scanners)
- B. Proofreading
- C. Revisions and redlining
- D. Formats (standard in firm)
- E. Finished work
- F. Deliveries and copies
- G. Archives
- H. Department Manager (duties)

DUPLICATING SERVICES

- A. Document reproduction services
 - 1. Equipment and location
 - 2. Procedures for using equipment
 - 3. Charges for copies
 - 4. Equipment maintenance and repair
 - 5. External services/outsourcing

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- B. Miscellaneous equipment
- C. Reproduction clerk (duties)

COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

A. Mail

1. Incoming
 - a. Date stamp
 - b. Personal or confidential
 - c. Overnight delivery
 - d. Registered or certified
 - e. Postage due
 - f. Distribution
 - g. Logging
 - h. Replies
2. Outgoing
 - a. Registered or certified
 - b. Express services available
 - c. Charging clients
3. Email
 - a. Incoming
 - b. Outgoing
 - c. Saving/deleting
 - d. Confidentiality Statement
 - e. Email policy for replying to client emails
 - f. Setting spam or junk email filters to allow receipt of e-notices from courts
 - g. Creating agents or rules to automatically forward e-notices to appropriate staff

B. Phones

1. Equipment description
2. Receptionist hours
3. Message center/voicemail
4. Private phone numbers
5. After-hours numbers
6. Long distance calls
7. Inter-office calls
8. Answering procedure
 - a. Response when out of office
 - b. Response when in conference
 - c. Priority messages
9. Reporting repair problems

C. Photocopier/Facsimile

1. Equipment description
2. To send
3. To receive
4. After-hours use
5. Logging
6. Charging to clients
7. Use of fax cover sheet for privacy
8. Confidentiality statement

D. Messenger services

1. In-office/out-of-office

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2. Charging to clients

ACCOUNTING

- A. Timekeeping records
 - 1. Daily procedure
 - 2. End-of-month procedure
- B. Disbursement of funds
 - 1. Client costs (See Example)
 - 2. Firm costs
 - 3. Advanced expenses
 - 4. Retainers
 - 5. Posting
- C. Receipt of funds
 - 1. Matching funds to client bill
 - 2. Endorsement of checks
 - 3. Deposit procedures/cash receipts
 - 4. Posting
 - 5. Retainers
- D. Petty cash
- E. Reimbursement of expenses
- F. Billing procedures
- G. Trust account
- H. Accounting manager/supervisor (duties)
- I. Bookkeeper (duties)

Example:

Client Costs

1. A client expense request form must be completed for receipt of any funds to be charged to the client's account. This form must be completed in full and must be signed by the person requesting the funds. All requests should be given to the Accounting Department as early in the day as possible. Checks are distributed at 4:00 p.m.
2. Travel and professional expenses must be accompanied by supporting receipts.
3. Any expenses exceeding \$500 must be approved by the attorney in charge of the file.
4. Every staff member should have a schedule of disbursement codes. If you do not, contact the Accounting Supervisor.

Client Expense Request		Date: _____
Firm Check <input type="checkbox"/>	Cash <input type="checkbox"/>	Trust Check <input type="checkbox"/>
Client/Matter Number: _____		
Client/Matter Name: _____		
Issue Check To: _____		
Address (if applicable): _____		

Amount of Check: \$ _____		
SS/EIN: _____		
If over \$500, approved by: _____		
Date of Expense: _____		

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Disbursement Code: _____
Description of Expense (if different from code): _____
Special Handling Instructions: _____

Signature of Person Requesting/Ext No.: _____
Date/Time Needed: _____

EQUIPMENT, MAINTENANCE, AND SUPPLIES

A. Furniture and equipment

1. Requisition
2. Purchase
3. Maintenance
4. Repairs
5. Budgeting

B. Supplies

1. Budgeting
2. Ordering
3. Supply room

OFFICE SECURITY AND EMERGENCY PROCEDURES

A. General

1. Admission of visitors or strangers
2. Doors
3. Building security
4. Personal property
5. Office closing

B. Emergencies

1. Emergency phone numbers
2. Fire
3. Medical
4. Power outage
5. Natural disaster

SUPPORT PERSONNEL

- A. Receptionist (duties)
- B. Calendar or docket clerk (duties)
- C. Filing or records clerk (duties)
- D. Mail clerk (duties)
- E. Relief personnel
- F. Temporary personnel
- G. Training guidelines

MISCELLANEOUS GUIDELINES

- A. Client parking
- B. Travel arrangements
- C. Conference room (See Example)

Example:

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1. Reserving a conference room: The assistant should check with the receptionist to reserve a conference room, providing the name of the person reserving the room, the date, hour, number of people, and length of time needed. The receptionist keeps a schedule of all conference room reservations. (Specify the location these reservations are kept.)
2. Resolving conflicts: If the conference room is already reserved for a time you wish to reserve it, the receptionist will provide the assistant with the availability of other conference rooms and/or the name of the person currently reserving the conference room in question. It is then the responsibility of the assistant to confer with the person requesting the reservation and the person who currently has the conference room reserved to resolve the conflict. The assistant should then call the receptionist to advise of the outcome.
3. Maintaining supplies: All conference rooms contain message pads, pencils, pens, paper clips, coffee cups, water glasses, napkins, and condiments. It is the responsibility of the assistant to provide the coffee, tea, and water.
4. Cleaning up: It is the responsibility of the assistant to clean up the conference room when the conference is over. The conference table should be cleared, and all dirty cups, glasses, and pots should be returned to the kitchen. All supplies should be replenished.

Keeping your manual current

A procedures manual will only be successful if you update it over time. As new material is added and existing procedures are revised, insert or delete pages as needed. Advise staff of these changes by circulating an inter-office memorandum, briefly describing the changes and including the added or revised pages. If major changes are made, hold a short staff meeting with time for questions.

Conclusion

Remember, a procedures manual should:

- Be an orientation tool
- Be a training guide
- Be a reference guide
- Provide uniformity
- Reduce disputes as to work methods
- Delegate through clearly outlined duties and responsibilities
- Facilitate work measurement and provide information for cost control
- Improve morale by letting everyone know the standards and expectations

IMPORTANT NOTICES

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