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The ultimate Standard Operating Procedure Checklist

Whether you're training a new employee, covering for someone out, or learning a new job duty — it's a nightmare to scramble to learn a new task with little guidance. Creating efficient and repeatable processes for completing tasks for your business is a vital part of streamlining and maintaining your business operations. However, many businesses let this fall to the wayside, and then waste time and lose productivity playing catch up. The easiest way to prevent this is by creating standard operating procedures for your business processes.

A standard operating procedure (SOP) can be created to guide your team members through workflows for specific tasks. Documenting these processes allows small and large business owners to keep outcomes consistent throughout the organization. An SOP should document your procedures in a way that is easy to follow and replicate in a consistent manner. Even a new employee should be able to refer to the document and be able to follow it.

The process of creating an SOP can be a bit confusing at first. Follow our SOP checklist to make sure that you have included all of the necessary pieces of information on your standard operating procedure documentation.

What Is a Standard Operating Procedure?

Standard operating procedures (SOPs) are a method of documenting procedures and processes. An SOP is a document detailing step-by-step instructions on how to perform a specific business process. SOPs can be used to document any procedure that is commonly performed in your workplace such as payroll processing, publishing content on your company’s website or social media page, completing tasks in your companies internal databases, and more.

They are typically used to document processes that need to be done in a consistent manner. For example, you might create an SOP for creating a new customer profile in your company’s customer relationship management (CRM) system. You would do this to ensure each account is created the same way and the correct fields are filled in every time so that the accounts possess all of the necessary data and are consistent regardless of which employee created them.

The key to creating a good SOP is to be very thorough. You should be able to give the SOP document to ten different employees to follow, and they should each finish the task in the same manner with the exact same steps and process. SOPs are meant to ensure that work is completed in a consistent and efficient manner across the board.

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If you’re having trouble getting started in the SOP development process, check out our guide on how to develop an SOP. When creating a new process, you will need to spend some time meeting with stakeholders, creating a flow chart for the process, and gaining more information before you can dive into documenting detailed instructions with this checklist.

Next, you can follow the checklist below to make sure that you have included all of the required information in your SOP documentation. Some of these items can be easily overlooked, so you can use this checklist as both a guide for writing your SOP and a quality control measure to confirm that you didn't miss any necessary fields. You can follow any sop format, standard operating procedure template, or even develop your own sop template for your company. Regardless of the format chosen, all SOPs should contain these key pieces of information.

Procedure Title: Provide a clear title at the top of your SOP. This should provide enough detail to ensure that someone can quickly understand what process the document will be covering. If you plan to store and have employees access your standard operating procedures electronically, consider what keywords an employee might use while searching for an SOP on this particular procedure. Some organizations include a title page, while others simply include the title in the header or at the top of the page.

Date: Include the date that the document was created. This will help employees that come across the SOP later know if the document is up-to-date. Also, include a revision date field to mark when the SOP was last updated.

Who Is Responsible for the SOP: List who is responsible for the SOP. It's a good idea to assign someone as the owner of each standard operating procedure. This tells employees who to go to with questions or who to reach out to if they find an SOP document that is outdated and needs to be updated. Technical standard operating procedures can become outdated quickly, even with a regular annual review, as the step-by-step instructions for completing a task in a computer system can change slightly with each new update or version of the software that is released.

Contact Information for the Owner of the SOP: After you have listed who is meant to take ownership over updates or questions regarding this standard operating procedure, provide the contact information for that person. Typically an email address will suffice. If the SOP details an urgent or emergency procedure, include a phone number where that person can be reached during and outside of business hours. Note that emergency safety procedures do not typically go in a SOP document. However, things like setting the alarm system or opening the office might, and you'll need to know who to contact urgently if there is a problem.

Target Department or Job Titles: Make it clear who the SOP is intended for. Sometimes multiple departments can have similar processes with different standard operating procedures. List the department(s) or job title(s) that should be following this particular SOP.

Purpose of the SOP: Detail the reason for the process. What is it meant to accomplish? How does it benefit the business? Are there regulatory requirements or industry standards that need to be met? Can safety concerns arise if the procedure is not followed in the correct format? Help your employees understand why following the standard operating procedure correctly is important.

Remember that while one of the goals of creating a standard operating procedure is to have a more efficient process, there will be times when the procedures listed on the SOP are not the fastest way to accomplish a task. If you don't list why employees need to do the task in a particular way, they may cut corners in order to save time. However, cutting corners or rushing through certain tasks can create a safety hazard or result in quality control issues with your product or service.

Give a thorough explanation here to gain buy-in from your staff. Telling someone to do something without giving them a reason is typically ineffective.

Goals or Objectives: Similarly, it can help to include the goals or desired outcomes of the procedure. What is accomplished by this SOP and what should the final product look like. You can even include a photo if the goal is to package a product neatly and uniformly or you have another objective that can be conveyed best visually. If there are particular metrics or other quality assurance standards, list your expectations.

Health and Safety Considerations: Safety equipment, hazards, or training needed with the task? Are there any safety aspects that people should be aware of? Make these very clear and stand out within your guided steps.

Define Key Terms: Provide a short dictionary of any industry jargon or key terms used throughout the SOP including abbreviations or acronyms. Consider the intended audience of the SOP to determine what terms they may or may not be familiar with. Consider any terms that have alternate names.

Required Equipment: List what tools, technology, or equipment must be used in the standard operating procedure. Do the instructions work in Google Docs or only Microsoft Word? Is there anything they need to know about operating a particular piece of equipment or machinery? Does it involve a tool or piece of equipment that only certain people are allowed to operate (such as those that have completed a safety certification)?

Step-by-Step Instructions: The meat of the SOP documentation should be the detailed steps on how to complete the task.

These should be quite detailed. The goal of these detailed instructions is for everyone to interpret and follow them in the exact same manner. Thus, each step should tell them not only what to do, but also how to do it.

For example, if you are creating a SOP on how to generate an invoice in your company’s accounting system, you would want to detail exactly what information to enter, what box to enter each piece of information, and where to find that information. Reference exact fields in computer systems or forms, and provide instructions on how to navigate through the system.

Ideally, these SOPs can be followed by new staff members or staff members that are filling in for someone on leave or a sick day. Therefore, you want to provide a clear and detailed description of each step so that the SOP may be followed by someone with limited knowledge of the process.

Try to list your steps in any easy-to-read manner. List them in hierarchical steps and use bullet points to convey information in a clear, concise manner.

Contingencies: Consider any potential problems that could arise and how employees should handle them. Ask team leaders of the relevant departments that will be using this SOP about issues that have arisen in the past that required their team to temporarily deviate from their standard processes. What do they do when their computer system goes down? Has there been a time when the equipment or technology malfunctioned? Is there a way to access the necessary databases remotely if there is a snow day or something that prevents employees from going into the office? Spend some time planning for the what-ifs.

Including contingencies will help your employees start troubleshooting issues in real-time rather than panicking or having to call around to find out what to do.

Test: Test out the SOP. Give it to someone not involved in the development and see if they can follow the process in the intended manner just by following the steps listed in the standard operating procedure. Make note of where they may have encountered uncertainty or confusion.

Review Schedule: Set a review schedule for each SOP. This helps you keep all of your procedural documentation up-to-date and encourages continuous improvement. Perhaps after six months of using the SOP, your team has found that a step or two is inefficient or they would like to suggest an alternate process for completing a task. Be open to feedback and stay on top of your set review schedule.

Standard Operating Procedures Help Your Business Run Smoothly

You may be surprised by how thorough you need to be when following the above checklist to create your standard operating procedure. It may feel cumbersome to create documentation for all of your major processes. However, the time investment will likely save your business time and money in the long run.

Having well-documented policies will improve your onboarding and training process for new hires, prevent mistakes, reduce safety incidents, and improve the quality of your team’s work. The boost in profitability and improved safety within the work environment will make the initial time investment worth it.