

## Writing Effective Business Procedures

In the [last blog entry](#), we discussed the need for policies and procedures, and how procedures are used to put policies into practice. Policies are basically frameworks for decision-making. They should not be restrictive, but need to be progressive, practical, and forward-looking. Procedures outline how to implement the policies in a step-by-step fashion, and should align with business objectives. [Business systems](#) are real-life manifestations of information flow that put the policies into practice, and define interdependencies with other systems.

In developing the procedures that make policies a reality, remember that procedures, like systems, need to be well-documented in order to be transferrable, and adaptable. You want to make sure the instructions are readily available so anyone can do the task in the event someone is out sick or on vacation, or if you need to train new staff. And by documenting procedures you leave no room for argument and there is less risk of missing a step or making an error.

When identifying what tasks you need to convert into procedures, make sure those tasks are not only clear but relevant. Consider the tasks that need to be performed independently of senior staff, such as sending out invoices for services. For example, if your company has a policy of “full disclosure” or “no surprises,” then your invoicing procedure needs to be sufficiently detailed to make sure that you explain every line item, and that the invoice aligns with the estimate for goods or services provided in advance. The policy of “no surprises” is part of a business strategy to improve customer satisfaction. The procedure for delivering an accurate and sufficiently detailed invoice is fulfillment of the “no surprises” policy.

It’s best to handle one procedure at a time, rather than trying to develop all your procedures at once. In the case of our example, there should be one procedure for generating estimates and another for issuing invoices. While the two procedures are interdependent (the interdependencies would be managed by a larger business system) they work in isolation, without the need for support from senior management.

When documenting procedures, consider the following points:

- . Procedures must document every step in the process.
- . Procedures must be clear, and simple enough that anyone can follow them.
- . Procedures can include checklists.
- . Start by taking notes about what you need to do to accomplish each task.
- . To promote consistency, convert your notes into a repeatable template with a step-by-step process.
- . Be sure to store the procedures in a central location where everyone has access, such as employee manuals or central locations on the company file server.
- . Be sure to include relevant details, such as mailing addresses, tax identification numbers, and other information that may be required to implement the procedure.

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There are software packages and third-party consultants who can help you define the procedures you need to make your business thrive. Be sure to think through every step needed to successfully complete any business task. When writing procedures, the devil is in documenting the details.