



# HR Examiner

*Examining practical HR issues business owners  
and managers encounter every day*

## February News

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### Don't Get Snowed by Your Employees

As you can imagine, Joyce Rosenberg (AP) and I discussed many facets of the issue. Some of those items included:

► It's important to have a written Emergency Policy. Since I live in MN, we typically call it an Inclement Weather Policy. This should spell out how

## Working in a Winter Wonderland

I was contacted by Associated Press this week regarding what employers are doing about the sensitive issues related to closing the office in snow emergencies or handling employee absences even when the business is open. You'll find the article below.

### **BUSINESSES DEAL WITH SNOW AND EMPLOYEE ISSUES**

NEW YORK (AP) -- The winter weather has been unrelenting in parts of the country, and small-business owners are having to deal with employee issues along with the snow.

Some staffers may live in areas that have gotten very heavy snow, and they can't get to work, sometimes for days, even when the business is open. Others may



should open but how employees are informed about snow emergencies and how they're paid if (a) the organization is open and they don't show up and (b) how they're paid if the organization is closed.

► Most organizations pay employees for the lost time when the business is closed, since employees are absent through no fault of their own. Some policies set a maximum number of days they'll pay for per year.

► When an employee elects not to come to work (no matter the reason – including school closings), there are many options. One would be to allow the employee to use the available vacation or PTO; other companies allow the employee to take the time off unpaid.

have to stay home with their children because schools are closed. And not everyone can get their work done via telecommuting.

Rob Wilson, president of Employco, a Chicago-based human resources outsourcing company, says he's been fielding questions from small business clients about how to handle problems that come up during a snowstorm like the one that hit Chicago on Tuesday. A big concern that many have: Do you pay someone who's snowed in and can't work? The answer, as with many other snow-related employee issues, will be a mixture of policy and goodwill.

### **PAY SNOWED-IN STAFFERS? OR DOCK THEM?**

Small businesses still rebuilding from the recession worry about having to pay staffers when they can't do any work. Companies aren't required to pay hourly employees, but those on salary by law cannot have their pay docked, says Rick Gibbs, a senior HR specialist with Administaff, a Houston-based company that provides HR outsourcing.

Owners need to balance their economic needs against the fact that not paying someone can be a morale buster. Wilson noted that many people are going to be looking for jobs this year as the economy improves. Docking someone's pay during a snowstorm will give many staffers another incentive to leave. Wilson's suggestion: Lean on the side of goodwill.

That's especially the case if the company is forced to shut down. "If the business can afford it, we recommend that they pay," he says.

It gets tricky when you have to decide how many days an employee can miss. One complication is the fact that those who live closer to the job are likely to make it back to work sooner, while those who are in more remote areas may be snowbound because of treacherous roads. In places like the Northeast, where the

▶ The written policy ensures that managers and business owners do not have to make this pay decision on an individual employee basis or on a case-by-case basis. It gets you off the hook from favoritism, discrimination and having to make the same decision over and over again.

One of the other areas Joyce and I discussed was who typically comes into work no matter the weather. I think that employers know which employees they can rely on. The poorer performer may be more prone to take advantage of the “day off” even if they can make it to work. The stronger performer is going to make every attempt to get there or is going to communicate their difficult situation in a way that the employer can tell that the employee really is in a

snow has seemed never-ending this winter, some workers have been missing a lot of days because they live in outlying areas.

Arlene Vernon, president of HRx Inc., an Eden Prairie, Minn.-based HR consultancy, says owners should be guided by whether a state of emergency has been declared in an area. It may just not be safe for employees to travel near their homes, even if roads are clear near work. So it's unreasonable to expect them to come in. And not paying them may also be unreasonable. Wilson says you don't want to force employees to get on icy roads so they don't have to miss a day's pay.

Still, at some point, an owner may have to start putting the needs of the company first. When some staffers start piling up snow days, it may be time to tell them they need to make up the time or take vacation or personal days.

## **BEING FAIR**

Staffers who live close by and can make it to work may end up doing the work of others who can't come in and who can't telecommute. That can get irritating when it keeps happening.

One solution, again, is to tell staffers they need to use vacation days. Another solution is to have them make up the time they've missed.

One source of resentment may be when parents have to stay home for several days because schools are closed. Vernon says bosses should tell these employees that they need to come up with other child-care options. For example, if an employee keeps staying home when his or her spouse could also take time away from work, then they need to split looking after the kids.

Vernon also recommends that parents share child-care with friends or neighbors who also have to deal with school closings.

employee really is in a bind.

For example, the great employees who can't make it to work when schools are closed are more likely to present alternatives to their bosses regarding making up work, coming in late once things are settled, or partnering with others in their families or neighborhoods to help get the work done – remotely or from home. We know our employees and how they're going to react to these situations before the snow falls.

If you know a storm is coming, prepare in advance. Discuss the options with staff before you find yourself in a tight situation. Have an emergency strategy for handling the work remotely, staggering schedules, closing down and catching up. When proactive is

Owners may notice that problem staffers, the ones who are frequently absent and/or whose performance is poor, are the ones who just can't seem to make it in during the snow -- even when other staffers do. The answer is to start dealing with the employee's overall performance issues.

## **BEFORE THE NEXT STORM**

Many companies can get through a storm with minimal loss of productivity because much of their work is done on computers. Often, workers can telecommute.

But companies may not have the ability for workers to log into the office computer from home. Gibbs suggests that when the forecasts call for a huge storm, that employees take work home with them.

Vernon noted that it's an employee's responsibility to come to work. So an owner may need to remind staffers that they need to plan ahead and figure out how they'll get to work when bad weather hits.

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