How to Develop an HR Policy

A practical guide from identifying the need to reviewing implementation

A useful HR policy explains what the organisation expects, why it matters, who is responsible and how decisions will be made. This guide helps you develop a policy that people can understand and apply, supported by clear procedures and accountable ownership.

Who this guide is for

Business owners, HR practitioners, managers and organisational leaders developing a new policy or replacing an outdated one. Apply the process to one defined policy at a time and tailor the depth of consultation and approval to its impact.

What you will produce

A clear policy brief, an editable policy draft, a consultation and approval record, an implementation plan and a review schedule. Use the companion Turnitup HR Policy Review Checklist to assess the draft and its operation.

Understand the documents

Document	Its purpose
Policy	Sets the principles, expectations, decision rules and responsibilities.
Procedure or SOP	Explains the operational steps, sequence, timeframes and hand-offs.
Form or checklist	Captures information or helps someone complete a task consistently.

These documents work together. A policy can refer to an SOP rather than repeat every system instruction or administrative step.

Use this as a development guide. Requirements differ by policy, employer and context; arrange appropriate specialist review where needed. It does not replace a legal opinion or certify compliance.

Define the need and plan the work

Step 1 Identify the problem and intended outcome

Start with a specific issue rather than a policy title. Examine complaints, inconsistent decisions, operational risks, organisational changes or gaps in existing guidance. Consider whether a new policy is needed or whether training, a revised procedure or better implementation would solve the problem.

Write a short purpose statement: This policy exists to [address the issue] so that [the intended outcome]. State what will be outside its scope.

Step 2 Identify requirements and related documents

List relevant employment terms, collective agreements, organisational commitments, existing policies and applicable requirements for this subject. Ask a competent reviewer to assess the requirements before approval. Record the source, date checked and any interpretation that needs clarification.

Check for overlap and contradiction. A new policy should not promise benefits, impose restrictions or introduce decision powers without the necessary authority and review.

Step 3 Define scope and responsibilities

Decide who the policy covers, the activities and locations it applies to, and any justified exclusions. Name a policy owner, drafting lead, consulted stakeholders and approval authority. Establish who will communicate, implement, monitor and maintain the policy.

Complete your policy brief

Field	Your working notes
Policy title and issue	[Enter the proposed title and the specific problem]
Outcome and scope	[Enter the intended result, who is covered and exclusions]
Owner and approval authority	[Enter the accountable roles]
Requirements and dependencies	[List sources, related policies and specialist reviews needed]
Consultation and timetable	[Who needs input, and by when?]

Draft a policy people can use

Step 4 Use a consistent structure

Use the outline below as a starting point. Keep the main policy concise and move detailed process instructions into a linked procedure where that makes the document easier to maintain.

Policy section	What to include
Document control	Title, reference, version, owner, approval authority, approval date, effective date and next review date.
Purpose and scope	Why the policy exists, the intended outcome, who it covers and relevant exclusions.
Definitions	Terms a reader needs to understand; avoid unnecessary jargon.
Policy principles and rules	What is expected, permitted or prohibited, with clear decision criteria.
Responsibilities	What employees, managers, HR and other accountable roles must do.
Application and supporting procedures	How to initiate a request or process, applicable timeframes and links to SOPs or forms.
Exceptions and escalation	Who may approve exceptions, the basis for decisions and how they are recorded.
Concerns and review routes	Where to ask questions or raise concerns, and any relevant review or appeal process.
Records and information handling	What is recorded, who has access and how retention and disposal are managed under applicable requirements.
Monitoring and document history	How effectiveness is assessed, update triggers, related documents and a record of changes.

Step 5 Write precise and workable rules

Use plain language and active verbs. State the responsible role, the action and the timeframe where appropriate. Distinguish mandatory requirements from discretion. Define vague terms such as promptly, reasonable or exceptional when their interpretation affects a decision.

Avoid copying a generic template unchanged. Check that roles, resources, systems and approval limits exist in your organisation. Test whether a new manager could apply the policy consistently without relying on unwritten rules.

Test consult and approve the policy

Step 6 Test the draft with realistic situations

Walk through an ordinary case, an urgent case, an exception and a disputed decision. Check who acts, what evidence is needed, what happens next and how the decision is recorded. Look for ambiguity, unnecessary delay or unfair outcomes.

Worked example for a learning request policy

Illustration only. The wording below demonstrates clarity and process design; the organisation must agree its own rules and review their suitability.

Before	Clearer working draft
Managers may approve training when appropriate.	Employees submit a learning request stating the business need, cost and proposed dates. The line manager assesses the request against role relevance, budget availability and operational cover, and gives a written response within ten working days. Requests outside the manager's delegated authority are referred to the designated approval role.

Supporting SOP: Specify the submission channel, required documents, approval sequence, booking process and record location. Test a request where the manager has a conflict of interest or the training date is urgent, and document the escalation route.

Step 7 Consult and resolve feedback

Share the draft with affected stakeholders and the people who will apply it. Include employee representatives where appropriate. Explain the purpose, invite specific feedback and keep a record of comments, responses and unresolved matters. Confirm any consultation obligations with the relevant reviewer.

Record each material comment, the proposed change, the decision and who made it. Return unresolved issues to the policy owner rather than allowing conflicting versions to circulate.

Step 8 Obtain approval and control the version

Submit the final draft, consultation summary, significant risks and implementation plan to the authorised approver. Retain the approval record. Set an effective date that allows preparation, allocate the version number and archive superseded documents with appropriate access controls.

Final quality check: Is the scope clear? Are responsibilities and decision rules workable? Are relevant requirements checked? Have fairness, accessibility, privacy and supporting procedures been considered? Is approval documented?

Implement monitor and improve

Step 9 Prepare people and systems

Communicate what is changing, who is affected, when it applies and where to find the approved policy. Brief managers on their responsibilities and provide practical examples. Update linked forms, SOPs and systems. Record communication and any required acknowledgements; acknowledgement alone does not demonstrate understanding.

Step 10 Review how the policy works

Set a review date and identify earlier review triggers, such as a material organisational change, recurring complaints, inconsistent decisions or changed requirements. Review actual decisions and feedback, not only the document wording. Assign ownership of corrective actions and verify completion.

Implementation action plan

Action or deliverable	Owner	Due date	Completion evidence
Publish approved policy and archive old version	[Enter]	[Enter]	[Enter]
Communicate changes and brief managers	[Enter]	[Enter]	[Enter]
Update SOPs forms and systems	[Enter]	[Enter]	[Enter]
Check early application and address gaps	[Enter]	[Enter]	[Enter]

Choose meaningful review questions

Are affected people able to find and explain the policy? Are decisions consistent with it? Are requests or cases handled within agreed timeframes? Are exceptions recorded? Have complaints, delays or unintended consequences increased? Use the answers to improve the policy and its implementation.

Common mistakes to avoid

Unclear ownership; a copied template that does not fit the organisation; contradictory rules; approval without an implementation plan; inaccessible documents; inconsistent exceptions; and policies left unchanged after material changes.

Support from Turnitup

Turnitup helps organisations review, develop and implement clear, workable HR policies. We can support a focused policy assignment or a broader HR Health Check.

Ntsiki Dlepu
ntsiki.dlepu@turnitup.co.za | https://turnitup.co.za
Telephone 079 492 8924 | WhatsApp 072 813 5582