Standard Operating Procedures

Standard operating procedures (SOPs) are preferred methods of performing certain tasks or core business functions, and SOP manuals are resources that record the instructions for performing these functions. Often presented in a step-by-step format, SOP manuals are a way for businesses to codify business functions not only as a store of explicit knowledge that can be a helpful training aid for new hires, but also as a resource for everyday operations and a way to measure success and efficiency. Sophisticated businesses enshrine their recorded explicit knowledge in some form of knowledge management system.

Explicit knowledge—as opposed to tacit knowledge—is knowledge that is easy to articulate, record, and share. Tacit knowledge is knowledge that comes from personal experience and context. Tacit knowledge is valuable, but for the purpose of documenting SOPs, a business is best served by taking steps to convert personal tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge that is no longer locked in the heads of team members but is recorded openly for everyone to access.

A knowledge management system is a software application that organizes documentation such as SOPs, frequently asked questions, training, and other important information. A knowledge management system can be as simple as a binder filled with printed documentation, but, given the proliferation of powerful learning management system (LMS) software, business owners owe it to themselves and their teams to use LMS software to enhance collaboration, communication, and transparency.

Documenting knowledge in your company may feel tedious, but it will be worth the effort. Below are some ways that explicit knowledge matters in your organization. Keep these things in mind when planning or creating your own standard operating procedure manual:

1. Explicit knowledge recorded in SOP manuals creates a common understanding of how and why your company does things in certain ways.

2. SOPs help build company culture by establishing a unified approach to important issues.

3. Clearly recorded explicit knowledge makes decision making transparent. This removes questions of bias or capriciousness.

4. Clearly recorded SOPs ensure that everyone does things the same way, which helps your organization operate with consistency.

5. A standardized set of operating procedures means that everyone can be fairly held accountable for their actions because they understand what's expected.

6. A robust knowledge management system aids in the training of new employees, allowing them to get up to speed more quickly—as opposed to having them learn from key employees and hoping they take good notes (or even figure out the right questions to ask).

CREATING YOUR SOPS

As discussed, SOPs are step-by-step documentation for how to perform specific tasks. Not all operational tasks are created equal, however, and therefore a long, detailed document with an abundance of text usually isn't the best way to record a process. Consider the following SOP formats when creating your own:

When recording a straightforward topic with a small scope...

A brief document that includes a statement of purpose, minor section dividers, and step-by-step instructions is a great fit. For repeatable processes that take place on software applications or computer screens, consider using screen recording software to capture yourself or another team member completing the process, and make the recording available via an LMS or some other centralized location.

When recording a complex topic with a broad scope...

A more hierarchical technical document is a better fit. Spend more time organizing the material you are presenting, using abundant section dividers and other organizational aspects such as a table of contents, and include a clear statement of purpose.

When recording a hands-on or decision-oriented topic with a flexible scope...

Consider a flowchart or other graphical representation of the process. Flowcharts work well for processes with easily repeatable steps or processes that might need to be referenced frequently. Flowcharts are good candidates to be posted at workstations or in common areas.