

Dear HR Knowledge, I have an employee who has every excuse in the book for being late each week; what do I do?

As long as you have employees, you will have employees who show up late; life happens. Traffic jams, sick children, train delays – there are many valid reasons for being late on occasion. However, chronic tardiness is an entirely different problem.

Have a mechanism in place for consistently tracking and documenting tardy workers, such as a time and attendance system. Many employers do not have a good system in place; without exact dates and times, you have a “he said, she said” situation when addressing tardiness with employees.

Decide what’s important and what you will and will not accept. You need to decide what is and isn’t acceptable; nowadays, many employers believe that getting to work on time is less important than getting the job done well. If you can offer flexibility, take a step back and ask yourself why lateness matters. Is this employee late and unproductive, or does he make up the extra hours? Is she missing meetings? Is the employee’s lateness affecting others’ ability to get work done effectively? Maybe the lateness itself is not as big a problem as the manager may initially think. However, in some roles, lateness is just not acceptable. For example, if you have employees who are paid hourly, or whose job requires a specific start time, that is when you need to clearly outline expectations and consequences.

Be clear about expectations and consequences. In many cases, employees are chronically late simply because they can be. Change the tone by setting expectations for punctuality and then recording them someplace where they’ll be seen often, not just in the employee handbook. Determine a clear progression of consequences, such as one verbal warning, one written warning, a write-up with HR, a dock in pay (if allowable), etc.

Adjust schedules when possible. Perhaps there’s a pattern in an employee’s excuses for late arrival, like running into traffic after dropping children off at school or some other family obligation. Instead of fighting an uphill battle, consider changing the employee’s schedule.

All employees will be late once in a while; they’re only human. But when it comes to chronically late employees, placing responsibility where it belongs, setting boundaries that everyone is aligned on, and being flexible when possible goes a long way toward fostering a work environment that’s good for everyone.

About HR Knowledge

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