BLOG

Does Your Nonprofit Need a Job Abandonment Policy?

September 9, 2025

Nonprofits have historically had a difficult time hiring and retaining employees, and this has become a more pronounced problem in the post-COVID world. A combination of economic uncertainty, shifts in employment patterns, and changes in federal funding for nonprofits has created a pervasive sense of instability.

As a result, many mission-driven organizations have started to explore flexibility, overhaul internal staff policies, and update employment rules to better reflect modern trends like hybrid work. As these changes fall into place, HR professionals are working to update policies to address them and to navigate the complexity these changes create.

One change that often gets overlooked is a job abandonment policy. Because it deals with what many consider an edge case, organizations do not always think through the details or how changes to work arrangements can make the concept of job abandonment more complicated to determine. However, as anyone who has dealt with such a situation can tell you, it can be surprisingly complex and can have significant legal and interpersonal repercussions if mishandled.

Here is some information about job abandonment policies and why you might consider adopting one.

What is job abandonment?

One of the most challenging aspects of creating a policy is that there is no fixed legal definition for job abandonment. Generally, it describes a situation where an employee fails to show up for work without communicating with their manager or giving a reason. This is often referred to as a "no-call, no-show," and in some industries, particularly service and retail, organizations have a zero-tolerance policy for employees who do this. In many other industries that are less sensitive or immediately limited by an employee's absence, the policy is less strict.

The defining characteristic of abandonment is not simply the employee being absent; rather, it is the lack of any stated or implicit reason for the absence. This puts the organization in a bind, as they cannot act until some communication with the employee is established. This is why creating a policy is invaluable.

Why does job abandonment matter?

If you have ever been in this situation, you know how challenging it can be. An employee who does not show up for work may, in fact, be abandoning their job without communicating with you, or they may be dealing with a crisis or unable to communicate for another reason. Either way, you are in a difficult position. If you choose to assume that abandonment means the person is not coming back, and therefore they are resigning, you may be subject to litigation for wrongful termination. Terminating someone who is dealing with a crisis and unable to communicate can also harm team morale.

On the other hand, if you wait for an employee who is not coming back, this can lead to missed deadlines, additional work for the rest of the team, and a delay in backfilling the role. Because you are often required to provide outgoing employees with certain documentation, such as COBRA (for eligible employers), a final paycheck, or other offboarding documents, choosing the right time to do so can be difficult, especially if the person is not responding.

How do you handle job abandonment?

Most organizations add a job abandonment policy to their employee handbook and other relevant resources. These policies typically define what abandonment means at the organization, how long the employer will wait before considering the absence an unspoken resignation, and the circumstances under which an employee might be granted leeway, such as during a health or family crisis.

Here are some considerations most organizations include:

- A definition for abandonment, whether it is failure to appear at the workplace or failure to respond to emails, messages, or other work-related communication.
- A time limit, typically three consecutive business days, before the employee will be considered to have voluntarily resigned.
- A provision for extreme circumstances, such as an employee being unable to communicate due to a personal or natural disaster, medical emergency, or other crisis. In these cases, the organization may reverse the resignation and restore employment.

If you are crafting and publishing a new policy, it is important to disclose it to your staff and explain your reasoning. Even though abandonment is rare, the fact that it may involve employees who are experiencing a personal crisis makes it a sensitive issue. Being up-front and willing to communicate helps employees understand your thinking.

What about remote work?

Creating a successful abandonment policy is not about copying one from elsewhere but thinking through the unique cases that might happen at your organization. Because many mission-driven organizations have instituted more flexible arrangements to attract and retain talent, they will also need an abandonment policy that accounts for these arrangements.

Most policies are built around the standard workweek, but this is harder to apply with hybrid or remote work. Some team members may work heads-down on projects for days or even weeks, with minimal communication. With distributed teams across time zones, determining whether someone is unavailable or absent can be even more complex.

Having a process for check-ins, one-on-ones between managers and direct reports, and other communication cadences can help improve accountability and ensure that team members remain engaged. It also allows you to tailor your policy to the rhythms of your workplace.

Mission-driven work is hard. We can help.

Job abandonment is a rare but complex issue. Having a clear policy can help nonprofits handle these situations consistently, fairly, and legally. Nonprofit work is uniquely challenging, as everything from hiring to fundraising to awareness-building is a full-time job.

About Us

For more than 40 years, 501(c) Services has been a leader in offering solutions for unemployment costs, claims management, and HR support to nonprofit organizations. Two of our most popular programs are the 501(c) Agencies Trust and 501(c) HR Services. We understand the importance of compliance and accuracy and are committed to providing our clients with customized plans that fit their needs.

Contact us today to see if your organization could benefit from our services.

Are you already working with us and need assistance with an HR or unemployment issue? Contact us here.

The information contained in this article is not a substitute for legal advice or counsel and has been pulled from multiple sources.

(Images by Pressfoto and Freepik)

© 2026 501(c) Services. Legal/Privacy Policy | Website by Outmark