



# Businesses Deal With Snow and Employee Issues

Small-business owners have to deal with employee issues when it snows and snows and snows

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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 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 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.

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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