

GUIDELINES FOR PREPARING A STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES MANUAL

I. INTRODUCTION

The Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) Manual describes all of a bureau's *regular recurring work procedures* (both technical and administrative in the office and in the field). Generally, a procedure is defined as a set of activities performed in a prescribed sequence leading to specific result(s). Generally, a result is a deliverable which is received by another person or persons who becomes the procedure's "customer" or customers. For example, a boiler inspection is a set of activities which should result in a certificate of operation for a boiler owner. The benefits of SOPs include:

1. A single authoritative source on all procedures;
2. Minimizing variation (promoting consistency) in job performance;
3. Reducing work effort;
4. Promoting quality data for management information and decision-making;
5. Minimizing the time needed for training new employees; and
6. Reducing liability.

Standard Operating Procedure

An SOP is the means for the quality control of every work procedure leading to a consistent result. An SOP *must* describe the procedure's purpose, scope and legal authorization to perform the task. It *must* specify the responsibilities of each bureau employee participating in the procedure including the responsibilities of external agents. (An external agent is anyone outside the bureau who has responsibility or a role relevant to the procedure.) Because employee health and safety is the primary mission of the North Carolina Department of Labor, each SOP *must* describe likely health and safety concerns and remedies for their prevention. Next, an SOP specifies the step-by-step activities of a procedure in chronological order and its expected results. Customer requirements, including internal customers within the Department, *must* also be described in the SOP. In addition, requirements for managing data and records, including preparation, storage and retrieval *must* be outlined. Moreover, an SOP *must* include any exhibits, such as forms, letters and diagrams pertinent to its execution. Finally, an SOP is not a static document. All SOPs must be reviewed periodically to determine if changes have occurred or are necessary to improve the procedure's efficiency and/or effectiveness.

Checklists

It is *recommended* that every SOP have an accompanying checklist. A checklist is a useful means for testing an SOP. It is useful for training and evaluating new employees in their understanding of the correct method for performing a procedure. A checklist can also be used by a supervisor to spot check a direct report's adherence to an SOP. Moreover, a checklist is a convenient guide for employees when performing a procedure.

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II. SOP MANUAL

Manual Content

The SOP manual is an electronic document maintained on the bureau's intranet webpage. At a minimum the SOP Manual homepage *must* show the following in its table of contents:

1. Key Values
2. The current organizational chart;
3. A current job description and ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) checklist for each job classification;
4. The Standard Operating Procedures;

As way of explanation, key values need to be considered when writing SOPs to reinforce desired behaviors and to encourage their consistency among employees. Moreover, it is critically important that a job description and ADA checklist be consistent with SOPs applicable to that position. When SOPs are revised, job descriptions and ADA checklists should be reviewed for possible revisions as well. The job description and ADA checklist posted are those signed by the current occupant of the position. Both documents should also be posted in pdf form. For positions that have many occupants, such as inspectors and investigators, only one job description and ADA checklist needs to be posted but it must be for the last person hired. Job descriptions and ADA checklists must be updated as new hires fill the position or if the job description and/or ADA checklist is changed.

Additional items can be added to the table of contents at the bureau chief's discretion.

In addition to an SOP for each regularly recurring work procedure, an SOP manual *must* also include:

1. A written procedure for training each job classification;
2. A written procedure for both approving procedures and for making revisions; and
3. A written procedure for systematically reviewing the entire SOP manual on a periodic basis (at least biennially).

Manual Development

The first step in developing an SOP manual is to develop a master list of the bureau's recurring work procedures organizing them into major headings (e.g., Administrative, General, Technical, Quality, Safety and Training). Next, prepare the list as a Table of Contents and develop a sequential numbering system (starting with an even number such as 100) for easily identifying and locating procedures. Third, it is recommended you complete one major heading of the manual at a time. Fourth, before drafting the step-by-step activities of a procedure, first identify its desired outcome(s). (A good tool for drafting steps is the Action Planning format.) Knowing the end result will help to determine what is required to achieve it. It is also helpful to think through different scenarios when developing procedures to make the procedure as complete as

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possible. Finally, involve the appropriate staff in helping to draft procedures. For example, office staff should be involved in writing Raleigh office procedures.

Document Control

All SOPs are prepared in Word format and are maintained as pdfs (portable document format) on the bureau's intranet webpage. Bureau employees are instructed to reference the electronic copy and refrain from printing a hard copy. Printing a hard copy makes the SOPs "uncontrolled" since a paper copy no longer captures revisions. Any employee printing a copy *must* destroy the copy within five days. Any employee found using a printed SOP document older than five days could be subject to disciplinary action. It is permissible to use printed checklists for longer than five days, if they are used as a means of employee training and evaluation by a supervisor/trainer since completed checklists are to be placed in an employee's personnel file. An employee using an approved checklist as a guide is also permitted to use a printed copy for longer than five days but should destroy it once it is no longer needed.

Requests made by external agents to the Department for a printed copy are subject to North Carolina's Public Records Law (see N.C. General Statute § 132-1).

Personnel Responsibilities

Role	Responsibility
Bureau Chief	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Lead responsibility for the development, maintenance, implementation and document control of the manual.2. Complete knowledge and understanding of all SOPs.3. Training new employees according to the appropriate SOPs.4. Monitoring and evaluating all direct reports on their knowledge and understanding of procedures and their correct application.5. Approves all procedures and re-approves any revisions made to procedures.6. The periodic review of all procedures.
All Supervisors	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Document control.2. Complete knowledge and understanding of all SOPs.3. Training new employees according to the appropriate SOPs.4. Monitoring and evaluating all direct reports on their knowledge and understanding of procedures and their correct application.5. Provide feedback when revisions are necessary to improve a procedure.
NCDOL IT Division	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Maintaining the SOP Manual on the bureau's intranet web-page.2. Quickly updating the SOP Manual when revisions or additions are completed.
Employees	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Document control.2. Performing work according to the current written procedures.3. Provide feedback when revisions are necessary to improve a procedure.

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III. SOP Content

Each procedure *must* include at least the following seven sections and numbering sequence:

- 1.0 Purpose and Scope
- 2.0 Personnel Responsibilities
- 3.0 Health and Safety Issues
- 4.0 Procedure
- 5.0 Customer Service Requirements
- 6.0 Data and Record Management
- 7.0 Exhibits

Each written procedure *must*:

1. Include a **title page** that identifies the procedure and the date and approval signature of the bureau chief and of the person who prepares it;
2. Describe its **purpose and scope** and,
 - a. Consistently use the opening phrase “This procedure establishes . . .” or “This SOP establishes the procedure . . .”
 - b. Relevant goals of the procedure,
 - c. Outline the basic steps of the procedure,
 - d. Reference any applicable statute, rule and/or code;
3. Describe the **personnel responsibilities** of each employee who participates in the procedure’s implementation and, if applicable, the responsibilities of external agents to the bureau;
4. Describe potential **health and safety issues**,
 - a. What would happen if precautions are not followed correctly?
 - b. If there are separate procedures for health and safety issues then reference the procedure number under the health and safety section,
 - c. The bureau’s unit committee of the Employee’s Health and Safety Steering Committee should be consulted on health and safety issues for every SOP;
5. Describe the sequence of activities in the chronological order required to complete the **procedure**,
 - a. Describe the action or condition (trigger) that indicates the procedure should be performed,
 - b. List the most commonly used activities in its proper sequence for completing the procedure,
 - c. Are there other ways to perform the procedure due to different circumstances, and if so what are the factor(s) which trigger an alternative or exceptional procedure?
6. Describe any **customer service requirements** (customers can be both internal to the bureau and the department as well as external to the department -- a customer is anyone who *receives* a product or service);
7. Describe **data and records management** requirements (any calculations, forms reports and data and record storage information); and

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8. List all exhibits (letters, forms, diagrams, etc.). The exhibits themselves are not included in the SOP but posted separately on the bureau's intranet webpage for easier access.

Each written procedure *may*:

1. Make use of **flow charts** to summarize the sequencing of activities;
2. Include a **checklist** for each procedure for on-the-job convenience by staff; and
3. Include **additional sections** based on the discretion of the bureau chief (See SOP template).

Every page of the procedure includes a short title, reference number, date adopted, date revised, how many times the procedure has been revised and page number. (See the SOP template.)

Customer Service Requirements

The following are the minimum requirements for producing user-friendly SOPs:

1. The SOP manual presents procedures in a logical order for easy referencing.
2. Each procedure is concise (not wordy), easy to understand, easy to use and laid out in a step-by-step format. However, it is written with enough detail that if an employee suddenly leaves, his or her replacement could use the manual to resume operations quickly.
3. Be mindful of the words used because the tone of the manual can impact a bureau's culture. Keep it positive by not using negative words or phrases such as shall not, do not, cannot, avoid, ignore and forbidden.
4. Use the active voice (where the subject of the sentence performs the action expressed in the verb) and present verb tense and refrain from using the word "you."
5. The words "shall" and "must" are used when an activity is required and deviation from the specification will constitute nonconformance to the standard. The word "should" indicates the activity is recommended. The word "may" signifies the activity is optional or discretionary.
6. At the first use of any acronym or abbreviation within an SOP, spell out the words which make up the acronym or abbreviation.
7. The purpose of the SOP is to empower staff. Consequently, procedures should not be so rigid that they do not allow for some latitude in unusual situations. (Rigidity promotes bureaucracy!)

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IV. Checklists

Each SOP *should* have a checklist. Checklists have multiple uses including:

1. Testing the accuracy of each SOP;
2. Training new employees;
3. Evaluating employees knowledge and understanding of SOPs; and,
4. Guiding the everyday work of employees.

Prior to an SOP being approved by the bureau chief a corresponding checklist should be developed to assist in verifying the SOP's accuracy. Verification is accomplished by a supervisor observing an employee performing the procedure. The supervisor then evaluates the employee's performance to determine the SOP's accuracy and if accurate, the employee's ability to perform it satisfactorily. Second, checklists are used by supervisors in training new employees. Once a new employee has "mastered" a procedure a supervisor then signifies competency by signing and dating the SOP's checklist and placing it in the employee's personnel file. The supervisor also makes appropriate notations in the employee's performance log regarding the new employee's training progression. Third, supervisors have a responsibility to periodically evaluate direct reports on their application of current procedures through means such as:

1. Management-by-walking-around (e.g., field visits);
2. Recurring reviews of investigative and inspection reports and other documentation;
3. Review and discussion of procedures at district supervisor meetings, tailgates, etc.;
4. Review and discussion of procedures at bureau management meetings.

In evaluating direct reports, supervisors also have a responsibility to provide feedback to the bureau chief when revisions are necessary to make improvements to the procedure. Finally, checklists assist employees in performing work as prescribed by the appropriate SOP. It is the responsibility of employees to remain current on all applicable SOPs and for providing feedback when SOPs need revision to improve performance. (See an example of a checklist used by Elevator and Amusement Device.)

V. EXHIBITS

NCDOL SOP Template 121113
NCDOL Checklist Template 121113