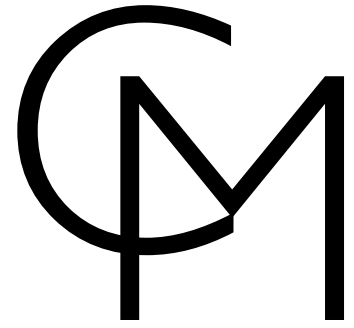


The California Merchant

News for the California Merchant Safety Association

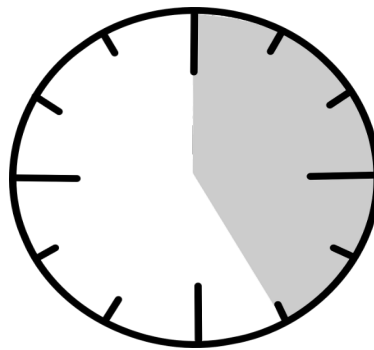


Stay focused using the Pomodoro technique

In the last issue, we discussed ways to keep up at work without suffering from burnout. One of the methods mentioned in the article was the Pomodoro Technique. The Pomodoro Technique is a simple yet powerful time management method that can help employees stay focused and productive—especially in high-paced environments or roles that require constant multitasking. Developed by Francesco Cirillo in the 1980s, the technique centers around short, structured work intervals followed by brief breaks. This rhythm helps improve concentration, reduce fatigue, and break large tasks into manageable steps.

At its core, the method is easy to apply. You choose a single task to focus on, set a timer for 25 minutes, and work steadily on that task until the timer rings. This 25-minute block is called one “Pomodoro.” Once it ends, you take a short five-minute break before starting the next Pomodoro. After completing four Pomodoros, you take a longer break—usually 15 to 30 minutes—to rest your mind and reset before beginning again.

Small business teams and individuals, particularly those juggling customer service, inventory, administration, or creative work, can benefit greatly from this approach. For example, an office employee might use Pomodoro blocks to clear out their inbox in focused sprints, while a retail worker could apply it during back-office duties like inventory logging or display planning. The short timeframes create a sense of urgency that helps prevent procrastination while also keeping the brain fresh and alert throughout the day.



This technique is also low-cost and flexible. Employees can use a simple kitchen timer, a smartphone app, or browser-based timers to implement it. Some teams even adopt group Pomodoro sessions—agreeing to work quietly for 25 minutes at a time, then sharing a short break together—to encourage focus and build camaraderie. Managers can also use Pomodoros to plan meetings more efficiently or carve out undisturbed time for administrative tasks.

For tasks where you’re really having trouble staying on track or even getting started, or for tasks you have been procrastinating a long time, try setting the timer for shorter periods—even five or ten minutes is enough to get started on a difficult task.

While the Pomodoro Technique may not suit every type of workflow, its structure can be especially effective for small teams balancing competing responsibilities. It encourages mindful work habits and allows even the busiest employees to make noticeable progress, one focused interval at a time.

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handbook in order*

A healthy break room

*Handling mental
health emergencies*

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Rendering first aid in the workplace

In any workplace—whether it’s a retail shop, office, warehouse, or remote work site—being prepared for accidents or sudden illness is essential. A properly stocked, accessible, and well-understood first aid kit can make a major difference in how quickly and effectively injuries are treated. But owning a kit isn’t enough. Employees also need to know what’s in it, how to use it, and when a situation calls for professional medical help.

Here’s what every small business should know about creating and maintaining a workplace first aid kit.

What Should Be in a Workplace First Aid Kit?

According to OSHA and the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), the contents of a basic workplace first aid kit should cover common minor injuries like cuts, scrapes, burns, sprains, and eye irritation. Every kit should be stored in a clearly marked, easily accessible location known to all employees.

A comprehensive first aid kit should include:

Basic Supplies:

- Adhesive bandages
- Sterile gauze pads and gauze rolls
- Adhesive tape for securing gauze or bandages
- Antiseptic wipes and/or hydrogen peroxide for cleaning wounds
- Antibiotic ointment
- Hydrocortisone cream for itching or rashes
- Burn cream or burn gel
- Cold packs (instant, chemical-activated)
- Elastic bandages (e.g., ACE wraps) for sprains

- Tweezers (for splinters or debris)
- Scissors (for cutting gauze or tape)
- Eye wash or saline solution
- Thermometer
- Disposable gloves (non-latex if allergies are a concern)
- CPR face shield or mask
- First aid manual or quick reference card

Additional Useful Items:

- Pain relievers (ibuprofen, acetaminophen)
- Allergy medication (antihistamines like Benadryl)
- Alcohol prep pads
- Finger splints
- Blanket (foil emergency type)
- Medical-grade mask

Kits should be checked regularly and restocked after any use or when items expire.

How to Use the Kit

While not every employee needs to be a certified first aider, basic knowledge of the kit’s contents and usage is essential.

- Always wear gloves when treating someone else to protect both the injured person and yourself.
- Wash hands before and after providing care if possible, or use hand sanitizer from the kit.
- Sprains: Use a cold pack to reduce swelling, and wrap with an elastic bandage without cutting off circulation.

- Burns: Apply burn gel and avoid using ice; cover loosely with sterile gauze.
- Eye irritants: Flush eyes with saline for at least 15 minutes if debris or chemicals are involved.

Always reassure the injured person, keep them calm, and do not move them unnecessarily if there is a chance of a serious injury like a back or neck issue.

Assess the Situation: Minor vs. Emergency

Call 911 or seek urgent care if you observe:

- Heavy bleeding that won’t stop with pressure
- Possible broken bones or joint dislocations
- Loss of consciousness or fainting
- Chest pain, shortness of breath, or stroke symptoms
- Burns covering a large area or affecting the face or airway
- Severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis): swelling, hives, difficulty breathing
- Seizures
- Suspected head or neck injuries
- Shock symptoms: cold/clammy skin, rapid pulse, confusion

Even a short annual training on how to use the kit can empower employees to act confidently in emergencies. Encourage CPR and first aid certification for at least one staff member per shift.

Make It Visible and Accessible

Post signs or labels that clearly show where the kit is stored. In larger spaces, multiple kits may be necessary.

What to do before and after an earthquake

Recent small earthquakes in the Bay Area and southern California have reminded many of us that we are vulnerable to that shaking and quaking! For small and medium-sized businesses—especially in retail or office settings—being prepared can mean the difference between chaos and a coordinated response. Earthquakes strike without warning, so it's crucial to create a culture of readiness before a disaster happens.

Here's how to prepare your workplace and team to respond safely and effectively.

1. Assess Your Space

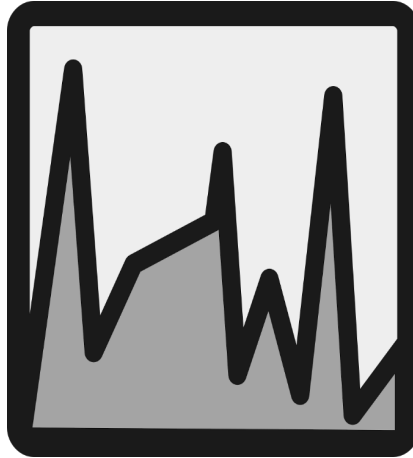
Walk through your business location and identify potential hazards. Earthquakes often cause unsecured objects to fall, shatter, or block exits.

- Anchor heavy furniture like bookshelves, filing cabinets, and stockroom racks to the wall with brackets or earthquake straps.
- Secure overhead signage, lighting fixtures, and hanging décor.
- Use museum putty or non-slip mats to keep countertop displays and electronics in place.
- Store heavy items on lower shelves to reduce risk of injury.
- Keep aisles, exits, and emergency equipment (like fire extinguishers) free of obstructions.

2. Create an Emergency Plan

An effective emergency plan ensures employees know how to respond and evacuate safely.

- Designate safe zones (like under sturdy tables or against interior walls away from windows) and exit routes.
- Post evacuation maps near exits



and in break rooms.

- Assign roles for emergency response: someone to check restrooms, shut off gas/electricity, or grab emergency kits.
- Plan for employees with disabilities or medical conditions and ensure assistance protocols are in place.
- Conduct drills at least twice a year—more often if you're in a high-risk region.

Encourage staff to keep personal emergency contacts and medications accessible at work.

3. Stock Emergency Supplies

Every business should maintain a workplace emergency kit, tailored to the size of the team and customer presence. Supplies should be easily accessible and stored in a clearly labeled container.

Recommended contents include:

- Bottled water (one gallon per person, per day—at least a three-day supply)
- Non-perishable food/snacks (e.g., granola bars, canned goods, trail mix)
- First aid kit with bandages, antiseptic, gloves, and burn ointment

- Flashlights, headlamps, and extra batteries
- Portable phone chargers or battery packs
- Emergency blankets and dust masks
- Whistle or air horn to signal for help if trapped
- Sanitation supplies: hand sanitizer, moist towelettes, garbage bags
- Basic tools: wrench or pliers (to turn off utilities), multi-tool, duct tape
- Contact list of all employees, emergency services, and utility providers
- A printed copy of your emergency plan and floor map

For customer-facing businesses: Include extra food, water, and basic supplies in case customers are present during a quake and cannot leave immediately.

4. Backup Your Data

In the event of physical damage, having your business data safe and accessible is critical for resuming operations.

- Use cloud-based services to back up financial records, inventory data, customer databases, and employee records.
- Schedule automatic backups daily, especially for POS systems and online stores.
- Store copies of critical documents (licenses, insurance policies, vendor agreements) both digitally and in a fireproof/waterproof safe.
- For sensitive data, use secure encryption and password protection to safeguard customer and employee

See **EARTHQUAKE**, page 4

Earthquake: Communicate your plan

Continued from page 3

privacy.

After an earthquake, being able to access key records remotely—even if your store or office is damaged—can significantly speed up recovery.

5. Communicate Your Plan

Information is only useful if it's understood and remembered.

- Train employees during onboarding and provide annual refreshers.
- Use posters, checklists, and laminated emergency cards to reinforce key steps.
- Send digital copies of emergency plans via email or a shared drive for remote workers.
- Conduct a “readiness review” at the start of earthquake season (usually spring to early fall).

Openly communicating your emergency procedures shows that you prioritize employee and customer safety.

What to Do During an Earthquake

When the shaking starts, the safest response is immediate and instinctive:

Drop, Cover, and Hold On

- Drop to your hands and knees to avoid being knocked over.
- Cover your head and neck with one arm and seek shelter under a sturdy table or desk.
- If no shelter is nearby, crouch in an interior corner away from windows,



tall furniture, or heavy objects.

- Hold On to your shelter until the shaking stops.

Additional tips:

- Do not run outside—you're more likely to be injured by falling glass or debris.
- If you're near a window, move away if possible to avoid shattering glass.
- If you're operating machinery or driving, stop safely and stay in place until the shaking ends.

What to Do After an Earthquake

Once the shaking stops, the next few minutes and hours are crucial.

Check for Injuries and Hazards

- Administer first aid as needed and check for signs of injury among coworkers and customers.

- Watch for hazards: broken glass, spilled chemicals, downed power lines, or gas leaks.

- Do not use matches or lighters until you're sure there's no gas leak.

Evacuate if Necessary

- Exit calmly if the building is damaged, smells of gas, or if instructed to do so by emergency personnel.
- Use stairs—not elevators—to evacuate.

Account for Everyone

- Gather at your designated meeting area outside.
- Use your emergency contact list to ensure all staff are accounted for.
- Inform emergency services if someone is trapped or missing.

Communicate and Document

- Alert local authorities of major damage or injuries.
- Take photos of damage for insurance purposes.
- Notify customers and vendors of any service interruptions using social media, email, or phone.

Inspect and Resume Operations Cautiously

- Do not re-enter your workplace until it's been inspected by building authorities or utility companies.
- Resume operations only when it's safe—for both employees and customers.

Earthquakes are unpredictable, but your response doesn't have to be. By preparing your workplace, educating your team, and maintaining supplies and backups, your business will be positioned to respond calmly, protect lives, and recover faster.

Do you have an employee handbook?

An employee handbook is more than a bundle of rules—it's a living guide that shapes your company culture, clarifies expectations, and protects both your business and your employees. For small and medium-sized businesses, an effective handbook can streamline communication, promote transparency, and ensure compliance with state and federal laws.

Begin with the Basics

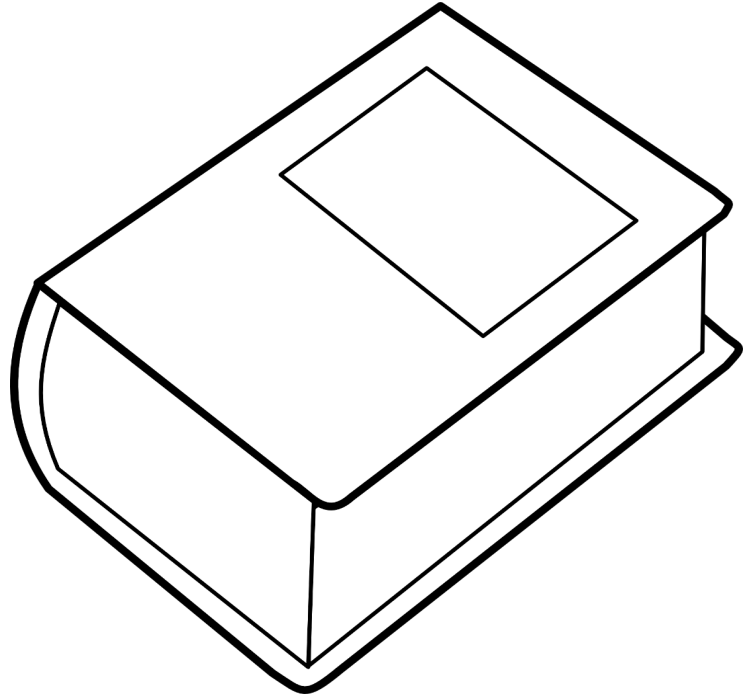
A good handbook begins with the basics. It should clearly outline your business's mission and values, as well as essential logistics like work hours, payroll schedules, holidays, and how paid time off is handled. For businesses with a mix of full-time, part-time, and seasonal workers, defining employment classifications and eligibility for benefits helps prevent confusion or future disputes. This section should also include clear policies on attendance, timekeeping, overtime, and how to request leave—especially since California has specific requirements around meal breaks, rest periods, and sick leave.

Include workplace conduct and safety policies

Equally important are your workplace conduct and safety policies. A handbook should outline your stance on harassment, discrimination, retaliation, and workplace violence. It should also include an explanation of how employees can report concerns confidentially and without fear of reprisal. For retail and office settings, you may want to include guidance on handling customer interactions, personal appearance expectations, and safety procedures for emergency situations such as fires or earthquakes.

Make room for hybrid and work-from-home scenarios

Today's handbook should also reflect



modern workplace realities. Many small businesses now offer remote or hybrid work options, and expectations for communication, availability, and home-office setup should be clearly defined. Similarly, technology use and social media policies help protect your company's reputation and clarify how employees are expected to use business devices or software.

The importance of accessibility

Perhaps the most overlooked—but critical—part of creating a successful handbook is its accessibility. Use plain language that's easy to understand. Organize the content with clear section headings and a table of contents. Offer the handbook in both digital and printed formats, and make it part of your onboarding process. Encourage employees to ask questions and acknowledge receipt to confirm they've read and understood the policies.

Revise every year

Because California labor laws change

frequently, it's wise to review your handbook at least once a year, ideally with input from HR professionals or legal counsel. Updates should be communicated clearly and made available to all employees. Even in a small business, having an up-to-date, well-structured handbook sets the tone for a fair, consistent, and respectful workplace.

It's wise to include your handbook revision schedule in your yearly calendar with financial year-end duties like filing taxes, renewing insurance policies, and updating personnel files. If you review your documents at the end of every year, you're likely to catch changes and ensure your information is fresh for all employees. Another benefit of yearly review and maintenance of the handbook is to remind the management team of your company culture and best practices.

In short, your employee handbook is an extension of your leadership. When thoughtfully written and regularly maintained, it fosters clarity, accountability, and a stronger workplace culture for everyone.

Creating a health-conscious break room

A break room isn't just a convenience—it's an opportunity to promote wellness, build morale, and encourage healthy habits. For small businesses, even modest changes can make a big impact.

Here's how to design a break space that supports the physical and mental well-being of your team:

Offer Healthy Food Choices

What employees snack on during breaks affects their energy and focus for the rest of the day.

- Stock options like granola bars, trail mix, fruit, nuts, low-sugar yogurt, and whole grain crackers.
- Replace traditional vending machine snacks with healthier alternatives, or label "smart choices" with stickers or signs.
- If you provide occasional meals, try balanced boxed lunches or salad/sandwich platters instead of heavy fast food.
- For businesses with fridges or microwaves, encourage employees to bring lunch by keeping the space clean and organized.

Even a basket of apples or bananas on the counter is a small gesture that supports healthier habits.

Provide Hydration Options

Staying hydrated is key to focus and overall health, but many workers turn to sugary drinks out of habit.

- Offer a filtered water dispenser or pitcher with lemon or cucumber slices for flavor.
- Stock low-sugar alternatives like unsweetened iced tea, sparkling water, or electrolyte-enhanced waters.
- Encourage reusable water



bottles by offering company-branded ones or posting signs about sustainability.

- If providing coffee, also supply decaf and caffeine-free herbal teas as an alternative for those sensitive to caffeine.

Hydration improves mental clarity, reduces fatigue, and supports vocal and physical health.

Create a Relaxing Environment

The environment itself can affect how restorative break time feels.

- Use warm, neutral colors, soft lighting, and comfortable chairs to create a sense of calm.
- Add elements like potted plants, local artwork, or a corkboard for community events and shout-outs.
- If space allows, designate a small section for quiet activities—reading, journaling, or mindfulness exercises.
- Avoid using the break room for storage or impromptu meetings whenever possible. Protect it as a dedicated rest space.

A well-designed break room tells employees: 'Your well-being matters.'

Encourage Hygiene

A clean, hygienic space reduces the spread of germs and contributes to workplace health.

- Supply and regularly restock hand sanitizer, disinfecting wipes, dish soap, and paper towels.
- Post friendly reminders to wash hands, wipe down surfaces, and clean out the fridge weekly.
- Designate someone to check the space daily or weekly to ensure cleanliness and restocking.
- Encourage respectful use of shared appliances like microwaves, coffee makers, and toasters.

Hygiene doesn't have to feel strict—clear signage and positive reinforcement go a long way.

Promote Mental Health

Short breaks are essential not just for the body, but for emotional reset.

- Post flyers or business cards for local mental health resources, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), or helplines.
- Add a bulletin board with positive quotes or anonymous "kind notes" from coworkers.
- If space allows, include noise-canceling headphones, puzzles, or stress balls to help employees decompress.
- Consider occasional wellness challenges or gratitude exercises to build a positive culture.

SAFETY ... IT PAYS



Mental health episodes in the workplace

Knowing how to respond when a co-worker or employee experiences a mental health episode can be confusing, emotional, and complex. Whether it's a panic attack, a visible emotional breakdown, or a sudden behavioral shift, how you respond can profoundly impact the individual's recovery, the safety of the work environment, and your team's culture.

When it occurs

Ensure Immediate Safety

- Assess the situation calmly and quickly. Is the person in danger of harming themselves or others?
- If there is immediate danger, call emergency services (911 in the U.S.). Notify your on-site health and safety team if applicable.

- If there is no immediate danger, create a safe, quiet space away from public view where the person can calm down.

Stay Calm and Compassionate

- Speak in a calm, steady voice. Avoid reacting with panic, judgment, or frustration.
- Use non-threatening body language: relaxed posture, open hands, and soft eye contact.
- Say things like:
 - "I'm here for you."
 - "Would you like to take a break or go somewhere quiet?"
 - "Is there someone you'd like me to contact for you?"

Respect Their Autonomy

- If they are coherent, ask for consent before taking action. Don't force help unless safety requires it.
- Avoid diagnosing or making assumptions. Mental health issues are complex and unique to each person.

Know When to Escalate

- If the episode escalates or involves erratic behavior, engage HR, on-site mental health professionals, or a manager with relevant training.
- In some cases, calling a mental health crisis hotline may be more appropriate than emergency services.

After the episode

- Don't expect them to return to work immediately. Depending on the severity, a short-term leave or flexibility with tasks may be needed.
- Offer space, but let them know they're supported.
- Avoid gossip or speculation. Only discuss the incident with those who need to know (e.g., HR).
- Respect the individual's privacy, even if they shared details with you personally.
- Normalize discussions around mental health. Create a culture where it's safe to speak up.
- Ensure supervisors understand how to recognize warning signs and intervene appropriately.
- Involve the employee in shaping their own support plan.

OSHA CORNER

Please visit the following address on the web to download helpful safety posters, guides and pamphlets for a safer workplace.

<https://www.osha.gov/publications>



Vocal health for workers who talk all day

Frontline workers in retail and customer service roles often depend on their voices as their primary tool. Whether greeting customers, answering phones, or guiding clients through purchases, vocal strain is a common—and preventable—occupational hazard.

Here's how to care for your voice and avoid long-term damage:

Stay Hydrated

Vocal cords need moisture to function properly. Dehydration causes them to become dry and irritated, making it harder to speak clearly and comfortably.

- Drink water throughout the day, not just when you feel thirsty. Aim for at least 6–8 glasses daily.
- Keep a refillable water bottle at your station or workspace.
- Avoid or limit dehydrating drinks like coffee, soda, and alcohol, especially during long shifts.
- Consider warm (not hot) herbal teas, such as chamomile or licorice root, which are soothing to the throat.

Rest Your Voice When Possible

Vocal fatigue builds over time. If you're constantly speaking, especially in noisy environments, your vocal cords don't have a chance to recover.

- Take short vocal breaks by limiting unnecessary conversation during downtime.
- Use non-verbal communication (nods, hand signals, signage) when possible—especially during long shifts.



- Rotate tasks among staff so one person isn't constantly responsible for vocal-heavy duties like answering phones or greeting customers.
- At home, give your voice a rest by minimizing phone calls, singing, or long conversations after a busy workday.

Use Good Posture

Posture affects breathing and breath control—both critical to healthy vocal production.

- Stand or sit upright with shoulders relaxed and back straight to allow for full lung expansion.
- Avoid slouching, which restricts airflow and causes vocal strain.
- If you're on the phone often, use a headset or speakerphone—don't cradle the phone between your ear and shoulder.

Proper posture doesn't just help your voice; it also reduces fatigue and tension in the neck and back.

Minimize Background Noise

Speaking over loud music, machinery, or chatter forces you to raise your voice repeatedly, increasing the risk of strain or damage.

- Ask management to keep background music at a reasonable level, especially during low-traffic periods.
- Use amplification tools like portable mics or intercom systems if addressing larger spaces.
- Create “quiet zones” for taking calls in open offices or large retail floors when possible.
- If your workplace is always noisy, speak in short, clear phrases rather than trying to project for long periods.

Seek Help for Persistent Issues

If you're hoarse for more than a week, or if speaking causes pain, don't ignore it. Vocal injuries can become serious if untreated.

- Common symptoms of concern include persistent hoarseness, vocal fatigue, throat tightness, or frequent throat clearing.
- Consult a doctor or speech-language pathologist. Voice therapy may be recommended for chronic issues.
- Employers should encourage staff to speak up (pun intended) if they're experiencing discomfort.

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