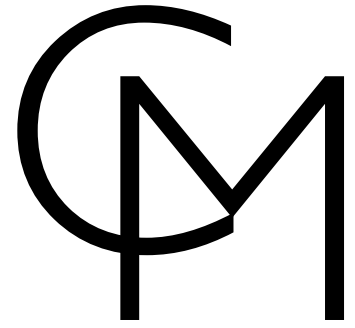


The California Merchant

News for the California Merchant Safety Association



Understanding overtime and break laws in the workplace

California has some of the strongest worker protection laws in the country, especially when it comes to overtime and rest breaks. But those rules can also be complex—and misunderstanding them can lead to costly mistakes, unhappy employees, or even legal trouble.

Whether you manage a small retail shop, oversee an office team, or coordinate hybrid schedules, it's essential to understand how these rules work in practice. Clear, consistent compliance doesn't just protect your business—it also builds trust and respect with your team.

Here's what every California manager should know about overtime and break laws, and how to apply them fairly and effectively.

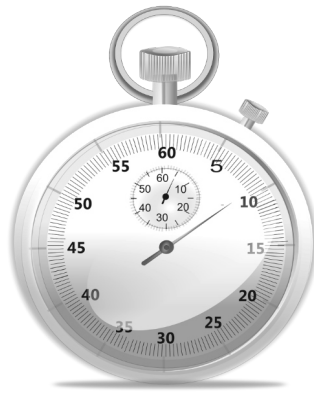
Overtime: When Extra Hours Mean Extra Pay

California's overtime rules go beyond federal standards. They ensure that employees are compensated fairly for long workdays and extended weeks.

1. The Basic Rule: 1.5x Pay for Overtime Hours

Nonexempt employees (those paid hourly or eligible for overtime) must receive 1.5 times their regular rate of pay when they work:

- More than 8 hours in a single workday, or
- More than 40 hours in a single workweek, or



- The first 8 hours on the seventh consecutive day of work in a workweek.

Example:

If a retail employee works 9 hours on Tuesday, that extra hour is paid at 1.5x their regular rate—even if their total weekly hours are under 40.

2. Double Time: When the Day Runs Long

Employees earn 2 times their regular pay when they work:

- More than 12 hours in a single day, or
- More than 8 hours on the seventh consecutive workday in a workweek.

Example:

If an office employee works 13 hours in one day, the first 8 are at regular pay, the

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next 4 at 1.5x, and the final hour at 2x pay.

3. The Workweek Matters

A “workweek” doesn’t have to start on Monday—but it must be a fixed, recurring 7-day period. Managers should define this clearly for payroll tracking and communicate it to employees.

4. Who Is Exempt?

Not every employee qualifies for overtime. “Exempt” employees—typically those in executive, administrative, or professional roles—must meet specific duties and salary requirements set by the California Department of Industrial Relations (DIR).

To qualify as exempt, an employee must:

- Earn at least twice the state minimum wage for full-time work, and
- Primarily perform exempt job duties (e.g., managing employees, exercising independent judgment).

If an employee doesn’t meet both tests, they’re nonexempt and must receive overtime pay when eligible.

Managing Overtime Wisely

Understanding the law is one part of the equation; managing overtime effectively is another. Here’s how to handle it fairly and efficiently:

- Plan ahead for busy periods. Anticipate seasonal surges or big projects and adjust staffing or schedules early.
- Require approval for overtime. You can set policies requiring pre-authorization, but if an employee does work extra hours, you must still pay them—then address the

policy violation separately.

- Track time accurately. Use a reliable system for recording hours. Paper timesheets, punch clocks, and digital tools are all fine as long as they’re accurate and consistent.
- Avoid “off-the-clock” work. Even short tasks before or after a shift—like finishing a sale or checking emails—can count as compensable time.

Fair overtime management protects your business and your team from burnout alike.

Meal and Rest Breaks: Every Employee’s Right

California law doesn’t just focus on how long people work—it also ensures they have time to rest and recharge. Breaks are legally required and play a big role in maintaining health, morale, and productivity.

1. Rest Breaks

- Frequency: Employees are entitled to a 10-minute paid rest break for every four hours worked (or major fraction thereof).
- Timing: Breaks should fall roughly in the middle of each work period, not tacked onto the beginning or end of a shift.
- Pay: Rest breaks are on the clock—employees don’t clock out.

Example:

An employee working 8 hours gets two paid 10-minute breaks, usually around mid-morning and mid-afternoon.

2. Meal Breaks

- Duration: Employees who work more than 5 hours must receive an unpaid, off-duty meal break of at least 30 minutes.
- Second meal break: If they work more than 10 hours, they’re

entitled to a second 30-minute meal break.

- Off-duty means off-duty. During a meal break, employees must be relieved of all work duties. They can’t be required to stay at their workstation or remain on-call unless they agree in writing to an on-duty meal period (which is rare and must meet strict conditions).

3. What if an Employee Skips a Break?

If a rest or meal break isn’t provided, the employer must pay the employee one additional hour of pay at their regular rate for each day a break was missed. This “premium pay” is designed to encourage compliance.

4. Scheduling Tips for Break Compliance

- Stagger breaks so coverage remains smooth in customer-facing settings.
- Use scheduling software to automatically assign and track breaks.
- Train supervisors not to discourage or delay breaks, even during busy times.

Special Situations: Remote, Split, and Alternative Schedules

California’s labor laws apply to all nonexempt employees—whether they work on-site or remotely.

Remote Workers

Managers must still track work hours accurately, including overtime and breaks. Encourage employees to log off completely during breaks and clearly record start and end times.

Split Shifts

A “split shift” occurs when an

See **BREAKS**, page 4

Supporting low-income workers

Behind every productive workplace is a team of people balancing more than just their job duties. For many workers—especially those in hourly, entry-level, or part-time positions—daily life involves navigating tight budgets, long commutes, limited childcare options, and health challenges that can affect performance and well-being.

As a manager, you can't solve every financial stress your employees face—but you can create a workplace that reduces burdens, builds trust, and helps people thrive. Supporting low-income workers isn't only an act of compassion; it's also good business. Employees who feel secure and valued are more engaged, loyal, and motivated.

Here's how managers can make a real difference.

Address Food Insecurity—Go Beyond the Pantry

Food insecurity is more common than most employers realize. Even full-time employees can struggle to afford nutritious meals, especially with the rising cost of groceries. While sponsoring or promoting a workplace food pantry is helpful, there are additional ways to make access to food more consistent and dignified.

1. Provide access to affordable meals on-site.

Offer subsidized or low-cost snacks and meal options in the break room.

Stock fresh fruit, oatmeal packets, and other healthy staples instead of only chips or candy.

Partner with local cafes, food trucks, or community kitchens for discounted employee meals.

2. Build flexibility around meal times.

Employees working multiple jobs or long shifts may skip meals to keep up. Allow flexible or staggered break times



so workers can eat when they need to, rather than sticking to rigid schedules.

3. Share information about local food resources—confidentially.

Instead of handing out flyers publicly, managers can make information available discreetly through email, HR portals, or staff bulletin boards. Highlight resources like:

Community markets or co-ops that offer discounted produce.

Double Bucks” programs for using SNAP benefits at farmers markets.

Local meal delivery or community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs that accept payment assistance.

Support Childcare Needs with Flexibility and Resources

Childcare costs can consume a large portion of a low-income worker's paycheck. When care falls through, workers often face impossible choices—miss work and lose income, or leave a child in an unsafe situation. Managers can ease this pressure with creativity and empathy.

1. Build scheduling stability.

Give as much notice as possible for schedule changes.

Avoid last-minute shift swaps or unpredictable hours.

Offer consistent start and end times week to week.

Stable schedules allow parents to coordinate childcare and reduce stress.

2. Explore childcare partnerships.

Even small businesses can connect with local childcare providers for reduced-rate partnerships. Some employers offer “backup care” arrangements with nearby centers, or share vetted provider lists through HR.

3. Create a family-friendly culture.

Be understanding about school closures or sick days.

Let employees make up hours rather than lose pay if they miss time for family reasons.

Offer remote or hybrid options when possible—especially for office roles.

A culture that acknowledges family responsibilities helps employees stay committed without fearing judgment or penalties.

Promote Health and Well-Being Accessibly

Low-income workers often face barriers to healthcare, including cost, lack of time, or limited insurance coverage. You don't need a full benefits department to make a difference—small adjustments and local partnerships go a long way.

1. Share low-cost or free health resources.

Compile information on:

Community clinics offering sliding-scale medical or dental care.

Telehealth options for mental health support.

Free vaccination or preventive care events in your area.

Make these resources easy to find

See SUPPORT, page 5

Etiquette for the modern hybrid workplace

The last few years have reshaped how—and where—we work. What began as a temporary solution for many companies has evolved into a lasting change: hybrid work. Today, countless businesses blend remote and in-office schedules, giving employees flexibility while keeping teams connected.

In fact, hybrid work is now one of the most common arrangements in offices and professional settings across California and the U.S. It offers the best of both worlds—quiet focus time at home and valuable collaboration in the office. But it also brings new challenges. Different schedules, mixed communication tools, and shifting boundaries can blur the lines of professionalism and courtesy.

That’s where hybrid work etiquette comes in. Thoughtful habits and small acts of consideration keep hybrid teams productive, respectful, and connected—no matter where they’re logging in from.

Hybrid success starts with predictability. Everyone should know who’s where and when—not only for meetings, but also for quick conversations, project planning, and shared space management.

Tips for employees:

- Share your schedule. Keep your in-office and remote days visible on shared calendars or chat status updates.
- Stick to agreed office days. Frequent changes can make coordination difficult.
- Be on time, whether in person or online. Logging in late to a meeting sends the same signal as walking into a conference room halfway through.

Tips for managers:

- Clarify expectations for

attendance, meetings, and “core hours.”

- Avoid scheduling in-person meetings only on remote days.
- Consider fairness—don’t give extra face-time opportunities to employees who happen to be in the office more often.

Consistency shows reliability and respect for everyone’s time.

Communicate Intentionally

Hybrid work thrives on communication—but it’s easy to either over-communicate (filling inboxes and chat feeds) or under-communicate (leaving teammates in the dark).

Good etiquette means being clear, concise, and considerate.

Please see **HYBRID**, page 6

Breaks: Flexible setups must be state-approved

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employee’s workday is broken into two parts separated by more than a normal meal period (for example, working 8–11 a.m. and 4–8 p.m.). Additional “split shift premiums” may apply, depending on wages earned.

Alternative Work Schedules

Some workplaces use flexible setups—like four 10-hour days instead of five 8-hour days—but these must be formally adopted by a two-thirds employee vote and approved under specific state guidelines. Without that approval, working over 8 hours in a day still counts as overtime.



Common Manager Mistakes

Even well-meaning managers sometimes trip over California’s strict rules. Watch out for these pitfalls:

- Assuming exempt status without verifying duties and salary.

- Allowing “off-the-clock” work to finish quick tasks.
- Failing to pay overtime because it wasn’t pre-approved.
- Not providing a second meal break after 10 hours.
- Scheduling back-to-back shifts that violate daily or weekly limits.

Regularly reviewing time records, communicating with HR or payroll, and refreshing training can help you stay compliant.

Overtime and break laws aren’t just red tape—they’re designed to ensure fairness, prevent burnout, and reward

employees for their time. For managers, understanding and applying these rules correctly strengthens credibility and protects your organization.

Encourage open communication about hours and breaks. If an employee isn’t sure about their rights, or if you’re unsure about a scheduling question, check the California Department of Industrial Relations (DIR) website or consult HR before making changes.

By respecting time—both paid and unpaid—you show your employees that their well-being matters as much as their productivity. And that’s the foundation of a healthy, lawful, and thriving workplace.

Support: Normalize resource sharing for all

Continued from page 3

and update them regularly.

2. Encourage wellness during the workday.

Allow quick breaks to stretch, hydrate, or walk outside.

Provide clean drinking water and encourage hydration.

Support stress relief—acknowledge busy seasons and offer short recovery breaks afterward.

3. Consider offering micro-benefits.

If full insurance coverage isn't possible, explore:

Discounted gym memberships or online fitness programs.

Access to affordable telemedicine services.

Wellness stipends for health-related expenses like over-the-counter medication or glasses.

Even modest benefits show employees that their health matters.

Provide Financial Stability Through Pay and Policy

Financial insecurity affects every part of a worker's life—from housing stability to physical health. While budget constraints are real, small steps toward financial fairness and predictability can make a big difference.

1. Offer predictable pay and hours.

When possible, give employees consistent weekly schedules and avoid sudden reductions in hours. Predictability helps with budgeting, rent, and childcare planning.

2. Simplify access to earned wages.

Some employers use on-demand pay systems that let workers access a portion of their earned pay early, reducing reliance on payday loans.

3. Review wage structures and benefits.

Even incremental raises can have long-term impact. Look for opportunities to:

Raise starting pay when financially viable.

Reward longevity or skill development.

Offer small bonuses for attendance, teamwork, or training completion.

4. Connect workers with trusted financial resources.

Provide voluntary access to financial literacy workshops, community credit unions, or nonprofit organizations that help with budgeting, debt management, and tax prep.

Consider Transportation and Housing Challenges

Commuting costs can eat into low wages, especially when public transportation is limited. Managers can help ease these pressures.

Offer flexible start times to align with bus or train schedules.

Encourage carpooling or coordinate ride-sharing among employees who live nearby.

Provide transit subsidies, even small ones, when possible.

Share local housing assistance information—many cities have nonprofit programs that help renters find affordable options or avoid eviction.

Build a Culture of Respect and Inclusion

Practical support works best when paired with empathy. Low-income workers often face stigma or assumptions about their circumstances. Managers can model respect by listening, avoiding judgment, and maintaining privacy when employees share personal struggles.

1. Normalize resource sharing.

When you share community resources, do it for everyone—not just those assumed to need help. This protects dignity and reduces stigma.

2. Encourage open communication.

Let employees know they can talk to you or HR about scheduling, financial, or family issues without fear of retaliation.

3. Recognize effort and contribution.

Publicly acknowledging hard work, creativity, or teamwork costs nothing but carries immense value. A culture of appreciation builds morale, especially when workers are facing personal challenges.

The Manager's Role

Supporting low-income workers doesn't mean overstepping boundaries—it means creating a workplace where employees can succeed despite outside challenges. As a manager, you can:

Ask employees what kinds of support or flexibility help them most.

Connect them with HR or local resources when needed.

Balance empathy with fairness—be consistent and transparent in how you apply policies.

Ultimately, small acts of understanding and structure can lift an enormous weight. Employees who feel seen and supported bring their best selves to work, improving morale, retention, and the business's bottom line.

Hybrid: Be respectful, mindful of space

Continued from page 4

1. Choose the right channel.

- Use chat or instant messaging for quick updates.
- Email for formal information or decisions.
- Video or phone calls for complex discussions or sensitive topics.

2. Respect response times.

Not everyone will reply instantly, especially if time zones or project schedules vary. If something is urgent, label it as such politely.

3. Include remote teammates.

When some participants are in the office and others are online, make sure everyone gets equal opportunity to speak. Avoid side conversations in the room that exclude remote attendees.

4. Keep your camera etiquette professional.

- Mute when not speaking.
- Maintain a tidy, neutral background.
- Use your camera thoughtfully—turning it on during collaborative meetings builds connection, but it's okay to stay off for larger webinars or information-only sessions.

Hybrid communication is about balance: not too much noise, not too much silence—just enough clarity and inclusion to keep work flowing smoothly.

Be a Good Neighbor—In the Office

When employees are only in the office part of the week, every day there counts. Shared desks, rotating seating, and flexible spaces are common—but they require consideration.

Office etiquette reminders:

- Clean as you go. Leave shared

desks, conference rooms, and break areas ready for the next person.

- Keep noise down. Use headphones for calls and avoid speakerphone conversations in open spaces.
- Be mindful of personal space. Hybrid offices can get crowded on certain days; give others room to work comfortably.

Little things—like refilling the printer paper, wiping down a table, or leaving a note of thanks for a borrowed item—build goodwill and a cooperative office culture.

Maintain Professionalism at Home

Remote days come with flexibility—but also responsibility. Working from home doesn't mean lowering standards of communication or reliability.

Set yourself up for success:

- Create a distraction-free space. A dedicated desk or quiet area signals “work mode” and reduces background noise.
- Dress appropriately for video calls. Casual is fine, but pajamas aren't a great message for clients or coworkers.
- Keep work hours consistent. Resist the temptation to blur boundaries between home life and work life.
- Be responsive. Check messages regularly and update your status when away.

Good remote etiquette ensures coworkers know they can rely on you, whether you're across the hall or across town.

Stay Connected and Inclusive

One hidden risk of hybrid work is the feeling of being left out, especially for employees who are remote more

often. Hybrid etiquette means making inclusion intentional.

For everyone:

- Acknowledge remote teammates. Start meetings with greetings that include everyone.
- Rotate meeting formats. Alternate between in-person, hybrid, and all-virtual to balance visibility.
- Share meeting notes. Summaries help those who couldn't attend stay informed.
- Celebrate together. Include remote employees in recognition events, birthdays, and team milestones via chat, video, or shared spaces.

For managers:

- Keep an eye on participation and visibility. Who's speaking up in meetings? Who's not getting invited to key discussions? Equal access to information and opportunities keeps hybrid teams healthy.

Respect Boundaries and Work-Life Balance

In hybrid setups, it's easy for work to spill into personal time, especially when team members have different schedules. Respecting each other's boundaries is an essential form of workplace courtesy.

- Avoid messaging after hours unless something truly can't wait. Use scheduled emails or chat delays if you work late.
- Don't assume availability just because someone's working from home.
- Model balance. Managers who respect boundaries set the tone for their teams.
- A culture of respect for personal time keeps morale high and burnout low.

SAFETY ... IT PAYS



Lift smart, store safe to prevent injuries

Lifting and storing materials are everyday tasks in most workplaces—whether it’s restocking shelves in a retail store, unpacking deliveries in a storeroom, or organizing files and supplies in an office. But these seemingly simple actions can lead to serious injuries when done incorrectly. Back pain, strains, and sprains are among the most common workplace injuries, and many can be traced back to unsafe lifting and poor storage habits.

The good news is that most of these injuries are preventable. With a bit of awareness and a few practical habits, you can protect yourself and your coworkers while keeping your workspace more efficient and organized.

Lifting Done Right: Protect Your Back and Body

Every lift, no matter how small, adds up over time. Repeatedly bending,

twisting, or carrying heavy items without using the right technique can cause wear and tear on your muscles and spine. Following these steps can help you stay injury-free.

1. Plan Before You Lift

Take a few seconds to assess what you’re about to move.

Check the weight. Gently push or tilt the object to gauge its heaviness. Don’t assume—some boxes look light but aren’t.

Clear your path. Make sure there’s nothing blocking your way or your destination. A cluttered floor or cords can cause trips and stumbles while carrying a load.

Plan your grip and stance. Know where you’ll hold the object and how you’ll set it down before you start.

Ask for help if needed. If the load looks too heavy or awkward for one person, team up or use lifting aids such as dollies, carts, or pallet jacks.

2. Position Yourself Correctly

How you stand matters just as much as how you lift.

Place your feet shoulder-width apart, with one foot slightly ahead for balance.

Keep the load close to your body—your arms should be tucked in, not extended.

Tighten your core muscles and maintain a natural curve in your back.

Keep your head up and look forward, not down at the load.

3. Lift with Your Legs, Not Your Back

This is the golden rule of safe lifting. Your leg muscles are stronger and better equipped to bear weight than your back muscles.

Bend your knees and hips—not your waist.

Grip the object firmly and lift in a smooth, controlled motion.

Avoid sudden jerks or twists.

4. Don’t Twist—Pivot Instead

Twisting while holding a heavy object puts major stress on your spine. Instead, turn with your feet. Take small steps to pivot your entire body rather than rotating your torso.

5. Set It Down Carefully

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>



Lift: Store heavy items low, light items high

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When placing the item down, use the same technique in reverse. Keep the load close to your body, bend your knees, and lower it smoothly. Avoid dropping or reaching too far forward.

Know Your Limits and Use the Tools Around You

Even with perfect form, lifting too much can still cause injuries. A good rule of thumb is:

Lift alone only if the load is under 25–30 pounds and can be easily handled.

For heavier or bulkier items, use mechanical aids like carts, hand trucks, or lift tables.

If those aren't available, get a team lift—two people can share the weight evenly and keep the lift stable.

In retail environments, equipment such as stock carts or conveyor belts can make a big difference. In office settings, a simple rolling chair or a box dolly can prevent overreaching and awkward lifts when moving paper reams or files.

Strengthen and Stretch

Your muscles and joints are your best tools. Keeping them flexible and strong helps prevent injuries.

Warm up before physical tasks. Gentle stretches for your back, shoulders, and legs can prepare your body.

Take micro-breaks. If you lift or move items repeatedly, pause for a moment to stretch and reset your posture.

Rotate tasks. Repetitive lifting—even if done safely—can lead to fatigue and strain. Switch between tasks that use different muscle groups when possible.

Store Smart: Organize for Safety and Efficiency

A well-organized storage area isn't just about neatness—it's about safety. Proper storage reduces clutter, prevents trips and falls, and makes items easier to access.

1. Keep Heavy Items Low

Store heavy or bulky items between knee and waist height. This range gives you the most strength and stability when lifting. Avoid putting heavy boxes on top shelves or near the floor, where bending or reaching adds risk.

2. Light Items Go High

Reserve upper shelves for lightweight or rarely used materials. If something does fall, it's less likely to cause injury.

3. Stack Smartly

Place heavier, sturdier boxes at the bottom and lighter ones on top.

Don't stack boxes too high—eye level or slightly above is safest.

Keep stacks stable and straight to prevent tipping.

4. Label Clearly

In shared workspaces, clear labeling prevents guesswork and unsafe handling. Indicate the contents and approximate weight if necessary—especially in stockrooms or supply closets.

5. Maintain Clear Walkways

Never store boxes or supplies in aisles, under desks, or near emergency exits. Clutter not only blocks movement but also creates trip hazards and fire safety issues.

6. Use Proper Equipment to Reach High Places

Standing on rolling chairs, shelves, or boxes is never safe. Always use a sturdy step stool or ladder designed for workplace use. Check that it's in good condition and placed on a flat surface before climbing.

Retail and Office Examples

In retail:

When restocking shelves, keep heavier items on lower racks where customers and employees can handle them safely.

Use carts for moving boxes from storage to the sales floor instead of carrying them long distances.

Rotate products by bringing older stock forward to reduce unnecessary lifting later.

In offices:

Store reams of paper or printer toner on shelves at waist height.

Keep infrequently used items, like seasonal decorations, in labeled bins on upper shelves.

When reorganizing or moving supplies, use a cart rather than carrying multiple items at once.

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