How to Keep Your Master Key System Secure When Employees Leave

Losing a key when an employee leaves is more than a small inconvenience. In a commercial setting, that single key can open multiple doors, storage areas, or even the main entry. A master key system simplifies access, but it also creates a clear risk: once a key is out of your control, the security of the entire building is compromised. Managing keys during employee departures requires a systematic approach that balances convenience with safety.

Step 1: Maintain a Detailed Key Register

The foundation of any secure key management plan is a complete and current key register. This should be a physical or digital log that records every key issued, to whom it was assigned, the date of issue, and the specific access level it provides. For a master key system, the register must also note which master keys are in circulation and which restricted keys are held by staff. Without this record, you cannot know exactly what needs to be recalled or rekeyed when someone leaves.

Make sure the register is updated every time a key changes hands. If a key is lost or returned, log that event immediately. A well-maintained register also helps during an audit, allowing you to quickly identify any gaps in your access schedule. When an employee gives notice, check the register against their assigned keys so nothing is overlooked.

Step 2: Establish a Clear Return Procedure

A key return procedure should be part of every employee offboarding checklist. The process must be straightforward: the departing employee returns all keys, including any temporary or spare keys they may have borrowed. Do not assume that keys will be handed back without a reminder. Send a formal request in writing and schedule a specific time for the return.

View the location on Google Maps

During the return, verify each key against the register. Check that the key matches the one originally issued. Sometimes employees switch keys with a coworker or lose a key and replace it with a similar one. If a key is missing, document that immediately and decide whether to rekey the affected locks. For a master key system, any missing master key should trigger an immediate rekeying of all locks that the master key opens. Delaying this step can leave your property vulnerable for weeks or months.



Step 3: Decide Between Rekeying and Recoring

When a key is not returned, you have two main options: rekeying or recoring. Rekeying involves changing the internal pins of the lock so the old key no longer works. Recoring replaces the entire cylinder, which is often faster and can be done on site. For commercial door security support, recoring is usually the preferred method because it can be completed quickly and does not require removing the entire lock.

If your master key system uses interchangeable cores, you can swap out cores in minutes without disturbing the lock body. This is especially useful for businesses with many doors. When an employee leaves with a key that opens several doors, recoring all affected cylinders ensures that the old key becomes useless. Keep a set of spare cores on hand so this process can happen without delay. If the employee returned all keys but you are unsure if copies were made, rekeying or recoring is still the safest route.

Step 4: Update Access Schedules and Electronic Systems

If your property uses electronic access control alongside mechanical locks, do not forget to update the digital side. Remove the departing employee's credentials from the system immediately. This includes key fobs, access cards, and any codes for keypads. An access schedule should be reviewed at the same time to ensure that no former employee retains entry rights after their last day.

For master key systems that integrate with electronic locks, the transition must be coordinated. Mechanical rekeying might be unnecessary if the electronic system can revoke access remotely. However, if the employee had a physical master key that opens both electronic and mechanical locks, you must still address the mechanical component. A combined approach where you update digital permissions and rekey the physical locks provides the strongest protection.

Step 5: Consider Restricted Key Systems

Restricted key systems are designed to prevent unauthorized duplication. Keys in these systems can only be cut by authorized locksmiths who have the proper code or patent. If you are not already using a restricted key system, an employee departure is a good time to evaluate whether upgrading makes sense. Restricted keys reduce the risk of a former employee making copies before leaving, because the key blanks are not available at standard key cutting kiosks.

High Security

AMERICAN LOCK

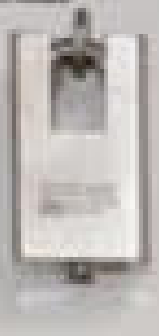
Maximum strength performance that protects vital workplace assets and property

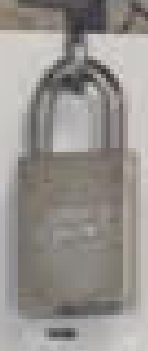
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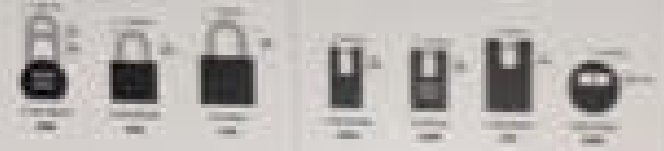


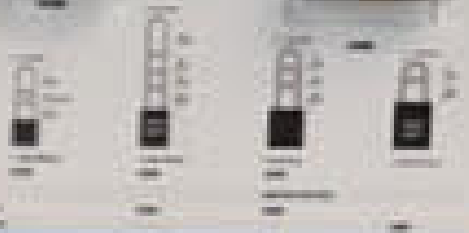










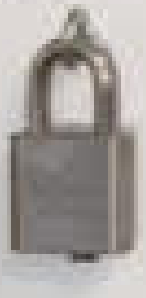


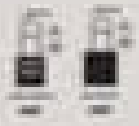
Harsh Environments

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Hard-working dependability for enduring performance in severe conditions

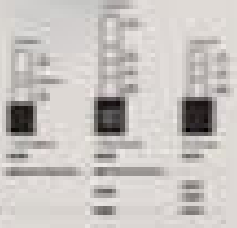
Stainless Steel





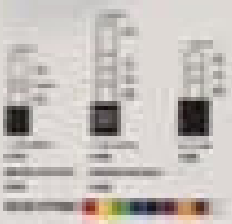
Solid Brass



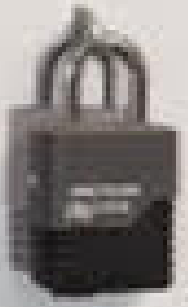


Solid Aluminum





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For existing master key systems, you can often retrofit restricted key cylinders into the same locks. This adds a layer of security without replacing the entire system. When an employee leaves, you can be more confident that any uncirculated keys cannot be easily duplicated. The cost is higher than standard keys, but the peace of mind may be worth it for sensitive areas like server rooms, storage closets, or offices with confidential files.

Step 6: Reissue Keys and Communicate Changes

Once the rekeying or recoring is complete, issue new keys to the remaining employees. Make sure each person receives only the keys they need for their role. Avoid giving master keys to anyone who does not require access to all areas. A best practice is to use a tiered system: a grand master key for facility managers, sub-master keys for department heads, and individual keys for standard staff. This limits the damage if a single key is lost or stolen.

After reissuing keys, communicate the changes to the team. Let them know that the locks have been updated and that old keys will no longer work. Provide a clear point of contact for any issues, such as a key not turning smoothly or a lock that seems stiff. This reduces confusion and ensures that the new system is adopted quickly. It also reinforces the message that key security is taken seriously.

Step 7: Schedule Regular Maintenance and Audits

Key management does not end with the departure of one employee. Regular maintenance and audits keep your master key system functioning properly and securely. Set a quarterly or biannual review of the key register. Check that all keys are accounted for and that no unauthorized keys have been issued. Test a sample of locks to ensure they are working correctly and that the keys still operate smoothly.

Part of this maintenance should include inspecting exit devices and cabinet locks for wear. Over time, locks can become loose or damaged, making them easier to pick or bypass. A simple inspection can catch these issues before they become security problems. If you have a maintenance plan in place, it can cover routine checks and emergency callouts, reducing the burden on your staff. For properties that rely on commercial door security support, regular audits help maintain the integrity of the entire access system.



Final Thoughts

Managing keys when employees leave is a straightforward process if you have the right habits in place. A clear register, a strict return procedure, and a willingness to rekey or recore when necessary will keep your building secure. By treating each departure as a trigger to review your entire master key system, you stay ahead of potential vulnerabilities. The goal is not just to collect keys but to maintain control over who can enter your space at any time.

For professional assistance with key management, Okey Locksmith provides 24/7 mobile automotive, residential, commercial, access control, and emergency locksmith services in Oklahoma City and nearby communities. They can be reached at +1 405-703-8943 or visited at 3121 SW 29th St, Oklahoma City, OK 73119, USA.

Okey Locksmith is also on YouTube.