

HRPA Practice Guideline:

Terminations Checklist

Purpose of Guideline

The termination process can be difficult and emotional for both HR professionals and employees. There are several challenges that exist in the process that, when done improperly, can lead to risk of harms to the public. This practice guideline, in the form of a checklist, focuses on areas of potential high-risk to the public in regard to terminations of non-executive, non-unionized employees, and helps guide HR professionals in properly handling them. Please note that as conducting terminations is a complex process, with many different variables depending on the situation, **this checklist is not an exhaustive list** of all the things that need or should be done.

Each termination of an employee is unique to the employee and the circumstances. Not all items on this list may be 'checked' for each termination process. For items that remain unchecked, it is recommended that the member ensure an explanation as to why the step was not needed or appropriate for the particular termination process to be available and provided to the employer upon request. It is also recommended that HR professionals consult legal counsel as needed in advance of and when anticipating a termination, as well as review any applicable employment standards laws.

This practice guideline primarily relies on the Canada Labour Code, as amended (the "CLC") and the Ontario Employment Standards Act, 2000, as amended (the "ESA"), but for HR professionals working for a national employer, other federal or provincial employment standards and/or human rights legislation may also need to be considered. For federally regulated employees, the CLC applies, which has different rules on termination than the ESA, especially as regards the ability to terminate a non-unionized, non-managerial employee without cause, the requirement to provide notice of termination and entitlement to severance pay. Additionally, if the employee being terminated is a temporary worker co-employed with a temporary agency or a unionized employee whose employment is governed by the terms of a collective agreement, or if the situation involves a mass termination (being 50 or more employees in a four-week period), there may be different or additional steps that need to be taken that are not covered by this Checklist.

HRPA regulates its registered HR professionals in the public interest (meaning for the welfare and wellbeing of the general public and society) and holds our members, firms and students to the highest standards. Like any regulatory body, professional guidance is critical in helping to supplement the **Code of Ethics and Rules of Professional Conduct** and to provide HRPA

members and students with the tools to protect the public interest by reducing/preventing risks of harm stemming from the practice of the Human Resources (HR) profession. These guidelines are to be read in conjunction with the HRPA's Code of Ethics and Rules of Professional Conduct.

DISCLAIMER: The information provided in this Practice Guideline and Checklist is in respect of the laws applicable to provincially and federally regulated workplaces in the Province of Ontario and is intended for general information only. This Practice Guideline and Checklist is not provided for the purpose of providing legal advice or a complete statement of the law on the particular topics. Every situation is unique and involves specific legal issues.

Further, this Practice Guideline is to be read in conjunction with the applicable employment standards and human rights legislation and does not supersede or replace the legal requirements set out in the legislation.

Topic:	Employer-Initiated Terminations of Non-Executive, Non-
	Unionized Employees
	. ,
Target user:	HRPA members, firms and students
Risk of harm to public	Improperly conducted terminations can harm the public,
(e.g. workers,	including, but not limited to:
workplaces, employers):	The reputation and rights of the employer
	 The dignity and rights of employee(s)
	The employee(s) financial status (especially if any
	remuneration owed is incorrect/not paid), and
	The employee(s) mental health.
Risk of harm to	Inappropriately conducted terminations can have an impact
profession:	on the public's trust and view of the profession and can have
	costly legal and reputational implications for the employer.
Critical connection to	The following provisions of <u>HRPA's Code of Ethics and Rules of</u>
Code of Ethics and Rules	Professional Conduct, which all members and students must
of Professional Conduct:	comply with, apply:
	Section I. Professionalism: Rule #10.
	Section IV. Competence: Rules #1-2 & 6.
	Note: This is not an exhaustive list of critical connections this
	guidance may have to the Code of Ethics and Rules of

	Professional Conduct. Please ensure you review the Code of
	Ethics and Rules of Professional Conduct in its entirety.
Desired impact of	Readers of this guidance should gain knowledge and feel
guidance:	more equipped to handle employer-initiated terminations in
	ways that reduce risk of harm to the public.

Defining Terminations

This practice guideline focuses specifically on involuntary and express terminations of employees, where the employer is the initiator of the termination for an active employee. Constructive dismissals, temporary layoffs and terminations based on frustration of contract are not within the scope of this guidance.

An employer is generally defined as someone who is directly or indirectly responsible for the employment of a person – for example a business, proprietor or manager. An employee is generally defined to include a person who works for or provides services to an employer for wages. Please note that these definitions are not exhaustive and may differ depending on the applicable legislation covering the workplace. As such, it is important to refer back to the applicable employment standards legislation at all times when determining who is an employer or employee in a particular setting.

The two primary options an employer generally has for involuntary terminations are a termination "with just cause" or a termination "without cause", as defined below.

Termination for Just Cause: Subject to the employment standards legislation
applicable to the workplace (the CLC or the ESA) and the contractual rights of the
employee, if any, employers must provide employees with notice of termination, or
pay in lieu of notice, before they can be terminated. However, there are rare
circumstances when employers do not have to give notice of termination or pay in
lieu of notice if they have just cause to terminate an employee.

Under the ESA, just cause is "wilful misconduct, disobedience or wilful neglect of duty that is not trivial and has not been condoned by the employer". Notice of termination or a severance package is not provided where the circumstances support a finding of just cause under the ESA.

Apart from a just cause termination in accordance with the ESA, an employer may have just cause "at common law" to terminate an employee. A just cause termination may be based on various forms of misconduct. For example, if an employee's conduct is in **significant violation** of an organization's policies or they have presented a danger to other employees, termination for just cause may occur. The Ontario Court of Appeal states that just cause may exist if the employee is "guilty of serious misconduct, habitual neglect of duty, incompetence, or conduct incompatible with his duties, or prejudicial to the employer's business, or if he has been guilty of wilful disobedience to the employer's orders in matter of substance." In the case of a just case "at common law", the employee remains eligible for their statutory minimum termination and severance entitlements under the ESA, but there is no entitlement to a separation package beyond their statutory entitlements.

As this type of termination is considered the "capital punishment" of employment law, employers are required to meet a high threshold before they can successfully assert there is just cause for the dismissal. The employer in these cases must have evidence that the employee's conduct was so serious and of such a degree to support the need for terminating for just cause (as opposed to without cause). It is strongly recommended that the employer obtain legal advice before proceeding with any termination for just cause. If an individual is able to successfully argue that there was no just cause for their termination, they may be entitled to damages above and beyond their statutory entitlement to termination pay, severance pay and benefits.

2. Termination Without Cause: Most dismissals in Ontario are done on a without cause basis. Ontario-regulated employers have the right to terminate the employment of a non-unionized individual employee without a cause, so long as the termination does not violate the Ontario Human Rights Code. Under this type of termination, the employee being terminated, if they have been employed continuously for at least three months or more, is entitled to a minimum period of advance notice of termination complying with the ESA or pay in lieu of notice. Examples of circumstances that might lead an employer to terminate an employee without cause could be business slow downs, restructuring or poor performance to name a few.

The ESA specifies that penalizing an employee, including terminating their employment without cause, cannot occur if any part of the reason is due to an employee asking questions or exercising any rights under the ESA. Additionally,

termination without case cannot occur if the reason could be linked to a protected ground under the *Human Right Code*.

In addition to their minimum statutory entitlements and depending on both whether there is a written employment agreement and what, if any, termination language is in said written employment agreement, the employee may also be entitled to "reasonable notice" of their termination or pay in lieu of reasonable notice. This "reasonable notice" period is different for each individual and their particular circumstances.

Checklist

When involved in the termination of an employee or employees, HRPA members, firms and students should follow the below checklist to protect the public, the profession and members and students themselves from harm (Note: This checklist does not apply to group or mass notices of termination wherein additional obligations are required. Additionally, if terminating a unionized employee, the collective agreement must be referred to and followed. As stated above, this list is not exhaustive):

Checklist Questions	Check as
	applicable
Before Termination/Planning Phase	
Do approvals need to be obtained before planning to terminate the	
employee? (ex. Executive team, legal team, etc.)	
Have you determined whether the individual is an independent contractor,	П
dependent contractor or employee of the company?	
If terminating for just cause, is there a valid basis supported by the law? Is	
there adequate documentation of issues and/or evidence to support	
terminating for just cause (ex. proof to show their conduct was	
wilful/intentional), which the employee had a chance to respond to? (Note:	
see the definitions section, above, for more information, including details for	
federally regulated employees).	
Is this a termination "without cause"? (Note: see the definitions section,	П
above, for more information). If so, have all other reasonable	

options/support been exhausted (ex. performance reviews, coaching,	
performance improvement plans, warnings, etc.)?	
Has the employee's situation been fully evaluated before making the	
decision to terminate – including, but not limited to, determining if the	
employee's conduct or performance could be related to workplace	
discrimination or harassment or an underlying medical condition, including	
psychological or mental disability? Termination should not occur if it could	
be linked to a <i>Human Rights Code</i> protected ground. In the case of potential	
or actual discrimination or harassment, termination should only proceed	
after a workplace investigation appropriate in the circumstances has been	
completed. In the case of an ill or disabled employee, termination should not	
proceed unless the organization has provided Code-related	
accommodation to the point of undue hardship and the form (e.g.	
frustration of contract) and basis of termination has been discussed with	
legal counsel.	
Have the employee's file/records been checked to see if the planned date	
for the termination meeting is appropriate? (e.g. avoiding the same date as	
their birthday or work anniversary). Is there any caution to be exercised on	
date/time selection?	
If terminating without cause and as applicable, are you providing the proper	
If terminating without cause and as applicable, are you providing the proper notice of termination and/or pay in lieu of notice, severance pay, and benefit	
notice of termination and/or pay in lieu of notice, severance pay, and benefit	
notice of termination and/or pay in lieu of notice, severance pay, and benefit continuation as mandated by (i) the ESA/CLC; (ii) their employment	
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- 7 years but less than 8 years: 7 weeks
- 8 years or more: 8 weeks

As of June 2022, as quoted directly from the <u>Ontario Ministry of Labour's</u> <u>website</u>, severance pay should be provided in addition to the above notice requirements if the employee has:

- "worked for the employer for five or more years (including all the time spent by the employee in employment with the employer, whether continuous or not and whether active or not) and
- Their employer:
 Has a global payroll of at least \$2.5 million; or severed the
 employment of 50 or more employees in a six-month period because
 all or part of the business permanently closed."

The <u>Ontario Ministry of Labour's webpage</u> on severance pay also provides details on calculating the amount of severance pay owed.

For Federally Regulated Workplaces:

For workplaces that fall under federal labour law, including banks, railways, airlines, airports, telecommunication companies, federal government employees, etc., the *Canada Labour Code (CLC)* applies and must be followed. The CLC details the **minimum** rights of employees, however common law should also be assessed where applicable, which can be much greater than the minimum rights.

Under the CLC, as of June 2022, federally regulated employees being terminated by the employer must be provided either at least 2 weeks written notice of termination or pay in lieu of notice equal to at least 2 weeks' regular wages pay if the employee has worked three or more consecutive months continuously with the employer.

Under the CLC, severance pay must be provided to the employee if they have been continuously employed for at least 12 consecutive months before termination. Minimum severance pay is 2 days' regular wages for each full year the employee worked for the employer prior to termination, with a minimum of 5 days of wages.

Have you considered if any of the reasons for termination, whether explicitly stated or not, are or could be interpreted or deemed to be related to discriminatory reasons? (ex. Terminating employment of an older employee, then intending to hire a younger employee. Or terminating a visible minority, then planning to hire a non-minority). Allegations that a termination is based on discrimination or reprisal make up a large percentage of people filing employment-related human rights claims in Ontario and these types of terminations should never be made, even in the case of a probationary employee.	
For those conducting the termination meeting, are they appropriately	
trained to do so? (eg. Trained and knowledgeable of all applicable	
employment laws and trained in conducting terminations with fairness and respect).	
Will there be at least two people conducting the termination meeting (ex. To	
have a witness)?	
If you are offering the terminated employee any outplacement assistance, is	
this clearly detailed in the termination package, including how it will be	
arranged?	
Are there statutory protected rights, such as a return to work following an ESA	
leave, emergency leaves and/or WSIB, that need to be addressed?	
Has an employment lawyer been consulted to assist with termination	
planning, if deemed necessary? (e.g. For complex cases, if there are legal	
questions, etc.)	
If there is an employment contract, are you following the clauses and	
entitlements contained therein?	
Is there a termination clause that speaks to what the employee will receive	
on termination? Note, legal advice may be required to review the	
employment agreement before proceeding with the termination to	
determine if the termination clause, if any, is valid and enforceable.	
Also, note that if the employee's role, salary, or location of work has	
changed significantly since the employment agreement/contract was	
entered into and it has never been amended, the contract/agreement may	
no longer reflect the employee's current employment terms which will need	
to be considered. Regardless of any employment agreement/contract,	
ESA or CLC minimums will still apply, unless governed by a collective	
agreement.	

Has the correct amount of what is owing to the employee for the period from	
the termination date to the end of the statutory termination notice period	
been calculated and clearly detailed for the employee in the termination	
package, where possible? This includes salary, vacation pay, commission,	
incentives, bonus, notice pay, severance pay, benefits, pensions, RRSPs, stock	
options, loans, advances, etc. as applicable. This must comply with the ESA	
or CLC, unless there is a collective agreement. (Note: The Ontario Ministry of	
Labour, Training and Skills Development has a <u>termination entitlement tool</u>	
and a termination pay calculator that may be helpful as a starting point for	
basic calculations). The common law should be considered when	
developing the terms of the termination package, where and as applicable.	
Are you following your own company's code of conduct and policies relevant	
to termination, as well as HRPA's Code of Ethics and Rules of Professional	
Conduct? It may be helpful to review any history of similar terminations	
within the company that might provide a guideline that could be followed to	
ensure employees are being treated fairly and consistently.	
Have you considered a good time of day and location to meet with the	
employee regarding termination that provides privacy and dignity?	
Have you determined how the employee will receive or continue to have	
access to their pay statements (hard copy or continued access to electronic	
pay statements using an alternative e-mail address)?	
Has a safety risk assessment been conducted? Is security necessary for the	
termination meeting to protect the safety of all parties? (Note: Using security	
can negatively impact the dignity of an employee and it may be beneficial	
to only use when you reasonably think it would be necessary, such as if you	
have concerns of aggression or outbursts).	
Does the severance and/or termination package contain all required	
documents and deadlines (e.g., Information on accessing the Record of	
Employment, benefit and benefit conversion information, payment amounts	
and dates for all that is owed, termination letter, confidentiality requirements,	
and any release that the employee might be asked to sign)?	
If considering asking an employee to sign a Release form, does the	
termination package offer the employee <i>more</i> money than the minimums	
prescribed by law, the employment contract (where applicable) etc.? Asking	
an employee to sign a Release form that does not offer more money than	
the minimums required by law is wrongful and should not be done as it is not	

legally enforceable, even if the employee signs the Release, and may be	
used against the employer in any claim or application brought by the	
employee.	
Has it been decided whether employment references following termination	
will be provided, how much detail will be provided in the references, and who	Ш
the terminated employee can contact for such?	
Has it been considered whether arrangements for the employee to get	
home (ex. a taxi) following a termination can be offered should they feel	Ш
uncomfortable driving?	
Where the employee has a company car, have arrangements been made	
for the return or collection of the company car?	
Is a sufficient amount of time given to the employee to receive legal advice	
on the termination and severance package?	Ш
Are there Human Rights considerations under the Ontario Human Rights	П
Code, the Canadian Human Rights Act (for federally regulated employers)	Ш
and/or medical issues that should be accounted for and accommodated for	
before proceeding with the termination?	
Have both the Ontario Employment Standards Act and the Occupational	
Health and Safety Act been reviewed and complied with for all termination-	Ш
related processes? For federally regulated employers, has the Canadian	
Labour Code, Canadian Human Rights Act, and Employment Equity Act been	
reviewed and complied with? (For all employees, regardless of whether they	
are provincially or federally regulated, this includes appropriate payment	
where applicable, not reducing the employee's compensation or benefits, or	
any other term or condition of employment during the statutory notice of	
termination period and continuing to make the usual benefit plan	
contributions to maintain the employee's benefits until the statutory notice	
period is complete). If the employee resides outside of Ontario, have all other	
applicable provincial employment standards and human rights legislations	
and common laws been reviewed and referred to?	
Is there a plan for the appropriate timing of notifying payroll, the IT team, and	
the benefits provider (as applicable) of the termination in a confidential	Ш
manner?	

During Termination Meeting	
When notifying the employee of the termination, is it done professionally,	
respectfully, and privately? Has the person delivering the news, prepared for	
what they will say and how they will handle questions or interruptions?	
Has all employee personal property been returned to them in a timely	
manner during or post-termination? Give consideration to items the	
employee may need from their workstation (e.g. car keys, personal phone,	
purse, etc.) or work computer/devices (e.g. personal photos, personal	
documents or information) before exiting the premises.	
Are the details of the termination, any outplacement assistance (if offered)	
and payout packages clearly described to the employee? This should	
include information on what is included in their final pay, an explanation of	
notice pay and severance pay (as applicable), how their Record of	
Employment (ROE) will be coded, when/how they will receive their ROE,	
details on the use and conversion rights of employee benefits and when they	
will stop, etc.	
Has the employee been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and	
told to whom they can direct any questions after the meeting?	
After Termination	
Has all employee access been shut down (ex. email, computer, office access	
card) directly after termination or upon expiration of working notice,	
whichever is later?	
Has consideration been given regarding what, if any, notification will be	
given to staff, relevant stakeholders, and/or external clients about the	
employee's departure? Where such notification is appropriate and given,	
has it been done with respect and without confidential details exposed? This	
includes appropriate messaging on voicemail and email auto responses.	
Have all company equipment/property, passwords and documents been	
returned?	
Has the employee returned the signed termination letter and any Release, as	
required?	
Following the return of all employee's personal belongings, has a record of	
what was returned been maintained?	

Suggestions to Have in Place at All Times for All Staff	
Do you have a clear code of conduct/standards explaining the potential	
consequences for breach of the company's policies and/or procedures,	
which employees have to sign off on, attesting that they have been reviewed	
and accepted?	
Are your code of conduct, handbooks, policies, etc. reviewed and revised	П
regularly and as required by law to ensure compliance with current legal	
requirements related to employee rights and/or terminations?	
Do you have protocols in place that are followed for performance issues –	
including documentation, written warnings, etc.?	
Do you provide staff with regular performance feedback or reviews that are	
well documented?	
Do you have a policy regarding workplace equipment/property given, and	
upon termination or resignation, returning all equipment and/or property	
(including documents)? The policy should detail what is to occur should	
equipment not be returned in good working order. In addition, it should	
articulate any rights and obligations regarding intellectual property.	

Scenarios

Below please find some examples on how content from this practice guideline may apply to HR practice. Please note that these scenarios are <u>not</u> exhaustive or determinative and are meant for illustrative purposes only.

Scenario 1

Background	L. has been open to their employer that they are struggling with diagnosed
	mental health disabilities. L. called in sick on 7 different occasions within a
	month. L.'s boss is not happy with this as it causes inconveniences and
	delays for the entire construction crew when L. is not there. L.'s boss would
	like to terminate them, telling HR that L. is unreliable, consistently absent
	and therefore no longer wanted on the team. HR is tasked with handling
	the termination and terminates L. without cause.

The employer is aware of L's diagnosed mental illnesses but appears to completely ignore this when coming to the conclusion that termination is most appropriate. Mental illness is recognized as a disability under the Human Rights Code. The employer should have engaged in the Code-related accommodation process, whether or not the employee initiates the conversation to determine whether the employee's conduct is related in any way to their absences or tardiness and what, if any, accommodation may be required and/or available. Employers, if aware of or suspecting an employee has a disability, have a duty to inquire and accommodate. It appears that the employer may be discriminating against the employee due to their mental illnesses, which goes against Ontario laws. Analysis This termination can be seen as discriminatory and a breach of the employer's legal obligations under the Human Rights Code which prohibit discrimination and speak to accommodation requirements. The employee's situation was not fully evaluated before making the decision to terminate – including, but not limited to, determining if the employee's conduct could be in response to an underlying medical condition, including a mental health disability. Bottom Line Terminating an employee that could be linked to a Human Rights Code protected ground should be avoided unless the organization has provided		
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protected ground should be avoided unless the organization has provided		including a mental health disability.
	Bottom Line	Terminating an employee that could be linked to a <i>Human Rights Code</i>
		protected ground should be avoided unless the organization has provided
Code-related accommodation to the point of undue hardship (and		Code-related accommodation to the point of undue hardship (and
subject to frustration of contract), or it can be shown that the termination is		subject to frustration of contract), or it can be shown that the termination is
wholly unrelated to the Code.		wholly unrelated to the Code.

Scenario 2

Background	B., an Indigenous employee, usually gets along well with their colleagues.
	Recently and uncharacteristically however, B. has appeared agitated,
	irritated, and angry with another colleague, T.
	T. reports to HR that B. is being verbally and emotionally abusive to them
	and they are no longer comfortable working with B. HR investigates and
	decides that termination without cause of B. is the best option.

Issues	It appears that the investigation did not consider the underlying
	cause of B's conduct, including whether B.'s conduct could be in
	response to workplace discrimination, racism or harassment, or
	other stressors, including a mental health disability, especially given
	the behaviour was uncharacteristic and sudden.
Analysis	Workplace investigations must include discussions with both parties and
	any relevant witnesses, and a review of all relevant documents. In this
	case, the investigator should have considered and inquired about the
	reason for B's conduct, including why it was occurring and if B.'s behaviour
	was in response to racism and/or discrimination, an underlying medical
	condition or personal or family stressors. If it was, and depending on the
	circumstances, termination may not have been the appropriate option.
Bottom Line	Employers have obligations under both the Occupational Health and
	Safety Act and the Human Rights Code to conduct a workplace
	investigation that is appropriate in the circumstances. Terminations based
	on complaints of workplace harassment should proceed only after a
	workplace investigation has been concluded and the facts and
	circumstances found to support a termination as opposed to another form
	of discipline or response.

Scenario 3

	T
Background	R. is being terminated from their role. During the termination meeting with
	their boss and an HR representative, R. is upset, confused, and angry. R. is
	especially worried about finances and is not clear on how much
	termination pay R. will receive, when workplace benefits will expire,
	information on RRSP and other important calculations. None of this
	information was detailed to R. during the termination meeting or provided
	in writing.
Issues	During the termination meeting, details around pay, workplace
	benefits, RRSP contributions and other calculations should be
	clearly outlined to the employee, both verbally and in writing. In the
	alternative, the written termination letter should be provided to the
	employee, and they should be advised that the letter includes these
	details and they have the opportunity to ask any questions.

	Not including this information can cause confusion and the
	employee to be more upset. It can also cause delays or issues if the
	employee seeks legal counsel to review all details of the
	termination, given this important information is missing. Most
	importantly, it could place the employer in a position of being liable
	to the employee for loss of benefits (loss of conversion rights or
	disability benefits) and/or damages.
	Employees have the right to review all information of the
	termination, including pay and benefits calculations, and to ensure
	that the calculations are correct.
	Employers have an obligation to treat employees fairly, honestly
	and in good faith both in manner of their termination and in the
	termination process.
Analysis	The termination meeting exasperated R.'s emotions as it generated further
	confusion and uncertainty about their finances without any information
	provided on pay, benefits, RRSP contributions and other important
	calculations. This is unfair to R., and all information related to this and
	calculations should have been clearly provided and explained.
Bottom Line	Employers should be fair and treat employees with respect during the
	termination process. Notice of termination must be in writing. Severance
	and/or termination packages should speak to the employee's rights to all
	benefits and entitlements, including any benefit conversion rights. Written
	termination letters/severance package must be provided to the employee
	and should be clearly explained appropriately. The package should
	contain required information, including but not limited to: Information on
	accessing the Record of Employment, insured benefit information, and
	payment amounts and dates for all that is owed by the employer.

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